

7-1983

## Grave Violation of Religious Rights in Albania

Gjon Sinishta  
*University of San Francisco*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree>

 Part of the [Religion Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Sinishta, Gjon (1983) "Grave Violation of Religious Rights in Albania," *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*: Vol. 3: Iss. 5, Article 3.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol3/iss5/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ George Fox University.

## GRAVE VIOLATION OF RELIGIOUS RIGHTS IN ALBANIA

by Gjon Sinishta

Gjon Sinishta (Roman Catholic), a native Albanian, is presently associated with the Campus Ministry at the University of San Francisco. In his youth he spent six years in the Pontifical Seminary in Shkodra, Albania, directed by the Jesuits. When the new government in 1946 forced the seminary to close, Gjon moved to Yugoslavia, staying one year with the Jesuits. In late 1947, Sinishta's fluency in Albanian and other languages won him a position with Radio Belgrade as an announcer and journalist. Arrested and charged with anti-communist propaganda in 1956, he spent five years in Yugoslav prisons. Sinishta immigrated to the U.S. in 1965. Author of two books on Albania, Gjon is also the Editor of the Albanian Catholic Bulletin, based in Santa Clara, California.

Repression has been a fact of life for years in Albania. The Communist government, which has been in power for 38 years, has a shocking record against human rights. Since its inception in 1944, this government has constantly abused the most elementary rights and freedoms of Albanian citizens, openly violating international laws and agreements to which it has solemnly agreed to adhere.

Although the illegal acts of the Albanian government against its citizens are many, I will present here only an aspect which has lately received some attention, the abolition of religious beliefs and practices. Prior to 1967, the Communist government, which in theory constitutionally upheld religious freedom, did in fact ruthlessly interfere with those exercising their right to practice and profess their religion. This charade ended in 1967 when the government, by outlawing religious practice, in effect "legalized" religious persecution.

In order to better understand this situation, it is necessary to present a short background about the country and people. Albania is a small mountainous country on the eastern shores of the Adriatic and

Ionian Seas, between Yugoslavia and Greece. Only forty miles of the Adriatic Sea separate Albania from Italy. Her size is about 11,100 square miles. Albanians are descendants of the ancient Illyrian tribes, regarded as the oldest inhabitants of Europe. They call themselves in their native language "sons of the eagle," and their land "eagle's country." St. Paul himself introduced Christianity to Albania at the time of his missionary journeys. Bishoprics such as Durrachium (Durrës), Aulon (Vlorë), Scodra (Shkoder), and Nikopolis (Preveza) are among the most ancient in the world. However, during the long rule of the Ottoman Empire, which lasted from the fifteenth century until 1912, a great number of Albanians, particularly in the lowlands, were converted to Islam. Today Albania is the only European country with a Moslem majority of 68%; the remainder are 19% Orthodox Christian and 13% Catholic.

The total population of Albania today is about three million. However, there are more than three million Albanians living outside the country. About two million reside in Yugoslavia; there are 200,000 in the U.S. and Canada, including the Italo-Albanians called Arberesh; in Italy 300,000; and the rest in Greece, Turkey, Romania and other countries.

After gaining independence in 1912 from Ottoman rule, Albania became a battlefield during World War I and was conquered by Italy and Germany during World War II. Having regained her independence in 1944, Albania wound up in the hands of ruthless Communist rulers headed by Enver Hoxha (Hoja), who initiated a process of the destruction of religious freedom, a process which has not diminished with the passage of time, but has, in fact, intensified. This deliberate political process of fomenting hatred toward religion clearly confirms the Albanian government's and the Communist Party's determination to eliminate religion--with particular emphasis against Catholicism--from national life by both force and legislation.

### Religion As Target

Between the World Wars, both Christians and Muslims were free to practice their religion in a spirit of mutual trust and ecumenical relations. With the advent of Communism at the end of 1944, this liberty and harmonious relationship among believers began to be deliberately attacked. The new government, as soon as it consolidated its power, initiated a twofold anti-religious program. First, in their quest to dominate all religious denominations, the Communist authorities began to reduce the entire religious structure of the land to spiritual and functional ineffectiveness, exploiting whatever formal power the Churches had in support of the aims of international Communism. Second, as a concurrent measure, the regime implemented continuous public agitation against religion.

In carrying out this over-all program, the regime pursued three separate but interrelated strategies:

1. Toleration, within limits, of Islam. Generally, with a few exceptions of high clergy, the Muslim religion was not a great obstacle to the new regime. By applying cunning leniency, the government wished to use it as a propaganda tool toward the Muslim world.

2. Although the regime considered Eastern Orthodoxy in general an enemy, they nevertheless attempted to use the Orthodox Church, because of her traditional patriotism, as an instrument for mobilizing Albania's Orthodox population behind its policies.

3. Complete elimination of Catholicism because of its strong spiritual, cultural and organizational power. For centuries the clergy and adherents of this Church were the frontrunners of Albanian's national, cultural and religious renewal. The vast majority of Catholics were unsympathetic towards the new (Communist) regime.

To pursue this program the government and its Communist Party apparatus devised various methods of depriving the Churches of their basic income, curbing their influence and outlawing public religious instruction by expropriation of the property of monasteries and religious orders, of all the various schools, including seminaries, libraries, etc. At the same time the propaganda organs were engaged in a

massive slander campaign against all religious leaders, particularly those most intransigent, with the aim of discrediting their spiritual leadership and moral character.

The new laws and specially promulgated orders which soon followed forbade the election or appointment of Church officials without government approval. All pastoral letters, messages, speeches and memoranda to be printed or made public in any form were to be sent prior to publication to the Council of Ministers. The new laws further ordered the education of youth to be conducted only by the State. It also forbade religious communities to operate hospitals, orphanages, welfare institutions, printing presses, and to own real estate.

#### The Muslim Religion

Enver Hoxha, leader of Albanian Communists and himself a Muslim, has repeatedly declared, "The Muslim religion, its adherents and its clergy were not a serious obstacle. Even before the occupation of the country, but more so afterwards, the hierarchy of the Muslim faith was weak, without the least experience to give us trouble . . . On the other hand, the Party and the government could not offend the religious feelings of a large number of Muslim people who were closely bound to the Party and the people's power . . ." (History of the Party of Labor of Albania, pp. 622-624). Thus, in a short period, without direct confrontation, the regime achieved total control over this religion by attacking separately, one after the other, the many Muslim sects in Albania in order to weaken systematically the whole complex of this religious body. In the beginning the regime favored the powerful sect of Bectashis, and three of their leaders, Baba Faja, Baba Fejzo and Sheh Karbunara, were "elected" deputies to the Peoples Assembly in 1945. When later on all three of them were assassinated, this alliance came to a sudden end. Thereafter the regime used the familiar tactics of imprisonment, torture and execution of the entire leadership of Muslim clergy whom were: Baba Zylfo, Baba Qamili, Baba Ali Tomori, Baba Murteza, Baba Xhemal Koshtani (the Sheh of Bilishti), Mustafa Varoshi (the Mufti of Durres), Baba Kamberi and Dede Abazi. Others, like Hafiz Ibrahim Dalliu, Sheh Xhemal Pazari of Tirana, Hafiz Ali Tari of Shkodra and Hafiz Ibrahim Dibra, the Grand Mufti of Albania, received long

and Hafiz Ibrahim Dibra, the Grand Mufti of Albania, received long prison terms or were sent to labor camps never to return.

It is worth noting that the government used the Muslim religion for a considerable period of time to fulfill a specific purpose in relation to Muslim countries by demonstrating to them the "harmonious compatibility" of the Muslim community with Communism. Under the cover of religious and cultural purposes, numerous Albanian Muslim delegations were very active in the Middle East and North Africa to propagandize Moscow's line and peace initiatives. At the same time, delegations from these countries were invited to visit Albania and see for themselves the "progressive" Muslim life there. However, by 1967 when the frontal attack was launched by Enver Hoxha against all religions, the activity had been terminated. The reaction of the Muslim world to this anticonstitutional and antihuman measure of the Albanian government against its people was very critical. Al Arabi, Islamic cultural periodical of Kuwait with the largest circulation in the Arab world, flatly stated in an article about Albania: "Albania has never been a Muslim state in the constitutional sense of the word and the 1967 decree (abolition of all religions) is a natural process of the development of the religious question in Albania."

#### The Orthodox Church

Albanian Orthodox and their Church have not always had an easy time professing their faith and national identity. Declared as Greeks because of their adherence to Orthodoxy by chauvinist Greek clergy and politicians, they have struggled vigorously to identify themselves with the Albanian nation. Because of the traditional nationalistic character of the Orthodox Church, the government's plan was to use it in the first place as an instrument for mobilizing the Orthodox population behind its policies. At the same time, steps were undertaken to eliminate elements within the Church which were considered "unreliable." To succeed in this plan, all churches and monasteries were infiltrated by Communist agents and sympathizers. Soon after this was implemented, the regime brought the entire Church under its control. Their only seminary was closed, while some church buildings and monasteries, such as those of Ardenica, Narta, Vlora and Voskopoja, were confiscated.

The elimination of the leaders of the Orthodox Church was carried out in the same way as it was against the Muslim and Catholic clergy--by murder, execution, imprisonment and torture. Thus, during a period of less than five years, the regime killed or put into prison and labor camps the majority of the hierarchy, which included: Visarion Xhuvani, Archbishop of Elbasan; Bishop Irine of Apollonia (Pojan); Bishop Agathangjel Cance of Berat; Bishop Irine, Deputy Metropolitan of Korca and Gjirokastra; Papas Josif Papmihaili, a promoter of the Uniate Church; and many other simple priests and deacons. The highly cultured Archbishop Kristofor Kisi, head of the Albanian Orthodox Church, was deposed and sent to prison where he died after much humiliation. He was replaced by the government with Pais Vodica, an ordinary married priest and Communist agitator.

As in the case of the Muslim religion, the government also used the Orthodox Church for its foreign policy purposes. During the Soviet tutelage of Albania, the Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Albania was forced to closely cooperate with the Moscow Patriarchate and Pais Vodica participated on behalf of the Albanian Orthodox Church in all peace conferences organized by the Soviet Union. However, after Albania broke with Moscow in 1961, the ties between the two churches were abruptly cut.

#### Catholic Church

Although the government directed its anti-religious campaign against all three religious groups, Catholics felt the main brunt of the assaults. Despite being a minority, Albanian Catholics and particularly their clergy, were admired and loved by Orthodox and Muslims for their traditionally strong patriotic and cultural dedication. Jealous of the strength of influential Catholic clergy and afraid of the unity among their believers, the government employed all kinds of legal and illegal means to erode and destroy the foundation of the Catholic Church. For centuries, the Catholic clergy had taught and worked with all the people without religious distinction. Many visitors to Albania noted how they cared for and served people selflessly, sharing daily joys and sorrows. It was this religious tradition the new government sought to shatter. By the end of 1946, almost half of the Catholic clergy were imprisoned, all

foreign clergy expelled and 20 priests and religious put to death. At the same time, Enver Hoxha, at that time General Secretary of the Party and Head of the government, directed all his efforts toward fomenting resentment against the Catholic church leaders. The Church, however, stood firm and united in opposition to the government's plan to establish a new church organization, severed from Rome, which would serve the purposes of Communist indoctrination throughout the land.

The actions of the Albanian government and Party to wipe out Catholicism from public and private life can be divided into three main periods: 1944-1948, 1949-1967 and 1967-1983.

#### 1944 - 1948

Hoxha's plan to establish a Catholic Church severed from Rome began to take shape in May 1945 when he expelled the Apostolic Delegate to Albania, Archbishop Leone G. B. Nigris. Then, hastily summoning the Metropolitan Archbishop of Shkodra, Primate of the Church, Gasper Thachi, and the Archbishop of Durres, Vincent Prendushi, a nationally famed poet and writer, he demanded that they separate from Rome, establish a new national church and give their allegiance to his new regime. In exchange he offered the government's "conciliatory attitude" and material help in maintaining the Church's institutions. Both prelates bravely refused, and paid for this stand with their lives. Thachi died in 1946 while under house arrest. Prendushi was sentenced to twenty years at hard labor and died in prison in 1949 after enduring horrible tortures.

The government's onslaught now turned against the priests. On June 21, 1945, two Jesuit teachers, Frs. Jak Gardin and Gjergj Vata were arrested and, after a trial filled with illegal proceedings and marked by the withdrawal of their defenders from the court in protest of the proceedings, sentenced to many years in prison. Immediately after the first elections, on December 31, 1945, in which no opposition party was allowed to participate, the police arrested Frs. Gjon Fausti, Vice-Provincial of the Jesuits and Daniel Dajani, Rector of the Pontifical Seminary of Shkodra. A month later the government ordered the immediate expulsion of all non-Albanian members of religious orders. The number expelled exceeded two hundred. During a mock trial on January 30, 1946,



Jesuit Fathers Fausti and Dajani, Franciscan Father Gjon Shllaku, and seminarians Mark Cuni and Gjergj Bici were sentenced to death along with 13 laymen. The execution took place on March 4, 1946, outside the Catholic cemetery in Shkodra and their bodies were thrown into a common grave. Their last words were of pardon for their persecutors and of praise to God and Albania as they shouted "Long live Christ, Long live Albania." Exactly one month later all Jesuit institutions were closed and the Order outlawed.

As soon as the shock of the executions had had its effect, Enver Hoxha summoned bishop Fran Gjini in Tirana to order him, as he had done the year before with Bishops Thachi and Prendushi, to cut his ties to Rome and to sway the clergy and Catholic population over to the government's side. Gjini had become the Substitute Apostolic Delegate and the leader prelate after the death of Thachi. Hoxha threatened him with a similar fate to that of his predecessor unless he capitulated; Bishop Gjini refused, saying "I will never separate myself and my flock from the Holy See." Nevertheless, fearing great reprisals against those under his care if a compromise could not be reached, Gjini attempted to bring about a reconciliation between the government and the Catholic Church in Albania. He courageously wrote an open letter to Hoxha, in which Gjini offered the Church's cooperation in "reconstructing the nation, binding the wounds and surmounting the existing difficulties." He expressed "hope for the realization of not only material advantages, but also spiritual benefits for all Albanians," Hoxha ignored the message and ordered the arrest of Gjini on the charge of spreading anti-Communist propaganda. After a year of undergoing torture and much humiliation, Bishop Gjini was executed on March 8, 1948, along with a group of eighteen clergy and lay people.

Just a month earlier, another Bishop, Gjergj Volaj, had been executed along with other priests and lay people, without trial, on the charge of being "enemies of the people." By now the persecution had reached its peak. Besides the Jesuits, the Franciscans had also been disbanded, along with all the orders of religious sisters. Their property, even their personal belongings, were confiscated. The hierarchy had been completely decimated, with only one bishop still alive.

1949 - 1967

In 1949 external and internal pressures prompted the Albanian government to slow its drive against the Catholic Church and religion in general. The expulsion of Yugoslavia from the Cominform at Stalin's orders, in June, 1948, had created an unexpected danger for the Albanian leader and its Party. Groups of pro-Tito sympathizers and Albanian escapees to Yugoslavia were being organized by Yugoslavia to overthrow the Hoxha regime. In order to meet the challenge, Hoxha took the offensive against Yugoslavia, publicly blaming Albania's neighbor for all of the misfortunes of Albania since the "liberation." As a tactic designed to forestall Catholics from joining forces against him, Hoxha delegated his Minister of the Interior, Tuk Jakova, to meet with Jakova's former schoolmate, the Franciscan priest Marin Sirdani, in the swamps near Elbasan (central Albania) where Fr. Sirdani was serving a long sentence of forced labor. Jakova blamed and condemned Yugoslavia for the policies of brutality against Catholics and their clergy during past years, and assured Fr. Sirdani of the government's desire for rapprochement with the Church. Stunned by Jakova's statements, Fr. Sirdani nevertheless rejoiced and promptly accepted his invitation to mediate between the government and the Catholic hierarchy, which was now reduced to one elderly Bishop, the Venerable Bernardin Shllaku, Ordinary of the Diocese of Pulti.

Fr. Sirdani informed the Bishop of the government's approach and both the Bishop and the government agreed to begin negotiations. Several organizational charters governing the Catholic Church were prepared between 1949 and 1951. Bishop Shllaku and his aides tried their best to accommodate the government's demands and conditions, while at the same time taking into account the articles of Canon Law. Satisfied with the goodwill of the Church leaders, the government pressed for complete separation of the Church from the Vatican. In order to force compliance, new arrests of intransigent priests were made. Stubbornly, Catholics refused to give in despite the fact that the government charters for the Muslim and Orthodox faiths had already been worked out and approved by the government a few years earlier. Finally, after lengthy and painful

discussions, a compromise was reached in which the government allowed the Church to keep its spiritual sovereignty and its links with the Holy See.

However, the official Communist press falsified the original text of the Charter and announced that all ties between the Albanian Catholic Church and the Vatican had been broken. The Catholic clergy were angered and saddened by this betrayal. They denounced the lies and misinterpretations regarding the Charter and emphasized their strong allegiance to the Holy Father.

In signing the Charter the government promised to allow churches and seminaries to reopen and to provide a subsidy for their maintenance. The government had also agreed to allow parents to bring their children into the Church for religious instruction. When these promises were not kept, the church tried to accommodate itself to the government's wishes in order to perform its religious duties toward Albanian Catholics. The Catholic faithful, who understood the Communist's hatred of them and religion in general, suffered greatly. They helplessly witnessed the destruction of Catholic institutions and the imprisonment and execution of their priests. In the midst of this turmoil, and despite the oppression and pillage directed against the Catholic minority, Catholics filled the churches for regular services. It was an open and eloquent testimony of their dedication to the Church and its clergy.

The leaders of the Church and the faithful were certainly aware that the government's attempt to nationalize the churches was only a temporary measure to prevent the growth of discontent. Adamantly, they refused to subordinate themselves to this kind of constitutional pressure and blocked all compromises concerning the fundamental teaching of the Catholic Church. As a consequence, a new wave of persecution washed over the Church. Between 1955 and 1965 more than a dozen priests and religious were shot. Many others were either imprisoned or sent to forced labor camps. Among the executed priests were Fathers Ded Malaj, Zef Bici, and Franciscan Konrad Gjalaj. Diocesan offices and parishes were constantly harassed, and religious services impeded by agents of the government. Titular Bishops and vicars were forced to clean streets and public bathrooms wearing clown outfits with paper signs across their

chests reading "I have sinned against the people." The entire Catholic Church was slowly being martyred.

1967 - 1983

This period is the final intensified attempt of the Albanian Communist Party and the Albanian government to wipe out the Church and all religious activity. Enver Hoxha again set the stage for action with his infamous speech of February 6, 1967, urging the Albanian youth to fight "religious superstitions." A ruthless campaign against all religion followed. Everywhere churches were burned or turned into sports arenas, dance halls, movie theaters, apartments, etc. Priests and bishops were publicly beaten. The Franciscan church of Arramadhe in Shkodra, together with the Friary, was set afire one evening and four elderly Franciscans were burned to death.

During 1967, according to the journal of Albanian writers, Nendori (November), about 2200 mosques, churches, chapels, monasteries and other religious buildings were vandalized and closed. Of that number, 327 were Roman Catholic. On November 22, 1967, the government published Decree No. 4337 ordering the annulment of the religious charters and of all laws pertaining to state-church relationships. All religious rites were prohibited and grave penalties were imposed on violators. The remaining priests were sent to forced-labor camps for "re-education." The Albanian Party and government boasted that it had become the first totally atheistic state in the world. Their actions had broken Article 18 of the country's 1946 Constitution which states that all citizens are guaranteed freedom of conscience and faith, and that religious communities are free in the exercise of their beliefs and practices. Their decree also violated the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (U.N.) which guarantees religious freedom.

The abolition of religion in Albania passed almost without notice abroad and aroused little protest, with the exception of the Vatican's daily, L'Observatore Romano, which published reports on anti-religious violence. The Free Albania Committee, located in New York, made a strong protest in the name of the silenced Albanian people, to the United Nations General Secretary, and urged that immediate steps be taken "to stop the savage religious persecution" in Albania. Unfortunately, such

steps were not taken and this plea went unheeded by world religious and civil leaders. Since that time, Cardinal Humberto Medeiros of Boston, Pope Paul VI, Bishop Mark Lipa of the Albanian Orthodox diocese of America, John Paul II and the European Catholic Bishops' conference have defended the right of Albania's citizens to practice freely their religion. In spite of their efforts, today, nearly two decades after the establishment of the first atheistic state in Albania, Albanian leaders continue to attack religion and proudly defend the destruction of churches, monasteries and mosques; the killing of hundreds of priests and religious; the inhuman persecution of believers. They attack with vehemence the Soviet Union, China, Poland, Yugoslavia and other Eastern countries for their "anti-revolutionary" stand toward religion. Needless to say, all these Communist governments which Albania criticizes persecute religion. However, they at least formally guarantee religious freedom in their constitutions and allow, with restrictions, some private and public exercise of religion.

To show their disapproval of such "lenience" toward religion, Albania's government adopted in 1976 a new Constitution whose Articles 37 and 55 boastfully proclaim that the State recognizes no religion whatsoever, and forbids all religious activities and organizations, while encouraging atheism.

Article 37. The state does not recognize any religion at all and supports and develops atheistic propaganda in order to implant in mankind the scientific-materialistic world view.

Article 55. The formation of any organization of a fascist, anti-democratic, religious or anti-socialist nature is forbidden. Fascist, religious, warmongerish, anti-socialist activity and propaganda are forbidden, as is the incitement to hatred between peoples and races.

With these articles Albania became the only country in the world where the suppression of religion and the propagation of atheism have become a constitutionally mandated state policy. In June, 1977, a new Albanian penal code was issued, clause 55 of which lays down the penalties to be exacted for religious activity. It states that "religious propaganda,

and also the production, distribution or storage of literature of this kind" will be punished with imprisonment for between three years and ten years. In time of war or if the offenses are deemed to be serious, imprisonment is for not less than ten years and the death penalty can be imposed.

Prior to the actual enactment of such official acts, the government manifested the same kind of suppression of religion. Fr. Stephen Kurti was executed in 1972 for baptizing a child in a labor camp at the parent's request. In 1974 the government also sentenced the three remaining Catholic Bishops to detention camps for conducting religious services in private. Following the constitutional outlawing of religion, in 1977 Fran Mark Gjoni of Shkodra was brought to trial for the possession of Bibles. Gjoni admitted, when presented with Bibles taken from his home, that he had found them in parks and at the seashore where they had been left by tourists or floated in by sea. For his "crime" Gjoni was sentenced to 12 years in prison. In spite of a total blackout in regard to the case by the government-controlled news media monopoly, everyone in Albania was aware of the trial and took great interest in it. The trial ironically helped to testify to the continued existence or religious faith in Albania, as well as highlighting the outrageous reactions made by the Albanian government to even the most mild expression of that faith! For religious criminals such as Gjoni, according to reports from recent refugees, the government has at least six prisons, nine concentration camps and 14 areas of internal exile.

An even more terrible example of the continuing anti-religious campaign of the Albanian government is that of Catholic Bishop Ernest Coba (Choba), Apostolic administrator of Shkodra. Bishop Coba, confined since 1974 to the labor camp of Paperr near the city of Elbasan in central Albania, celebrated a secret Easter service in 1979 at the request of his fellow prisoners. Unfortunately, the police were informed and at the beginning of the service prison guards entered the barracks and some began assaulting the Bishop, tearing off his vestments and breaking the cross, while others began beating the prisoners who had gathered for the celebration. The old, nearly blind, venerable prelate was seriously injured in the melee and died the following morning. His

body was immediately removed and buried by the police in an undisclosed site.

Another recent victim of the Albanian government's war against religion is Fr. Ndoc Luli, S. J. Father Luli, after much hesitation, in May of 1980, baptized--at the request of his sister-in-law her newborn twins at the Agricultural Cooperative, Mali Jushit, near Shkodra, where he was confined. The event leaked out somehow, first to the secretary of the Communist cell, then to the police. Father Luli was arrested immediately, along with his sister-in-law, and both interrogated and treated harshly. At the public trial, which took place in the recreation room of the Cooperative, Fr. Luli's sister-in-law was sentenced to eight years in prison at hard labor, while he received the sentence ambiguously termed "Life until death." His fate is unknown and many believe that Fr. Luli died at the bottom of some mine, a victim of the dreaded Sigurimi (Albanian Secret Police).

With the death of Bishop Coba, the only remaining Catholic Bishop in Albania is the 70-year old Nikoll (Nicholas) Troshani, titular Bishop of Cisamo and Apostolic Administrator of Lezha and Durrës. He is confined in the labor camp of Tepelana near the seaport of Vlora. The third of the surviving bishops who were detained in 1974, Antonin Fishta, died several years ago while still in confinement. The few priests and religious still alive remain in prison and forced labor camps. Among these is Mark Hasi who, for the second time, is serving a long prison sentence of "conducting religious services." Confined to the labor camp of Southern Albania are Fathers Injac Gjora, Rok Rjuraj, Jesuit Gjergj Vata, Simon Jubani, and Simon's older brother, Lazer, and two Franciscans.

Amnesty International has been interceding in vain for the release of Bishop Troshani and the other priests and lay religious believers who are kept in prison solely for their beliefs. In 1977 Cardinal Humberto Medeiros of Boston, together with Albanian Orthodox Bishop Mark Lipa, issued a "Joint Appeal for Religious Freedom" which condemned the anti-religious laws of Albania. Again on November 28, 1981, Medeiros and Lipa issued a "Declaration for Religious Freedom" on the sixty-ninth anniversary of the establishment of an independent Albanian state. In

the declaration the religious leaders called for "respect for human rights, and especially for religious freedom in Albania." They asked the Albanian government that the churches, mosques and religious institutions be allowed to reopen. They also stated their conviction that Church life and faith in God "promotes good social order." On October 5, 1980, Pope John Paul II, referring to the many martyrs of modern days Albania, asked all the faithful to pray for Christians and other believers who are persecuted for their faith. He reminded his listeners that "to be spiritually close to all those in Albania, who are suffering violence because of their faith, is a special duty of all Christians, according to the tradition inherited from the first centuries." In addition, he exhorted all "to pray also for those who persecute them, repeating Christ's invocation on the Cross, addressed to His father: 'Forgive them; for they know not what they do'." The Pope also defended the martyrs from the charges that they were guilty of political crimes by drawing attention to Christ's having been condemned on the political charge of having claimed he was a king.

In 1981, the Bishops of Greece also denounced religious persecution in Albania, particularly stressing the fate of the Orthodox believers. However, their appeal had chauvinistic overtones, claiming that 400,000 Albanian Orthodox were Greek nationals. Unfortunately, their distortion, instead of helping, hurt the Orthodox believers in Albania by giving Hoxha the pretext to continue his drive against religion.

Just recently, another positive indication that world opinion is becoming interested in the plight of Albanian believers, came from Eastern Europe. On October 7, 1982, in Bucharest, Romania, an international, inter-faith colloquium was held under the auspices of the Conference of European Churches of the World Council of Churches. The Ecumenical Press Service of the World Council of Churches published a part of the document from this colloquium which deals with the religious situation in Albania. The document reports the radical suppression of any organized religious activity in Albania. While denouncing the present religious oppression, it suggests that Christians outside of Albania utilize this period in order to prepare the way for an eventual future dialogue with the Albanian government regarding the fate of



Albanian believers.

#### Religious Activity in Albania Today

Religion continues secretly to influence the life of Albanians of all faiths despite the brutality of anti-religious campaigns. Evidence of this is given by official government agencies, including the government press and even Enver Hoxha himself. Hoxha has stated recently that "religion has still not been uprooted in our country," "religion is still alive among our working class;" "enemies of the people who believe in God do not sleep, they continue to look with sympathy and hope to the Vatican; these kinds of enemies are inside our Party lines and active in our organizations." These statements verify the reports which have come from Albania that some religious practices are alive there, that there is still the observance of major feast days, the wearing of "disguised" religious symbols, and even participation in religious pilgrimages.

Several young Albanian refugees reaching the United States within the last two years have given details of how the people have continued to practice their Catholic faith in the secrecy of their homes. It is almost certain that the remaining Catholic priests still alive are in prison. The people now rely on lay leadership for their religious services. The eldest family member is chosen to lead prayer service and to perform the rites of baptism and marriage. Religious medals, crucifixes, pictures and rosaries are kept hidden by families due to the threat of raids by the Albanian security police. Since 1975 by decree 5339, it has been forbidden to give children religious names. In 1980 the government complained that the children have reverted to being called by their saint's name at home. Such all-pervasive repressive measures against religion are greatly resented as being foreign to Albania's heritage by the refugees. Their parents and grandparents who still remain in Albania do not recall that even during the Ottoman rule of Albania, when forced conversions took place, that such attempts to totally eradicate Christianity were made.

A further indication of the continuing influence of religious beliefs in Albania is the recent survey conducted in 1980 by an Albanian government sociologist. The survey showed that there is an extremely low incidence (less than 4%) of marriages in Albania between people of

different religious background. According to this study, Albanians prefer to marry within their own religious group. This mixed-marriage rate is very low in comparison to other European countries and is also much lower than it had been prior to Communist rule. This means that the anti-religious oppression, far from removing religion as an influential factor in the life of Albania, has instead brought about a greater incidence of the preservation of religious unity within one's faith, by the overwhelming majority of Albanians.

#### How We Can Help Religious Freedom in Albania

The total war on religion being waged by the Albanian government has lasted for almost 40 years. Tremendous suffering continues to be inflicted upon Albanians for the mere fact that they choose to believe in God. It is to the credit of Albania's people that there are many signs that religion is still alive in Albania, as martyrs, religious prisoners and even Communist leaders testify. But there are many unknown casualties in this war against religion. For instance, there are those who are prevented from even hearing the message of the gospel because of rampant persecution of priests and other leaders of religious communities. Or there are those, like a young refugee from Albania, who are tempted to become embittered and unbelieving because of the seeming lack of concern on the part of believers outside Albania regarding the nation's plight.

Religious freedom in Albania is a matter of justice to which both civil and religious leaders should turn their attention. Until now, the leaders of nations have continued to overlook, disregard, ignore and remain silent in face of the actions of the Albanian government against its citizens who wish to practice their religion. In doing so, world leaders call into question their commitment to the United Nations Charter, which makes the choice of one's religion so fundamental a right that no government has the authority to discriminate against it, let alone totally deny it.

Religious leaders and all believers have an obligation to give assistance to those suffering persecution and to speak out in their defense. To fail to do so shows a lack of charity toward those in need. Our silence in regard to Albanian religious persecution signifies that

our belief in religious freedom only touches our own immediate environment and that we do not place a high value on the religious freedom of others. Certainly our generous and courageous commitment to religious freedom in Albania will help to bring about an increase in freedom and justice throughout the world and preserve the values of religion for future generations, values without which we are less than human.

Religious leaders, organizations and individual believers should urge their elected officials to speak out against religious persecution in Albania and for the right to Albanians to freely practice their religion. Protests against the Albanian government should be registered at the United Nations and human rights organizations, drawing particular attention to those sections of Albania's Constitution and Penal code dealing with the abolition of religion which are in violation of Chapter IX, Article 55, of the United Nations Charter. Religious organizations, which have a good record of showing concern for human rights, should bring this issue into the public forum and turn the attention of their own members toward concerted action on behalf of Albanian religious believers.

Translated by  
Raymond Frost