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of Tirana, Durres and all Albania

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1. General Religious Reality. From the first Christian centuries, religion has played a fundamental role in the formation of culture, self-conscience, and national self-identity among the peoples of the Balkans. Authoritarian regimes, however, dominated most of these countries over the second half of the 20th century and they imposed an atheistic education, mentality, and social structure.

Nevertheless, the search for meaning in human existence remains a basic stimulus that guides millions of people to a religious community. No power can stop such a quest, since it is identified with human existence itself. The main question, however, is how the various religious attitudes will exist alongside one another and contribute to a creative coexistence instead of developing into factors of conflict.

Intolerance among coexisting religious communities can find root in either seeds of a religious type (e.g. extreme fundamentalism) or from non-religious roots (e.g. political, nationalistic, psychological, or selfish factors). All these roots have been powerful in the past, and are still vigorous in the Western Balkans.

On the other hand, peaceful coexistence of religious communities also can derive from two opposite starting points: an indifference to religious experience, or a conscious experience of the innermost essence of the religion, as represented in the lives of many distinguished personalities of all religions.

In today's Balkan reality, the foundation for any common decision for peaceful coexistence among religious communities themselves, along with non-religious groups, can be based upon a respect for the UN Declaration on Human Rights and a regard for one's freedom of conscience. Nowadays, both Christian and Islamic worlds more or less approve this declaration.

2. Especially in Albania. The religious peculiarity of each country in the Western Balkans is multifaceted. In most states, there traditionally prevails one religion which relates to the identity, culture, endurance, and expectations of its people. Focusing more immediately on the particular experience we have in Albania, Muslims (Sunni and Bektashi) and Christians (Orthodox, Catholics, and Protestants) live together in a secular democratic society which has no particular positive or negative relation to any religious community. The collapse of communism added other informal social groups to today's religious scene – "a-religious groups". Such groups remain undefined and without any unique structure of their own, but they represent a significant proportion in modern civil society.

In the transitional period of the last decades, a more general crisis in the system of values has appeared in the Albanian society, creating a crisis of confidence in the various forms of authority, as well as uncertainty for what is genuine. Where slogans of utopian collectivism prevailed in past years, today's messages of egocentric secular capitalism bombard our youth. A particular reticence dominates everywhere, sometimes expressing itself as apathy and indifference, while other times as escapism. Within this spiritual vacuum, the religious communities of Albania strive to cultivate a faith in God and

open new spiritual horizons which will strengthen its moral ideas and inner discipline, as well as invigorate the endurance and creativity of the people. But of course, this can only happen in a condition of friendly coexistence with one another.

3. Rethinking the meaning of nationality. More particularly, no nation has the right to monopolize God and to consider the other nations as second-class. The Apostle Paul clearly emphasized that God “made from one every nation of man to live on all the face of the earth.” (Acts 17:26). All the nations belong to the same humanity which was created by the same God. In the new period of globalization, every nation is called to confront the great problem of preservation of their identity. The pretention of our uniqueness cannot be used as an encumbrance to our relationship with our neighbors, as a hindrance to respect truth and justice.

For centuries, the people of the Balkans have existed inside mighty empires – the Roman, Byzantine, and Ottoman – creating by interaction a particular Balkan culture. This ability continues to be relevant in the upcoming new form of “empire” – the European Union.

It is time for us to correct the erroneous, often distorted image formed in the consciousness of the Balkan people of “the other”, with xenophobic stereotypes, which were created by a variety of nationalistic groups through various methods. We must discover and acknowledge the positive aspects of our neighbors and to learn to collaborate. The development and prosperity of a neighbor can help our own progress. The “other” should not be considered as a threat, but under proper circumstances can become a blessing.

In summary, for a vision of peaceful coexistence among the peoples of the Balkans to become a reality, new initiatives are needed, with creative thinking and a wider perspective. All religious communities must search for the principles of a healthy anthropology from the depths of their teaching and the best pages of their tradition, giving emphasis to a sincere respect of each human being, and struggling for the development and prevalence of these principles through ethos of the leadership and education of their members. It must be stressed, in particular, that every type of war or violence in the name of religion is an offense against religion.

We believe deeply that in historic time the only antidote to the hatred that has been sown in our region and threatens it immediately, and that in the long term is dangerous as radioactivity, is initiatives of sincere love; each carried out with boldness and persistence.

Our standard proposal is: With the active contribution of all religious communities and every person of good will, let us process toward a wider commonwealth of peace and solidarity, that secures justice and human dignity for every person, for every people, and for every minority, and that leads ultimately to a deeper, human culture.