

THE ALBANIAN CATHOLIC BULLETIN

'A REMARKABLE SOURCE OF INFORMATION ON ALBANIA'

by James V. Schall, S.J.

Needless to say the thirteenth annual issue of the *Albanian Catholic Bulletin* (1992, 176 pp.) breathes in a considerably different atmosphere than the earlier annual issues. The dramatic changes in the internal structure and freedom of Albania were almost inconceivable when the first issue of the ACB appeared (1980). The ACB began as almost the only concentrated effort anywhere in the world to present the dire situation of religion in Albania in its true light. ACB will continue as a remarkable source of life and knowledge about Albania, particularly in the English-speaking world.

Yet with the turmoil and civil strife in Yugoslavia touching the many Albanian people residing there, it almost seems as if, in the modern era, Albanians have found it impossible to make a new beginning, without some disaster or disorder occurring that involves them in some peculiar way. They happened to be next-door when Mussolini was strong and happened to be neighbors when Tito was in power, and now when the breakdown of Yugoslavia has produced war. In this latest issue the ACB offers a detailed report on the condition of academic freedom in Kosova to remind us that much remains to be done by and for Albania and Albanians.

Gjon Sinishta, through his persistent and careful research, has managed again to publish a good deal of such information in English (there are also essays in Albanian in the *Bulletin*) as is available in the world, much of it appearing originally in Albanian, Italian, German, or French.

The *Bulletin* is a remarkable document indispensable to anyone interested in Albania, Eastern Europe, or the cause of freedom and religion in the modern world. Here may be found an essay on Albanians in Romania and another on minorities in Eastern Europe or the cause of freedom and religion in the modern world. We read Sami Repishti's "The Albanian Nation in 1991" and an account of "Freedom of Conscience in Albania." If the Albanian story, in its full complexity, is at all available to us, we owe much to Gjon Sinishta's determined efforts.

This year's edition begins with what is perhaps the most delicate issue of all. That is, how are we to related in a rational and Christian way, in a civilized manner, to those members of the Albanian Communist Party, their offspring, and their collaborators, to those who were directly responsible for 40 years of repression, murder, and tyranny? Sinishta's opening Editorial deals with this problem. Sinishta argues for a compassionate approach. He thinks that a program to solve the real problems of Albania is better than continued recrimination and repression.

Yet the *Bulletin* is full of accounts of the atrocities and havoc that afflicted this small land of some three million people during recent decades. The stories are not pretty. We almost hesitate to read "Seminarian Mark Cuni--Martyr of Faith and Freedom," or "The Calvary of Nikolle Troshani," or "The Testimony of a Priest Survivor," in the fear that someone might ask us what we were doing when these things were going on in our world.

There are also numerous accounts of leading Albanian statesmen, clerics, and citizens who have died in recent years--the poet Martin Camaj, the priest Gjergj Schiroi, the doctor Cesk Ashta. The *Bulletin* resembles a hometown newspaper in which people now familiar to us from earlier issues are praised, explained, or, finally, eulogized.

The *Bulletin* is also precisely 'Catholic.' That is, it pays considerable attention to the affairs of the Catholic Church as to religion in general. The Orthodox and Muslim situations are mentioned with respect and given due space. In this year's edition the several times when John Paul II has spoken to or about Albania are recounted and presented. In addition there is found the spiritual testimony of Albania's last surviving bishop.

There is an account of Mother Theresa's visit to America and of Fr. Jak Gardin's return to Albania. Several essays seek to explain the situation and condition of the churches and parishes in Albania under the new, more democratic conditions. There is an account of Easter at Durres in 1992. There is also an account of "Albanians and Hebrews" and of "The First Albanian to Be Recognized as a Savior of Hebrews."

The ACB likewise contains reviews of many books written by Albanians or about Albania. Another useful feature is that it brings to our attention not only books in English but those in other major languages that have treated Albanian subjects or personalities. One has the impression from the ACB that all the attention the world press and scholarship give to Albania is conveniently collected here.

In short the *Albanian Catholic Bulletin* is a gold mine of information. At times, it is spiritual reading, at others history, at others a witness to faith and truth, at still others it is geography and culture, literature, and politics. One would be hard pressed to find anything quite like it in any language about any country.

In a brief essay titled "Albania Reborn," George Lerski and Stephen Schwartz write,

God almighty in his wisdom created nations large and small, thus establishing as a principle of nature, opposed to the considerations of power politics, a multiplicity of ethnic species. The survival of these defies the dominance of huge and arrogant nations, and will do so unto the end of time . . . It is an ill-founded fallacy, however widely believed, that all nations are destined to the cycle of birth, youth, maturity, and decay. The Japanese and Jewish cases clearly show the baselessness of this oversimplification. So does the case of one of Europe's smallest and poorest but proudest nations, the Albanians.

These are forceful words and ideas. The defense and explanation of small nations like Albania is indeed of major importance in world civilization.

Albania, of course, having survived one of the worst tyrannies of modern times, must seek to remember its immediate past, that is, what can happen to a people that falls into the hands of an ideological tyranny, even of its own citizens. But it must also learn what economic system, what political regime, and what form of the life spirit can teach it truth and guarantee it order in both justice and mercy. Both can be successful to some degree in improving the human lot and providing some semblance of justice, peace, enterprise, and order.

Gjon Sinishta's plea for every effort to be made to transcend its awful heritage of political destruction in recent decades is moving:

Our task is to build the 'brotherhood and reconciliation of all peoples,' in the words of Pope John Paul II. . . The paramount task confronting Albanians today is hard work for the spiritual rebirth and the repair of the ruined educational system and economy. It is only by achieving these goals that Albania will be able to enter the family of free and prosperous European nations.

No one, of course, wishes to deny the sad and tragic events that have happened to Albania in the modern world, however slow this same world seemed at the time to have been in recognizing them or in doing anything about them.

The ACB has taken it on itself to identify and record these scenes and incidents of man's inhumanity to man. On the other hand the test of honor and religion is not so much how a person or country deals with its friends but with its enemies, even when its enemies are of their own small country. If for nothing else the *Albanian Catholic Bulletin* is worth reading to remind us of this, the most difficult of spiritual lessons.

The *Albanian Catholic Bulletin* can be ordered from:

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