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Group of Daughters of Charity

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The Daughters of Charity in Albania

*By Group of Daughters in Charity
Albania*

“The Daughters of Charity are devoted to the most abandoned, those who have no one to help them.”

I believe that this description which Saint Vincent wrote to Guillaume Delville on 1st February 1658 can also explain the reasons why the Superiors in our Province opened a house in Albania. It also explains their tenacity in the face of many difficulties, which arose in the struggle to carry out this decision.

Up to only a few years previously, little was known about the “Country of the Eagles”. It was known to be a very poor country which for more than forty years had suffered from a destructive cultural isolation, and was subjected to a harsh totalitarian regime. The leader of the Albanian Communist Party, Enver Hoxha, had seized power during the Second World War, and remained in power for forty years, until his death.

During these oppressive decades of communist dictatorship, religious persecution increased and became progressively harsh, culminating in the new Constitution of 1976 which declared Albania to be a “completely atheist state”, and forbid all forms of religious practice. In 1990 violent revolution put an end to the dictatorship. Freedom was returning.

As a consequence of the country’s socio-political order, and the more recent financial swindles, the situation in Albania ten years after the fall of communism, is one of continued technological and structural decline, as well as the ongoing effects of war; a situation in which everyone continues to lose out.

Some facts will help to clarify the situation. Surface area is 28,478 km² ; population is 3,256,000: 29% are illiterate; religions, 73% are Muslim, 10% are Catholic, 17% are Greek Orthodox.

Poverty and suffering are manifest in various ways.

- Materially: lack of infrastructures, no road network exists; natural resources are almost all used up; insufficient resources from tillage or livestock; there is no industry; widespread unemployment.
- Culturally: educational development has been blighted by the ideological censorship of the regime, and the consequent isolationism. As a result of this, the exchange of ideas, experimentation, etc, have suffered, affecting the various sectors of life, social, economic, health and business.

- Spiritually: the effect of an imposed atheism, while not extinguishing the profound human search for meaning, has weakened the religious impulse of the people which in its turn encourages human development and social cohesion.

Perhaps the most striking result of poverty in Albania has been the annihilation of the inner person, oppressed and cut off from hope. He has been forced to accept many constraints, deprived of meaning and purpose, robbed of initiative to further his own development and further the cause of common good.

Faced with this poverty, and in response to the Superior General's invitation in one of his Circulars, to each Province, to look to the needs of the poorest countries, the Turin Province undertook to investigate the possibility of opening a house in Albania.

This idea took shape in response to the request of the Apostolic Nuncio in Albania, and the Bishop of Scutari who were asking us to help in the dioceses under their care.

Having received permission from the General Council, and when our Visitatrix and our Director had made two visits to plan how we might affect the idea, the Mission to Albania began with two Sisters. They stayed with our Sisters in Naples, and then proceeded to their placement in Gramsh, a town in S. Albania. With a population of 16,000, Gramsh is locked in by mountains, and its arid landscape offers no natural resources, so that industry, farming and commerce are all lacking. The area is quite inaccessible, the poverty is grinding. There are 93 small villages scattered throughout the surrounding mountainous region, cut off from each other by a lack of roads.

Why was this small town chosen?

- a) No religious community had previously gone to this district.
- b) It is a difficult region where, according to the Apostolic Nuncio, only the Daughters of Charity could fit in.

For the time being the Sisters are living in some rooms put at their disposal by the civic authorities in Gramsh in the hospital for Contagious Diseases. The Sisters at once rolled up their sleeves and set to work "by the sweat of their brow, and the labor of their hands."

The gap between resources and needs did not dismay the Sisters, but spurred them on to adopt the most expedient methods. They began by sharing in the lives and poverty of the people, and working in collaboration with other religions already active in various areas of Albanian life. This led to the setting up of a small but functional health centre; the provision of basic necessities for the most needy; visitation of the poorest families; outreach to 93 surrounding villages.

The needs of the people are many and great, but the Sisters have focussed their energies on the children and young people, because the future of the people depends on the development available to them now. It is important to note that the majority of the Albanian population is less than 30 years old.

It is essential to develop the minds of the Albanians of the future, to build up their inner lives, so that getting to know the power and love of Christ, they may be able, as soon as possible, to take responsibility for the life and destiny of their noble nation. That is the aim of our Sister's efforts.

After three years presence in Albania, we need to establish more suitable centres for the development of the Mission and to meet the needs of the people. The existing structures: are not adequate to meet these needs. The new plan aims to provide centres which are fitting for "Our Lords and Masters."

In the town of Gramsh where a Christian presence has been established for the first time, our Chapel is a sign of Him who called us to work in His name as servants of the Poor. Our small community desires to make present everyday the Word of the Lord: "Truly, I say you, as often as you did it to one of the least of my brothers, you did it to me."

Truly, on the threshold of the third millennium, the charism of Saint Vincent has found a fertile soil in which to take root: "it is not enough to love God, if my neighbor does not love Him also."

(Translator: P. Eamon Devlin, C.M.)