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THE CONFERENCE OF EUROPEAN JUSTICE AND PEACE COMMISSIONS

“Inter-religious and intercultural relations – chances and challenges for our solidarity”

An Albanian contribution to the construction of Europe

The theme chosen by Pope Benedict XVI for World Day of Peace this year was ‘Religious Freedom, the Path to Peace’. Twenty years after Albania emerged from what was arguably the most repressive communist regime in Europe, the *Conference of European Justice and Peace Commissions* came here to learn about the Albanian experience of inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue.

The representatives, from 23 European countries, had the privilege to be welcomed by all the main religious communities of Albania. Leaders and members of the Muslim, Orthodox, Catholic, Bektashi and Protestant communities shared experiences in a solemn opening of the workshop, in a conference, in welcoming participants into their communities and in responding to questions in a round table discussion. Prime Minister Sali Berisha addressed the participants and invited guests during the opening ceremony. This experience of welcome and sharing was deeply appreciated.

During encounters with the different communities participants were deeply moved to learn of the persecution experienced during the communist period: people were imprisoned for their faith; the leadership structures of the different religions were decimated through imprisonment and exile; the cultural heritage of the different traditions was destroyed; places of worship were taken away from the people and often put to uses that were disrespectful of the faith and of the values of the community.

It was inspiring to see the tremendous resilience of the Albanian people, in the face of so much suffering and destruction, as they kept their faith alive in their hearts. When the persecution came to an end in 1991, the religious communities, united by the experience of common suffering, ensured that the work of reconstruction was carried out in a spirit of solidarity with the other, cooperation and sharing. In this spirit, religious revival in Albania has been a time of shared celebration.

All the religious communities showed a keen awareness that Albania today is still a society in transition: some issues from the past remain unresolved and there are significant political, social and economic challenges for the future. The task of defining the role of religion in modern Albanian society is not yet complete, but the religious communities are aware of their role in the construction of a new society in Albania. Although there may be some tensions and difficulties, the attitude that the religious communities have displayed to date, characterized by mutual respect, mutual support and an emphasis on common values such as the dignity of the human person, should provide a solid foundation from which to continue to address these challenges.

It was encouraging to learn of the support of political leaders for the religious communities, underlined in a particular way by the address given by Prime Minister Berisha. The openness, at a political level, to an Albanian identity that not only accepts, but also takes pride in the religious plurality and religious freedom of its society, is an example to other nations. The religious communities too play their part in making a contribution to social cohesion and the life of the state through multiple kinds of social engagement, many of which include extending a hand of friendship to those outside their community.

The essential spiritual dimension of this inter-faith encounter was marked by a ceremony with representatives of the participating communities in the centre of Tirana on 17th of September. The different communities, each according to its own tradition, offered prayers for the future in a moment of shared celebration of unity in our diversity. In symbolic recognition of the significance of this encounter an olive tree was planted in front of the Art Gallery in central Tirana, with the support of the municipality, as the busy life of the city continued all around us.

The strong desire of the Albanian people to strengthen their ties to other European countries was evident throughout this experience. It is clear that Albania has much experience to share in terms of the challenges facing religious communities throughout Europe today, such as the economic crisis, dealing with past conflict, adapting to increasing levels of cultural diversity, providing welcome to those who arrive from other countries and addressing religious fanaticism. Religious communities need to show leadership on moral and ethical questions, making their contribution to the common good and the development of our societies.

The members of the *Conference of European Justice and Peace Commissions* are deeply grateful for the welcome extended to us by our Albanian hosts and wish to thank all those who made this experience possible. This includes, in a particular way, the leaders and representatives of the different religious communities in Albania: Archbishop Rrok Mirdita (Catholic Community); Mr Selim Muça (Muslim Community); Auxiliary Bishop Antoni (Orthodox Church); Baba Edmond Brahimaj (Bektashi Community); Reverend Fitor Muça (Evangelical Brotherhood). The participation of Prime Minister Sali Berisha and Mr Lorenc Luka, Mayor of Shkodra is greatly appreciated. Special thanks

are also due to the Albanian Justice and Peace Commission: The President, Archbishop Angelo Massafra, the Secretary General Luigj Mila and all those who helped and supported us during our preparations and visit to Albania.

Notes for Editors

1. The *Conference of European Justice and Peace Commissions* (Justice and Peace Europe) is a European network that today comprises 30 national Justice and Peace commissions. Each one is established or recognized by its Catholic bishops' conference. The secretariat of Justice and Peace Europe is currently situated in Paris (France).
2. The distribution among the religious communities of Albania are usually estimated at 70% Muslims (which here includes the Bektashi community representing some 4-5%), 20% Eastern Orthodox, and 10% Roman Catholics. The Evangelical Christians in the country represent some 8.000 persons. In 2011 a new government census is carried out.