



An Examination of The Historical, Cultural, And Social Aspects of Catholic Missions in Southern Albania During The Italian Occupation (1939–1943)

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Abstract

From the perspective of religion, Albania is a tiny country with a majority of Muslims, Orthodox, and Catholics. Geographically speaking, the Christian population's settlement produced a split between the Orthodox south and the Catholic north, but in practice, this was not entirely clear-cut because there were Orthodox people in the Catholic area and vice versa. In the north of Albania, where the missionary process had started early during Ottoman occupation and continued under the Austro-Hungarian protectorate, leading to the establishment of Jesuits and Franciscans, the Catholic Church's attention was concentrated until 1939. Concrete measures were launched to establish Catholic missions in the southern part of the country in April 1939, right after the Italian invasion. This study intends to examine the Vatican's attempts to expand the activity of missionary priests in a region where the majority of the population was not Catholic and where there was a shortage of local clergy, necessitating their importation from other nations, using Albanian archival sources, historical literature, and a portion of the funds of the Central State Archives based on the methodological approach of integrating chronological with thematic-problematic criteria. The establishment of administrative-religious structures that would make missionary work easier, the activities of foreign priests' missions from Italy and Albanian sisters' settlements in some of the major southern cities, the attempts of Italy to expand its influence in that region through them, the financial challenges they faced, and the hostility and indifference of the Orthodox population, which viewed their mission with suspicion, are all given particular attention.

Keywords: Apostolic Delegate; Italo-Greek war; orphanage; Orthodox population; Vicar Jacomoni

1. Introduction

A multitude of historians, both Albanian and international, have engaged in the examination of Albania's historical narrative during World War II, placing particular emphasis on the political, economic, military, administrative, social, and educational dimensions of that era. A notably underexplored dimension has been the religious aspect. This paper seeks to enhance the understanding of Albania's historical narrative during World War II by presenting data on the

operations of Catholic missions in the southern region during the Italian occupation. It employs a methodological approach that integrates chronological and thematic-problematic criteria, grounded in archival research and an examination of both Albanian and foreign literature, as well as contemporary religious publications, utilizing analytical and synthetic methods, among others. By integrating two distinct categories of primary and secondary sources, this paper seeks to present a critical and argumentative analysis grounded in verifiable documents sourced from the Central State Archive in Tirana.

Within the Albanian context, drawing from historical documents, this study seeks to address inquiries such as: What initiatives did the Vatican undertake to enhance missionary endeavors in southern Albania, a region characterized by a sparse Catholic population and a predominance of Orthodox Christians? What factors contributed to the influx of foreign missionaries in Albania, and what were the reasons for the exclusion of local clergy in this context? Did Italy and the Vatican possess aligned interests concerning the missionary process?

This paper faces several limitations: First, there is a lack of in-depth historical studies on the religious activity of Catholic missions in Albania during World War II, both by Albanian and foreign authors. This makes it more difficult to analyze historical facts and events in this period. Second, previous and current studies on this topic, especially in the Albanian context, are limited, so comparing the findings with similar studies was almost impossible. Third, the sources used, especially the primary ones, have been critically analyzed, taking into account the political conditions in which Albania was located, as well as the time and purpose of producing the documentation used. But, we are also aware that sometimes the data obtained from them do not always provide complete information on all issues or cities of Albania. Fourth, for a more complete analysis of the facts, causes and reasons that led to the arrival of foreign missionaries in Albania, of the interests and motives that the interested parties had at that time for the missionary process, it would be necessary to consult foreign archives, especially those of Italy and the Vatican. It remains a task for the future to realize this objective on the part of the author.

2. The religious landscape in Albania during the Italian invasion on April 7, 1939

From a religious perspective, Albania showcases a fascinating tapestry where Muslims, Orthodox and Catholic Christians, along with the Bektashi sect, exist in harmonious coexistence. Up until the year 1939, the demographic landscape was predominantly characterized by Sunni and Bektashi Muslims, who constituted approximately 70% of the population, followed by Orthodox Christians at around 20%, with Catholics making up the remaining 10%. (Akademia e Shkencave e Shqipërisë, 2009) From a geographical perspective, the presence of Christians in Albania has engendered a notable division: the Catholic north juxtaposed with the Orthodox south. In truth, the situation was not as definitive, given that there existed an Orthodox community within the Catholic region and conversely.

During the period of Ottoman occupation, the missionary efforts in northern Albania commenced early and subsequently continued under the auspices of the Austro-Hungarian protectorate, aimed at safeguarding the religious practices and the Catholic Church. This led to the establishment of Jesuit and Franciscan orders (Bello, 2019, p. 19). The Catholic Church defined "missions" as centers of religious activity established in regions where the predominant population did not adhere to Catholicism. Catholic missionaries comprised individuals from various European religious congregations and were bolstered by the support and patronage of the Catholic populace (Uffing, 2013). The nineteenth century was the greatest one thus far in the history of Christianity in terms of its extent and its effect upon mankind (Hudson 1973). In Albania, Catholics were predominantly situated in the northern regions of the country.

However, the political circumstances prevailing in the Albanian territories during that period, coupled with a scarcity of local clergy, necessitated the expansion of the Catholic Church's influence through the efforts of foreign missionaries. (Ukgjini, 2016)

Up until 1939, the Vatican focused its foremost efforts on the northern region of the country, which served as the principal heart of Catholicism, while still maintaining its commitment to missionary endeavors in the southern areas. This undertaking was regarded as challenging and nuanced, given the opposition from the Orthodox community. The ecclesiastical authorities exercised meticulous attention to guarantee that this endeavor would not undermine their standing, ensuring that each action was deliberate and judiciously considered. (Bello, 2019, p. 223)

On April 7, 1939, Albania experienced an invasion by fascist Italy. Prior to the official onset of World War II, it was crucial for the Italians to frame the invasion as a necessary undertaking that would minimize bloodshed among the Albanians, avoiding unnecessary aerial bombardments of urban areas. The initial interactions between Italian forces and the local populace were expected to adhere to "the principles of mutual understanding and respect" that had characterized their relations previously. (Jacomoni, 1965) In truth, a multitude of soldiers disembarked in Durrës, accompanied by 400 fighter planes that commandeered Albanian airports, exemplifying both power and might, (Peters, 2010, pp. 114-115) alongside the belligerent character of Italian fascism. (Basciani, 2021, p. 28)

The absence of an official religion in the country led to a prudent disposition among the Italians towards them. They had conceptualized the religious landscape under the former regime, during which they allocated resources for the Catholic clergy and their educational institutions; however, they now confronted an entirely altered scenario. It was also observed that the general populace, regardless of their religious affiliations, regarded them with a degree of skepticism. They encountered a multitude of challenges, both from within and beyond, during the era of global conflict. However, in the initial months of the occupation, they exercised great caution to uphold a "impartial balance" among the various religions, extending equal respect to each. (Della Rocca, 1994)

One of the central objectives of Italy's policy was the comprehensive utilization of resources, with the intention of transforming Albania into a supplier of raw materials for Italian industry and a consumer market for its products. Concurrently, a significant influx of Italians commenced in Albania. Individuals from diverse professions, both prominent and emerging entrepreneurs, motivated by the incentives they received, started to migrate to the nation heralded as the "land of opportunity". During the years 1939 to 1940, approximately 55,000 to 60,000 Italian workers arrived in a systematic fashion, enjoying a level of privilege that starkly contrasted with that of their Albanian counterparts. Upon their arrival, they proceeded to register with the Fascist Party. (Instituti i Studimeve Marksiste-Leniniste pranë KQ të PPSH, 1975) The strategies for the colonization and ultimate establishment of Italian citizens suggested enduring objectives aimed at altering the ethnic makeup of Albania, and within this framework, a transformation in the religious demographics of the populace. A significant number of these Italian immigrants established themselves in the southern regions of the country, thereby necessitating the provision of religious services by Catholic priests.

3. The Endeavors of the Catholic Mission Following April 1939

Subsequent to April 1939, a series of definitive measures were implemented. The Congregation of Propaganda Fide, tasked with the dissemination of Christian teachings globally, aimed to further the reach of the Catholic faith within the Albanian Kingdom. Following consultations with esteemed religious authorities in Albania and the Apostolic Delegate, a significant decree was issued on May 8, 1939, establishing the Missionary Union of the Clergy. The Archbishop

of Shkodra, Monsignor Gaspër Thaçi, has been designated as the National President, whereas Dom Mikel Koliqi, the parish priest of Shkodra, has been appointed as the National Director. (Kumbona e së Diellës, 1939, p. 105) The proclamation of this decree underscored the significance attributed by the Vatican to the optimal and comprehensive structuring of missionary endeavors. It required assistance and endorsement from the most significant religious institutions within the nation. A report from the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, dated September 1939, provides a concise overview of the religious landscape in Albania, including pertinent information regarding the prevailing religious beliefs. It was noted that, in contrast to Muslims and Orthodox Christians, Catholics established missionary organizations with the purpose of disseminating and safeguarding their faith through catechetical instruction and sermons. (Verli, Verli, 2013) Consequently, missionary endeavors were not beyond the purview of Italian state institutions, which perceived their engagement as a strategy to augment Italian influence in a region marked by evident skepticism towards them and where the initial communist factions would subsequently emerge. (Peters, 2010, p. 118)

The endeavors of the Catholic missions were regarded as notably praiseworthy, and periodically, masses were convened to celebrate and elevate their contributions. On the designated day for missions, October 22, 1939, Bishop Gaspër Thaçi conducted a mass wherein he articulated the profound significance of their daily endeavors through conferences, educational institutions, and orphanages. He acknowledged their unwavering commitment and perseverance in the face of considerable challenges, including the isolation of their operational locations, insufficient staffing, the extensive resources of Protestant propaganda, opposition from adversaries, and the skepticism of foreign missionaries. (Kumbona e së Diellës, 1939, p. 175)

The Holy See, aiming to facilitate missionary endeavors for the local populace and to provide religious services to the Italian laborers who had established themselves or would arrive subsequently, implemented a strategic organizational modification. The region under its administration was delineated into two distinct zones: the northern and the southern. The initial northern region preserved the existing diocesan structure, comprising two archbishoprics: Shkodra and Durrës, alongside three bishoprics: Pulti, Sapa, and Lezha, as well as the abbey of Oroshi located in Mirdita. This arrangement remained under the authority of the Sacred Congregation of Propaganda Fide. On November 11, 1939, the Apostolic Administration for Southern Albania was founded in the southern region of Albania by Pope Pius XII. It encompassed Gjirokastra, Berat, Korça, Elbasan, and Vlora. The oversight and authority were vested in the Sacred Congregation Pro Ecclesia Orientali, also known as the Congregation for the Oriental Churches, and were guided by the Apostolic Delegate in Albania, Leone Giovanni Battista Nigris. (Cimbalo, 2013, pp. 70, 82) A persistent issue was the insufficient number of local clergy, necessitating the importation of missionaries from overseas, predominantly from Italy. From the dawn of the 20th century, a gradual settlement in Shkodra took shape through various congregations, comprising both religious and lay individuals. Notable among these were the Stigmatine sisters, affiliated with the Franciscans, alongside the Servite sisters, the Salesian sisters, the “Daughters of Mary,” and the “Servants of Love.” These groups undertook significant initiatives, establishing kindergartens for children, orphanages, and manual labor courses aimed at older girls, among other endeavors. During the years 1939-1944, certain individuals expanded this endeavor to multiple cities in the southern region of the country.

The Servite sisters established the inaugural kindergarten in Shkodra in the year 1897. It garnered an esteemed reputation, as it welcomed the children of the city without charge, irrespective of their social class or religious affiliation. The total count was approximately 340 children. In the year 1940, the organization comprised a team of 18 sisters, among whom 3 were of Italian descent, under the leadership of Bonfiglia Zorba, hailing from Shkodra. A

course in domestic management was introduced for adult women, attracting approximately 40 participants, who contributed a fee ranging from 1 to 2 francs monthly, contingent upon their financial circumstances. In both the kindergarten setting and the course, daily sessions of Italian language instruction were conducted for one hour. (Arkivi Qendror i Shtetit, 1940, Fondi 132, Dosja 12, fl. 21-22)

The endeavor of the Salesian sisters commenced in 1907 and, notwithstanding certain interruptions between 1916 and 1919, persisted in its activities until 1946, at which point they were compelled to depart from Albania. The Italian sisters held a prominent position among their peers, and in their efforts to integrate the local element, they exercised caution and selectivity, mindful of the cultural disparities between Italians and Albanians. Consequently, by the conclusion of World War II, the total number of Albanian sisters reached eight. Their primary hub was the city of Shkodra; however, beginning in 1937, at the behest of the Italian government, they broadened their efforts to Kuçova to provide religious support to the workers of the AIPA (Azienda Italiana Petroli Albanesi) society, where they managed a modest hospital situated amidst the fields. (Auciello FMA, 2007, pp. 17, 50) Their efforts became increasingly pronounced during the Italo-Greek War. Amidst exceedingly challenging circumstances and the looming danger of aerial bombardment, they attended to the injured, despite having been granted the option to vacate the conflict area. The Salesian sisters of Kuçova were acknowledged for their remarkable contribution and bravery in serving as volunteers, receiving gratitude from Pope Pius XII and the Italian Army. (Auciello FMA, 2007, p. 63)

The establishment of the “Daughters of Mary” Society in Shkodra occurred in the year 1914. The program encompassed the education of young girls, their spiritual development, and the cultivation of a conscience and character rooted in Christian principles. Similar to other societies, it possessed a distinct internal structure, operated under a set of statutes and regulations, and was guided by a leader appointed by the Franciscan Province to which it was affiliated. The individual who established and guided the organization was Father Marjan Prelaj. It possessed its own edifice, banner, treasury, and a provisional publication entitled “Catholic Daughters.” In the year 1939, the count of sisters stood at 50, whereas approximately 350 other girls were engaged in service across various centers, including Tirana, Naraçi, and Nënshati. (Shtypshkronja Françeskane, 1939) Their endeavors were consistently bolstered by the assistance and encouragement of the Stigmatine sisters. The society's founder, Sister Felician Marconi, arrived in Albania driven by the noble aspiration of missionary work. She welcomed Albanian Catholic girls as well as those from various faiths, engaging with fervor and commitment to nurture them into exemplary women and mothers. For those inclined, she provided the opportunity to pursue a spiritual journey dedicated to God. In 1942, despite her departure from leadership and the completion of half a century of service as a missionary, she persisted in her endeavors with unwavering dedication and humility. (Zani i Shna Ndout, 1942, pp. 217-218)

The origins of the Catholic mission in the city of Korça can be traced to 1931, marked by the efforts of the Lazarist priest Francesco Tommaso Brunetti, who secured an apartment for this purpose. In that same year, through the decision of Prefect Ismet Kryeziu, he acquired the privilege to conduct religious functions within his residence for the Catholics residing in this province. He persisted in his endeavors as a solitary missionary until the year 1937, at which point the Franciscan Stigmata sisters made their arrival. (Arkivi Qendror i Shtetit, 1942, Fondi 132, Dosja 33, fl. 1-2) In the course of broadening their endeavors in the southern region of the country, they established a convent comprising five sisters, inaugurated a primary school catering to 21 students, launched a children's home accommodating 90 children, and initiated handicraft courses with an enrollment of 80 to 120 students. By 1939, the group expanded to include ten sisters, who provided Italian language courses to a total of 130 students. (Peters,

2010, p. 109) In March 1940, an act by the mayor of Korça, accompanied by a directive from the Ministry of the Interior, resulted in the transfer of the internal administration of the city's orphanage to four Albanian Stigmata sisters. The structure was erected in 1931, financed by the benefactor Erasti Turtulli, who, in commemoration of her only son, who tragically passed away at the age of 18, provided the resources for both the acquisition of the land and the interior furnishings of the edifice. (Gogaj, 2003) The children were discovered in deplorable circumstances, afflicted by measles, scabies, and surrounded by environments teeming with insects. Upon assuming office, there were 40 children under care, comprising 26 boys and 14 girls. The sisters attended to these children without regard for their Orthodox or Muslim backgrounds, garnering notable attention from the community for their commendable efforts. (Arkivi Qendror i Shtetit 1942, Fondi 132, Dosja 7, fl. 45)

In the course of the Italo-Greek War, as Greek forces entered the city, the situation became perilous, compelling them to depart and entrust the orphanage to the stewardship of an Orthodox priest. The municipality, facing challenging circumstances, has reinstated the former director. Following the recapture of Korça on April 30, 1941, the sisters returned and commenced their endeavors. In February 1942, discussions took place between Apostolic Delegate Nigris and the priests of the Don Orione order, in conjunction with local authorities. It was resolved that the 26 orphaned boys would be relocated to Shkodra, to the orphanage managed by them, while the 16 girls would continue their education at the city's primary schools for the time being. Upon completing their academic pursuits, they proceeded to the sisters' institution, where they acquired proficiency in the Italian language, as well as skills in sewing and culinary arts. The objective extended beyond mere education; it encompassed the pursuit of training and mastery in the management of the household. (Arkivi Qendror i Shtetit, 1942, Fondi 132, Dosja 7, fl. 46)

The Korça region was assigned to the Lazarists, who endeavored to broaden their influence even further. In the year 1940, an additional three priests, along with two auxiliary fathers and the sisters known as "Zelatrici del Sacro Cuore," arrived to establish a residence in Pogradec. A report submitted by the leader of this mission, dated November 28, 1942, indicates a notable expansion in their missionary activities. During the decade spanning from 1932 to 1942, there were a total of 60 baptisms conducted, with 20 occurring in the year 1942 alone. Additionally, 23 marriages were solemnized, 7 of which were recorded in the same year. He noted the establishment of a modest community of Eastern rite Catholics, comprising 130 individuals, and indicated that efforts commenced to enlist local candidates for the roles of priests and sisters, with the aspiration that this assembly would soon evolve into a parish. (Arkivi Qendror i Shtetit, 1942, Fondi 132, Dosja 33, fl. 1-2)

The missionary process was progressing at a measured tempo, as the figures were, in fact, rather modest. In the southern cities, particularly in Korça, a locale distinguished by its robust nationalist traditions and significant Orthodox Church influence, there is a discernible effort to dispatch Albanian sisters, as they would likely be more readily embraced by the local populace. To fulfill their mission effectively and "to gain the favor of the Pope", they adhered to the rites of the Eastern Catholic Church, albeit "with considerable sacrifice". (Zani i Shna Ndout, 1942, p. 251) However, it proved to be quite challenging for the Catholic clergy to embrace an Eastern religious practice that diverged from their established tradition.

4. The Objectives, Undertakings, Individuals Involved, and Urban Centers in Which Catholic Missions Were Active

In May 1941, the Apostolic Delegate submitted a comprehensive report from Shkodra to Prime Minister Shefqet Vërlaci, addressing the objectives, activities, personnel both local and foreign and the cities in which they were active. He elucidated the manner in which the missionaries

were strategically positioned in specific locales, referred to as Missions. In their endeavors, they were compelled to adhere to two guiding principles. Firstly, they needed to gradually immerse themselves in the language and customs of the local populace, fostering an understanding that divine impartiality transcends race, culture, or nationality. Secondly, they were required to genuinely appreciate the hospitality extended by the locals, dedicating themselves fully to education and service for the community, irrespective of existing religious divisions. Furthermore, they were to cultivate amicable relations with all civil and religious authorities, deliberately abstaining from political involvement and concentrating their efforts solely on the realms of religion, education, charity, and culture. (Arkivi Qendror i Shtetit, 1941, Fondi 132, Dosja 20, fl.2-3)

The initial principle posited that the amalgamation of missionaries with the local population was regarded as a paramount responsibility. There existed stringent regulations concerning them, which could result in their exit from Albania, particularly if they failed to acquire proficiency in the Albanian language. It was suggested that priests or sisters of foreign nationality engage in initial preparation in the Albanian language prior to their arrival for missionary work. For the newcomers who had previously established themselves in Korça and initially faced challenges with the language, Monsignor Scarpeli was entrusted with the responsibility of imparting both linguistic skills and an understanding of the Eastern rite. Father Josif Papamihali of Elbasan was similarly entrusted with the responsibility for the regions of Berat and Lushnje. Concerning the second principle, it was imperative for the missionaries to recognize and value the hospitality extended by the local populace. They were to dedicate themselves fully to the realms of education and service for the community, irrespective of the existing religious divisions within the nation. Furthermore, they were to foster amicable relations with all civil and religious authorities, abstaining entirely from any political engagements. (Arkivi Qendror i Shtetit, 1941, Fondi 132 Dosja 20, fl.2-3)

In light of the anticipated resistance from the Albanian population towards foreign clergy, the Apostolic Administration overseeing the mission in the southern region of the country unequivocally emphasized the importance of teaching the Albanian language for the mission's success. Furthermore, to dispel any uncertainties regarding the intent behind their presence, Monsignor Nigris underscored that there was no accord with the Italian authorities and dismissed the accusations suggesting that the Catholic Missions were mere “puppets of Italian politics” asserting his readiness “to confront anyone who could substantiate such claims”. In an effort to persuade dissenting opinions, he presented the assertion that foreign priests were required to acquire proficiency in the language of the nation to which they were assigned. He argued that this indicated a greater tendency towards the Albanianization of Italians rather than the Italianization of Albanians. Furthermore, he urged the sisters engaged particularly with children to impart as many poems in Albanian rather than in Italian, as the objective of their mission was to cultivate believers rather than merely instruct in a foreign tongue. To accomplish this, it was essential for them to integrate with the local populace “without any distinctions, not even linguistic ones”. (Arkivi Qendror i Shtetit, 1941, Fondi 132, Dosja 20, fl.6-7) The envoy of the Holy See in Albania endeavored to alleviate concerns regarding the alignment of these missions with Italian interests, particularly during a period marked by strained relations between the Vatican and Italy, alongside the cessation of efforts to establish a Uniate church.

The Apostolic Delegate offered intriguing insights regarding the Albanian cities where these missionaries, priests, and sisters established themselves, touching upon their origins and proficiency in the Albanian language, though refraining from disclosing their numerical count. The following table encapsulates our findings succinctly:

Table1: The settlement of missionaries in Albanian cities and their origin

No.	Albanian cities	The origin of missionaries and knowledge of the Albanian language
1	Elbasan	The missionaries were Albanian-speaking Italians, while the sisters were Servite nuns from Shkodra.
2	Korçë	The missionaries were Lazarists, who were learning Albanian and spoke it a little, while the sisters were Stigmatine nuns from Shkodra.
3	Pogradec	There was only one Lazarist missionary who spoke Albanian, while the sisters were learning it.
4	Gjirokastër	The missionary and sisters were Albanian-speaking Italians and spoke Albanian.
5	Vlorë	The missionaries were learning Albanian, while the sisters were Albanian-speaking Italians.
6	Vuno	The missionaries were learning Albanian, and one of them was even very passionate about it, while the sisters were Albanian-speaking Italians.
7	Fier	The missionary was from Rome and part of the Basilian order, but he spoke Albanian, while the sisters were Albanian-speaking Italians.
8	Berat	The missionaries and sisters were learning Albanian. Only one of them spoke it.
9	Lushnjë	The missionaries and sisters had been receiving lessons from Father Josif Papamihali for months.

(Arkivi Qendror i Shtetit, 1941, Fondi132, Dosja 20, fl.8)

The data presented above clearly indicates that the Catholic Church implemented measures requiring that priests and sisters assigned to Albania possess knowledge of the Albanian language or commit to learning it. The significance of language as a crucial medium of communication can either enhance interactions with the local populace or act as an impediment. Conversely, the engagement of Italian-Albanian missionary personnel, including the monks of the Basilian Order based in Grottaferrata, the Vincentian fathers, and the Congregation of Friars Minor of the Byzantine rite, (Cimbalo, 2013, p. 83), in southern Albania, offered significant benefits for the Catholic Church. Initially, they were required to function in a region where Catholics constituted a minority and were simultaneously regarded with skepticism by the Orthodox, who inhabited their geographical and religious domain. Consequently, the ability to communicate in Albanian played a crucial role in their endeavors, whereas foreign missionaries were often regarded with considerable skepticism. Furthermore, the presence of familial connections contributed positively to the situation. The Italian-Albanian priests predominantly emerged from the lineage of Albanians who had migrated to Italy, particularly following the demise of Skanderbeg. The language, customs, and traditions were meticulously preserved; however, from a religious perspective, while the Byzantine Orthodox rite was maintained, administratively they aligned themselves with the Catholic Church, all the while retaining Greek as the liturgical language, along with certain other rites. Thus, there exists potential for greater efficacy in engaging with the skeptical Orthodox community. Thirdly, their suitability was enhanced by the fact that they were returning to the homeland of their ancestors, with the intention of propagating what they regarded as the “true religion.” (Arkivi Qendror i Shtetit, 1941, Fondi 132, Dosja 20, fl.8)

In his report, Apostolic Delegate Nigris articulated the necessity of focusing on the gradual development of local religious personnel, underscoring that this aligns with the intentions of the Catholic Church. For him, this matter was particularly nuanced, especially in Southern

Albania, given that in the north there existed the Pontifical Seminary in Shkodra, which cultivated a new generation of clergy. To attain this objective, he suggested that young individuals aspiring to the priesthood be sent either to the Abbey of Grottaferrata in Rome to engage with the Basilian monks or to a college designated for Uniates in Rome to pursue studies in philosophy or theology. The report underscored the potential for more definitive actions to be implemented domestically, particularly in Elbasan, where a Uniate church has been functioning since the 1930s. Adjacent to the mission building, Nigris acquired a space during this time, which he envisioned could serve as a pre-seminary, where young individuals would receive preparation prior to their departure for Grottaferrata. The missionaries in Vlora sought to establish a seminary for Albanian children in proximity to the church they operated. (Arkivi Qendror i Shtetit, 1941, Fondi 132, Dosja 20, fl.4)

Nigris articulated the challenges associated with establishing a community of Albanian sisters in Southern Albania, primarily due to the limited Catholic population and the dominance of Orthodox believers. Should their numbers rise incrementally, he posits that one might also consider the establishment of a Congregation of local sisters. In response to the requirements in Korça and Elbasan, the sisters from Shkodra were summoned; however, they lacked the necessary personnel for additional regions. In Korça, ten stigmatic sisters provided various services, including Italian language courses to over 130 students. (Peters, 2010, p. 109) Consequently, it was resolved that the foreign sisters would remain until a sufficient number was established. In light of the challenging circumstances prevailing in the country, the local authorities in Vlora and Gjirokastra sought assistance for the wounded from the conflict, as well as for those suffering from illness, by reaching out for support in hospitals. They provided for the less fortunate, including children and young girls, imparting skills such as sewing, cooking, and household management, with unwavering commitment and care. Nigris articulated that the primary aim of their endeavors was to assist those in greatest need, emphasizing that the sisters bore a responsibility to care for all individuals, irrespective of religious affiliations. They frequently engaged in regions devoid of any Catholic presence, where they distributed quinine and an array of medicinal supplies. (Arkivi Qendror i Shtetit, 1941, Fondi 132, Dosja 20, fl. 6)

With deliberate phrasing, aiming to minimize antagonism while clearly articulating the primary objective of the mission in southern Albania, he concluded the report by addressing two key matters. Firstly, concerning the selection of the mission's location, he noted that the initial suggestion was to position it in proximity to the Italian elements. However, he emphasized the necessity of prioritizing the needs of the Albanians and remaining steadfast in their established goals. He asserted that the primary focus should be on the local population, relegating aid to the Italians to a secondary status. Furthermore, he expressed gratitude to the prime minister for allocating a state subsidy to the Albanian Catholic Church, thereby rectifying what he termed “an injustice of the previous regime”, (Arkivi Qendror i Shtetit, 1941, Fondi 132, Dosja 20, fl. 9) alluding to the strained relations between the former King Zog and the Catholic Church.

His discourse reveals that discrepancies emerged among the clergy concerning the appropriate allocation of these funds and the recipients deemed worthy of such support. He regarded some of them as “undisciplined, intent on undermining the missions in the south.” It has been posited that, in the forthcoming period, financial support ought to be allocated solely to the Albanian clergy, whereas the missionaries situated in the southern regions “should receive assistance from Italy”. (Arkivi Qendror i Shtetit, 1941, Fondi 132, Dosja 20, fl. 10) The dissenting perspectives among the Albanian Catholic clergy appear to have been represented by the Franciscans, who expressed discontent following their exclusion from missions in the southern regions, comprising solely local constituents within their ranks. The assertion that subsidies ought to be allocated exclusively to Albanian priests functioning in the traditional northern

regions, while the responsibility for foreigners is relegated to Italy, reflects a prevailing skepticism from both the populace and the clergy regarding their role.

From Nigri's account, we gain further insights into the intricate workings of the Catholic missions in the southern region of the country, as well as the nuanced and often precarious nature of their relations with Italy, characterized by differing goals and objectives. Conversely, the discord between the Franciscans and the Italian authorities in Albania has been evident since the initial months of the occupation. While they initially endorsed the missionary endeavor, they exhibited hesitance in extending complete support to the Catholics. Viceroy Jacomoni even went to the extent of threatening arrests should any instances of promoting the conversion of the Orthodox population in southern Albania come to light. (Basciani, 2022, pp. 146-147) In fascist Italy, the emphasis was placed on political interests rather than religious considerations. In my publication on this matter, I have demonstrated that the establishment of a Uniate church in alignment with the Albanian Autocephalous Orthodox Church (KOASH) has been deferred (Kuqi, 2022) to a more suitable time and context; however, efforts with the faithful have persisted on the ground. The Vatican initially contemplated the integration of missionaries within the populace, believing that their unwavering dedication and sacrifices, particularly during periods of conflict and adversity, might render the community more inclined to embrace the Catholic Church. The policy it adopted was characterized by caution, and from the report of the Apostolic Delegate, we discern that the Vatican's objective was to reintegrate the Orthodox believers into the fold of the Roman Catholic Church while attempting to distance itself from the aspirations of the Italian fascist government, which sought their Latinization.

5. The Phenomenon of Missionization within the Urban Centers of Southern Albania

In Tirana, there were intermittent communications from the southern Albanian cities directed towards the Viceroyalty or the Prime Minister's Office, concerning the endeavors of the sisters. In August 1941, Father Lorenzo Tardone, the head of the mission in Gjirokastër, composed a letter addressed to Viceroy Jacomoni, in which he detailed the endeavors undertaken by the Basilian sisters within the Italo-Albanian colonies of Sicily and Calabria. Beginning in October 1939, a kindergarten was established that welcomed both Christian and Muslim children. By March 1940, official authorization was secured from the occupying Albanian administration. Since its inception, the establishment has welcomed more than 80 children, to whom the sisters have extended their care "with unwavering affection and dedication", thereby cultivating a profound sense of trust and goodwill within the community, further enhanced by the introduction of a workshop for girls aged 14 and above. (Arkivi Qendror i Shtetit, 1941, Fondi 131, Dosja 1, fl. 8)

This letter provides insights into the era of the Italo-Greek War, a time when they were compelled to suspend their missionary endeavors and instead contribute to field hospitals, attending to the needs of Italian soldiers. The reinstatement of the prior circumstances has consequently led to the resurgence of financial difficulties. The sum designated for the sisters' monthly disbursement was 120 fr. The situation in Albania is inadequate for a standard of living, as, despite having obtained approval from the relevant authorities, they did not receive any financial support from them. Furthermore, there was no income generated from the kindergarten, given that it was provided at no cost to the children. He posited that acquiring a house was essential for achieving a sense of stability; however, the financial burden was considerable. Consequently, he sought the Viceroy's assistance in subsidizing a third of its value. (Arkivi Qendror i Shtetit, 1941, Fondi 131, Dosja 1, fl. 8)

In a similar vein, the Catholic priest Father Vincenzo Corradini apprised Prime Minister Vërlaci from Berat, in October 1941, regarding the endeavors undertaken by the sisters in the city over the course of a year. He elucidated that, under his guidance and through their initiative, a kindergarten was established in the summer of 1940 for the children residing in the castle neighborhood of the city, emphasizing that it was an institution dedicated solely to educational, humanitarian, and non-religious objectives. He regarded the sisters responsible for the care and education of the children as the most suitable candidates for this role, given their excellent proficiency in the Albanian language and their unwavering commitment to their work. The inauguration of the kindergarten has also addressed another issue, namely the displacement of underprivileged children from the streets, where they might acquire detrimental habits and veer off course. (Arkivi Qendror i Shtetit, 1941, Fondi 131, Dosja 1, fl. 6) He also presented to the Prime Minister a formal request for intervention with the Ministry of Education, seeking official authorization to establish the kindergarten. He elucidated that despite having assembled all requisite documentation, bolstered by endorsements from local officials including the prefect and the mayor, he had yet to receive a reply. (Arkivi Qendror i Shtetit, 1941, Fondi 131, Dosja 1, fl. 7)

The correspondence from the Italian clergy directed to the state authorities reveals a notable evolution in the objectives of their mission. The cleric from Gjirokastra communicated to Viceroy Jacomoni that “the endeavor of penetration is assured, albeit appearing gradual at first observation,” in an effort to characterize the sisters’ efforts as a manifestation of “Italianity.” (Arkivi Qendror i Shtetit, 1941, Fondi 131, Dosja 1, fl. 8) In the interim, the priest from Berat conveyed to Prime Minister Vërlaci that their objective was rooted in education and humanitarian efforts, rather than in religious motives. Did their assertions align with the perspectives of the individuals and the appeals they were articulating? To obtain funding, it was necessary to demonstrate a particular fervor in expression; otherwise, the endeavor would prove challenging. For Jacomoni, the foremost objective was to enhance Italian influence in those areas, while the educational and humanitarian dimensions became increasingly prominent. It is our belief that articulating objectives with clarity and openness during the tumultuous period of war was a formidable challenge, fraught with the potential for significant repercussions. A balanced approach needed to be established to advance the work while avoiding provocation of the occupying authorities.

Conversely, the Albanian Catholic clergy persisted in their diligent efforts to foster and enhance the local components. Owing to the diligent efforts of the parish priest of Tirana, Dom Shtjefën Kurti, the Society of Catholic Action “Daughters of Our Lady” was established among the Stigmatine Sisters (Franciscan Sisters), comprising a group of Albanian girls who devoted themselves to the promotion of faith and the love of God. (Loka & Kurti, 2020) However, he would not hesitate to express critical views regarding any group of sisters, including the “Servants of Charity” (Ancelle della Carita). In a correspondence dated 1941 addressed to the head of the order in Brescia, Italy, he expressed that their conduct “left much to be desired,” noting that nearly none were able to offer even a few words of solace in Albanian to the ill or those nearing death, a behavior deemed unacceptable not only by the laity but also by the clergy. He posited that they were unable to reach the hearts of the populace through such means, failing to expand their ranks and draw in new members, even when acting “in opposition to the directives issued by the Holy Father himself”. (Arkivi Qendror i Shtetit, 1941, Fondi 131, Dosja 4, fl. 8)

He expressed dissatisfaction regarding the perspective they maintained towards the local clergy, approaching it from a hierarchical standpoint, as they failed to provide Albanian candidates with adequate training, relegating them primarily to lesser positions and roles, thereby regarding them as a “inferior race.” His observation was aimed at the apathetic stance

they maintained regarding the parish's matters, as they seemed more preoccupied with songs and church music reminiscent of an era when Italian Jesuit fathers managed the parish (Arkivi Qendror i Shtetit, 1941, Fondi 131, Dosja 4, fl. 8) rather than addressing the spiritual needs of the many Italian children and girls residing in the capital. The foreign sisters found themselves subject to examination not merely by the populace, but also by the Albanian Catholic clergy. The remarks made by the parish priest of Tirana were a response to the conduct and endeavors of the Italian sisters, who were inadequately executing their mission not only in relation to the faithful but also towards their compatriots.

Following Italy's surrender on September 8, 1943, the influx of German troops, the escalation of hostilities between partisan and German forces, the rise of anti-fascist resistance within the nation, and the shifting balance of power among the belligerents in the global conflict rendered the efforts of foreign missionaries progressively more challenging. Following the conclusion of the war and the advent of the communist regime, the majority of them departed. Those who were not fortunate enough to escape, alongside the Albanian Catholic priests and sisters, endured the trials of atheism.

6. Conclusions

The endeavors of foreign missionaries in Southern Albania amid the Italian occupation were concentrated on the realms of religion, humanitarian efforts, and education. Their nationality acted as an impediment to forging intimate connections with the indigenous populace, and they were regarded with a degree of skepticism, even by the local clergy. The aspect that worked against them, fostering an air of suspicion, was their status as foreigners. While some hailed from the Albanian colonies of Italy, their upbringing within that context and mindset rendered the assimilation of Italian culture unavoidable. In certain instances, the Italian sisters expressed hesitance towards the inclusion of Albanian sisters, attributing their reluctance to differing mentalities, which resulted in a limited presence of the latter. In truth, their existence was evident, yet one cannot dismiss the notion that they may have perceived the locals as lacking the requisite capabilities for this endeavor.

The rise and strengthening of the local clerical elite created antagonism to foreign priests who did not learn Albanian or recruit locals. Historically, there existed resistance to the endeavors undertaken by the Jesuits, who, as outsiders predominantly of Italian origin, seemingly did not exert sufficient effort to endear themselves to the faithful.

World War II created a conducive environment for the emergence of Catholic missions. Despite the distrust of the Orthodox, they were predominantly well-received by the majority Muslim population, who valued their assistance and contributions to the impoverished and the injured. Their efforts were not solely religious, and they did not explicitly state the objective of converting Orthodox individuals to Uniate beliefs. Had the conditions and circumstances been more favorable, the Catholic missions would have been more effective in attaining this purpose. During peacetime, resistance to these operations would have been significantly heightened. The Albanian Orthodox Church was declared Autocephalous in 1937, following a protracted and arduous fight by Albanian patriots and adherents, who refused to relinquish their religion and submit to the Roman Catholic Church. A significant evidence of Orthodox opposition was the little number of individuals who reverted to Uniate practices.

Conversely, the Italian fascist regime sought to leverage their presence to augment its influence and serve its political objectives. Amidst the dynamics of territorial expansion and the pursuit of comprehensive dominance across various spheres of existence, fascism emerged as a “political religion”, engaging in “rivalries and conflicts between Catholicism and fascism for the control and the formation of the minds and the education of the new generations”(Gentile, 2015). It would seize any opportunity presented, utilizing Catholic missions as instruments to

foster the proliferation of Italian identity in regions where their sway was minimal. However, Italy's military casualties on the battlefield, the mobilization of anti-fascist factions within the nation complicating the governance of the entire territory, and the strained relations with the Vatican State rendered this process challenging.

The extent to which the Italian-Albanian missionaries who traversed the Adriatic contributed to the implementation of Italian policy in Albania remains elusive based on the available data. It is essential to acknowledge that the missionaries arrived in a nation thoroughly dominated and governed by the Italians, and whether overtly or subtly, a certain compromise was established. Alongside their religious endeavors, they imparted the Italian language to children and young individuals, providing them with exemplars of their cultural heritage and educational practices, which ultimately benefited the invaders.

However, one cannot overlook the significant contributions made in aiding impoverished and ill individuals, orphaned children, the elderly, and those affected by conflict through medical treatment and the provision of medicines. This contribution, albeit modest, warrants recognition in light of the profound poverty that pervaded Albania, the absence of fundamental medical apparatus and institutions like hospitals and infirmaries, alongside the ongoing conflicts that ravaged the nation.

Although we recognize that this effort facilitates further historical studies into the activities of Catholic missions in Albania during World War II, we acknowledge that numerous issues remain unresolved. Clarifying them remains a future goal.

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