

**Metropolitan Archbishop  
Shkoder – Pult, Albania**

**OVERVIEW ON THE SOCIAL LIFE IN ALBANIA IN THE LIGHT OF  
ENCYCLICAL “*POPULORUM PROGRESSIO*”**

**Belfast, 25 September 2006**

Let me, at the beginning of my presentation thank all the organizers who have given me the opportunity to present the Albanian reality in this Assembly in front of such a significant audience.

My presentation takes a very special place in the Encyclical *Populorum Progressio* that our Diocese is dedicating on the occasion of the 40 anniversary of its publication. Amongst other things, the text of Encyclical is in the process of translation. It might seem strange that the translation is so much delayed, but on the other hand we are all aware of the difficult situation Albania has been going through. There are still a lot of documents from the church and other related religious books to be translated .... but the difficulties are various. (We have translated so far :la Familiaris Consortio, la Rerum Novarum, la Pacem in Terris, Deus Caritas Est and “Summary of the social doctrine of the church”)

The *Populorum Progressio* has a fundamental importance for Albania as well, because of the three new elements I am going to describe as following:

**The first new element of *Populorum Progressio*:** its destination both to the church and “all the people of good will” in a way that in the first sight might seem to be of only economic and social nature: development of the nations, offering them “principles of reflection”, “criteria for judgment”, and “direction for their actions”.

**The second new element: deepen the discussion of “social issues”**

Pope Paul VI says it very explicitly in His Encyclica that in the current world exists “non equal distribution of means of living which in its origin it is destined equally to all the people” (here enters the topic of “universal destination of goods”). The wide spread poverty “does not come from neither responsibility of the people in poverty nor from their fatality”. The conclusion of such attention and moral sensibility brings us to highlight how “the people in charge of public issues, people from rich countries, especially if Christian have the moral duty according to their level of responsibility to take into consideration both in their personal and governmental decisions this universal proportion, this interdependence that exists in their behavior and the underdevelopment of millions of people”. In this way we recall to the necessity of “duty of solidarity”.

**The third new element is the formula related to taking over responsibility:** “The development of people is the new name of peace”. Here, enters into force the prerequisite for justice without which the violence dominates. Albania also needs an authentic social justice. It is

quite evident for all that the country would transform for better “if dominated by the willingness of people for the common good or the worry for the “spiritual and human development of all” rather than seeking a particular profit”. In this world “the peace would be possible like a fruit of “a perfect justice amongst people”(PP 76).

Taking into consideration the three above mentioned elements of PP, I propose the following reflection on the global situation in general and the situation of young people in Albania in particular.

Often, I am sorry to notice that whenever it is spoken about Albania, its most problematic and negative aspects are highlighted. Without wanting to negate or hide this, I am here to witness also other positive elements which are present in this reality and invite you all to see Albania from another point of view maybe from a wider prospective to what is described in the mass media.

1- I would like to treat as following an argument which interests to all Eastern European people who have lived under totalitarian communism.

Using an appropriate expression from the Pope the Servant of God John Paul II used in His book “Identity and memory” let me draw your attention to “devastation of consciences”. This phenomenon did not happen only with the Albanian youngsters, who were declared atheists by the Constitution of 1976, but involves all those people in eastern countries who came out from communist dictatorships. However, there the youngsters who are paying a high price for the bad consequences of the collapse of an ideology which was set as a system. For those who have lived out of this regime it is not simple to understand the devastating effects of this collapse. This has brought at the same time to the lack of faith or hopes for quick changes (which many times has turned into delusion...) and wish for new things but also a mistaken interpretation of freedom.

There is also another reason which has influenced negatively disorienting the conscience of these young people. Pope John Paul II treats it very explicitly this issue in the above mentioned book. He puts into evidence the fact how a lot of western negative models have penetrated in the eastern societies. Such models, which attract and trick especially those who have not reached the human and Christian maturity, have an enormous negative impact on those youngsters. One of the ways to contrast such models is to translate and make known the Social Doctrine of the Church.

2-The first big problem we are faced with in Albania is the problem of emigration to the west and inner migration of the population from one zone to another within the country. Lot of people leave the remote mountains because of the hard living conditions there and settle in the outskirts of the cities. On the other hand, a lot of Albanians especially youngsters immigrate abroad. Especially in the last decade 1995-2004 this immigration masse which we can easily call exodus or escape. Although decreased this phenomenon has not yet come to an end. There are different reasons. The lack of jobs and lack of real prospective of improvement of the situation in Albania in general. **A lot of youngsters have lost their hope to live in their homeland.** This pushes them to fulfill in other countries their dreams and make better use of their abilities. In this way, Albania is getting poor of its youngsters who very often are very good. This goes in the advantage of other nations which “use” their energy and their competences .... Isn't this a form of exploitation of rich countries towards poor countries which is also put into evidence by PP?

3-One positive element which should go in silence is the peaceful co-living amongst Catholics, Orthodox and Muslims. Pope John Paul II himself during His visit in Albania appealed to the people to preserve this “precious heredity”. *Of course we should not be pleased and limited to only using tolerance but we should be predisposed to have mutual respect of our values which can bring to a fruitful collaboration and respect of human rights.*

4-Another positive element at least for the Catholics is the ongoing Canonic process for the acknowledgement of the 40 martyrs killed during communist regime “in odium Fidei” Their testimony to life and faith is for all of us a light which illuminates our way and the future of the country.

5- The past of Albania- including the Turkish occupation and the recent communist dictatorship- has brought appalling consequences and has left traces in the memory of the people. The present is in front of the eyes of all: a present filled with many contradictions, a present which stays between great potentials and risks of regression. No-one can tell now how the future will be. I am also sure that the future is in the hands of many serious, honest, professional men and women who do not give up in front of difficulties but with courage prepare themselves to give their own contribution until the tomorrow will take the face of hope and love.

6- Hospitality.

a- The Christina tradition has always exalted “on open heart” as a characteristic of our identity, expressed so nicely in the expression that the guest will find in the Albanian house always “bread-salt-heart”. Nowadays, in every Christian community there are multiplied gestures of human solidarity and promotion, which have originated by the Holy Bible sometimes implied by the bible and sometimes expressed through big projects.

b- In a mentality which tends to justify “revenge” or “blood feud” we have the good sign which consists in “**offering forgiveness**”. Offering forgiveness for somebody who has been a victim of injustice or cruelty turn the forgiveness into an heroic action. On this occasion, I want to thank all those families, who following the example of Jesus, have forgiven the families of the perpetrators.

I want to express my gratitude to all the priests and laic people who continue to dedicate their time to the delicate and difficult task of “**reconciliation**” between those families who live their lives in mourning, violence and revenge.

There are still a lot of families shut in their houses because of the revenge: men, youngsters, old people and sometimes women and children are living their lives in fear that one day one of them can be killed; men that cannot go to work, youngsters who cannot go to school...etc

So let us take this as an experience on how many families illuminated by the faith in God offer and receive forgiveness, a forgiveness for life, a forgiveness for love. Forgiveness is the life of life and origin of peace.

**There are still a lot of needs which require advice  
Old and new poverties humiliate the human dignity**

a- The family in Albania still keeps its solidarity, but it is continually under the pressure of consumes and exaggerated liberalism and under desegregation push of immigration. Problematic remains the problem of abortion. There are cases of exploitation and violence on women. The high rate of unemployment amongst the population has brought to the sad reality of “dirty” money which came mainly from prostitution and drugs. We continue to give a lot of attention to life, especially to weak like the abandoned children or disabled ( we have in Shkodër several family-homes where these categories of people receive assistance and where the staff works for their human and social promotion)

b-We have the big problem of drugs which is cultivated mainly in the North of Albania without thinking that millions of people have become slaves of this demonic commerce. Every time I have the opportunity to speak to the people of these zones I try to raise their awareness that it is not cultivating “instruments of death” that they can make their living and it not helping the “the sellers of death” that you can stay alive.

c- Two other social aspects that we should pay attention to are the corruption and theft. It is necessary to stress that the unjust richness of the people are morally unacceptable and the church condemns decisively all those who are culprit. The duty to give back everything which has been unjustly taken by another person (or at least give back the economic value of the thing) and the repair the damage is the act of a constricted justice.

d- Another phenomenon which creates pain within the families is when children abandon their parents to go abroad. This has already become a social wound which is increasing and will have in the future its dramatic consequences. Of course, the separation takes place in a contest in which the parents wish for their children a better future but with what price? I repeat very often that it is not right that all the children leave their families. It is a human and Christian duty that somebody remain to take care lovingly of their parents on behalf of other children. At the same time it is a human and Christian duty for those who leave their families to support economically those who remain. My appeal is strong not to abandon your parents.

e- New poverties expect answers to general questions posed to them. For example: In which way the interest for common good can increase? The poverty and disoccupation, the escape abroad and immigration en masse switch off the hope in the heart of many people for the future. A lot of youngsters abandon the school, especially girls. A few continue the high school and unfortunately there are still frequent cases that youngsters do not manage to finish the elementary school. In the cities we notice another type of poverty, which derives from the fact of highland drift to the cities. The people from the mountains come to the cities for a better and more human life. These people are located in the outskirts of the cities brining a lot of social, educational and health care problems.

f- It is also increasing the illiteracy and there is still a big lack of medical care in the mountains.

g- Amongst other issues which I always raise I try highlight the following: **it is time overcome a misunderstanding and emergency.** Immediately after the collapse of communist regime, a **various type of aid** was provided to Albania. The willingness of the Universal Church which was

near us in an extraordinary way both with different programs of assistance from different countries and the special care paid by the missionaries. However, this did not go all well without misunderstandings. In the common mentality, the work carried out by the church was exclusively considered as economic aid. Unfortunately such mentality exists also nowadays. It is time that all the Christian community have an test of the conscience and think radically about pastoral actions and charity. We are more and more aware of the fact that we cannot fall into passivity and live always with assistencialism. It is sharing our lives and resources, no matter how poor they are, that we can go through a solid growth in line with what is indicated to us by *Populorum Progression*. For this reason I have elaborated and inserted the following idea in the pastoral plans of our Diocese which says “the Albanian should help his Albanian brother”

## **Conclusion**

By closing my presentation I would like to thank you again for your invitation to share with you this simple testimony of a nation that can give a lot more.

I would like also to thank all the churches that in these years with their ecclesial organizations have helped us a great deal with human, social and religious promotion and also through direct funding for construction of pastoral centers, schools and churches.

For us it still remains **vital and urgent** the economic aid to make possible the education with human values, to bring further education and spread further the word of the bible in a way to help “the poorest amongst the poor” following the teaching and example of Mother Theresa of Calcutta.

Let me on this occasion to present to you the following projects which are priority for us for the time being:

1. “Betania” project, which consists in a house for poor and numerous families
2. “Fund for medicines” project
3. “promotion of education” project
4. Aid to pay the dormitory for the youngsters who study
5. Scholarships for high schools
6. Scholarships for university (poor people who frequent the universities in Albania)

Thank you again very much for your attention and I send you all an affectionate greeting.

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