

Archbishop Janullatos and the Çameria Mission

By Xhavit Shala

On January 21, 2006,¹ the Archbishop of Tirana and all Albania, His All Beatitude, Janullatos, was bestowed the honor of the award, “For Distinguished work in strengthening the unity of the orthodox people in the Great Cathedral “Christ the Savior” in Moscow, in the presence of 2500 people representing senior orthodox church officials, artists, scientists and diplomats accredited to Russia.²

Lavished with the motivation “For the extraordinary efforts made in rebuilding from the ruins the Albanian Autocephalous Orthodox Church and contribution recognized by the whole world for peace, dialogue, and understanding between the various people and communities”, Janullatos stood alongside the President of the Republic of Cyprus, the Mayor of Moscow and the representative of the University of Balamand in Lebanon and others that were honored with the award, “Christ the Savior”. The ceremonies continued the following day in the historic cathedral “Saint Mary,” the church where Russian czars were crowned, and perhaps in the first time in history prayers in Albanian were chanted in a Russian church. The President of the Russian Federation himself, Vladimir Putin, hosted a reception in honor of the recipients of the awards.

Archbishop Janullatos was invited and honored in Moscow in his capacity as the Archbishop of Albania. His presence there and the honors bestowed on him in the presence of the representatives of the Albanian embassy in Moscow brought honor to all Orthodox believers in Albania and provided a positive introduction of Albania before the orthodox world. The event offered an occasion for President Putin to see the “dynamic and creative spirit of Albania”. The news did not grab the attention of the Albanians as the country was engulfed by the news of the death of the President of Kosovo, Mr. Rugova.³

It is true that the Greek Orthodox Church assisted the Albanian orthodox community in its efforts to rebuild the Orthodox Church. The role played by Archbishop Janullatos in this effort is of decisive importance. The work of the Archbishop has however, been accompanied by a public controversy over his appointment to this position, which according to the practice of the Albanian Orthodox Church that dated back to 1922 as a Greek citizen he was not allowed to lead. There were reactions against the appointment by Noli’s successors in the Albanian Orthodox Church of Boston and local clergyman that said they would not recognize the authority of the new bishop. With the passing of

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² The article was published in daily “Korrieri”, January 30, 2006

³ The news on the award given to Archbishop Janullatos was made public by daily “Koha Jonë”, on January 26, 2006.

time, while serious efforts have been made in establishing and training the local clergy, the issue of the primate of the church has not yet been resolved. And this issue can not be resolved for as long as the Albanian Orthodox Church has not attained its “economic autocephalous-ness” and there is no law on religious communities in Albania.

While the Archbishop’s contribution to rebuild the Albanian Autocephalous Orthodox Church is known to all, the public needs to know more about his activity to promote peace, dialogue and understanding among the people and various communities. The Archbishop has spoken of his contribution in this field in an interview printed in the daily “ABC”.⁴ “I have continually raised my voice, taken steps and made statements during my interviews in the Greek media on the need to respect emigrants and offer them support”. The Archbishop mentions his efforts to provide support for Albanians sentenced in Greek prisons, his public statements of condemnation against xenophobia. These statements imply and demonstrate that his words carry weight in Greece.

The Archbishop’s contribution to help normalize the often turbulent relations between Albania and Greece, while little known in Albania, has drawn the attention of the European Parliament which with a statement of July 14, 1993 has “expressed strong support for the work of the Archbishop of Tirana, Anastasios, who has made significant efforts to resolve the crises between the two countries”.

The frequent crises between our two countries have often been spurred by the failure to resolve the issue of Cham community deported from Greece in the aftermath of the WW2 in an operation of ethnic cleansing undertaken by the Greek state. The history of the Cham population is one filled with grief, blood, sacrifices, hopes and disappointments. The first democratic government back in 1992 prepared a draft law that aimed to deal with this issue. These efforts were finalized with the signing of the Treaty of Friendship between Greece and Albania in 1996 by the Foreign Affairs Ministers, Serreqi and Pangalos. The treaty entered into force only in 1998 when it was ratified by the parliament’s of both countries. The treaty provides for the resolution of the property claims that citizens in each country have in the other country by way of introducing legal measures to address the issue. “Each of the contracting parties will take upon itself to remove, in keeping with its legal framework, the obstacles that prohibit the citizens of one party from enjoying their properties in the territory of the other state,” article 15 of the Treaty of Friendship says. It has been many years now since the treaty was signed and no signs of progress on the Cham property issue has been noted. The resolution of this issue, aside from the existence of political will by the Greek party, calls for contribution by other factors that have influence among the Greek people and media.

The Archbishop of Albania, His All Beatitude Janullatos is a figure who enjoys the respect of the Greek orthodox hierarchy, academic and political world and who is held in high esteem both internationally and in Albania. Due to the excellent qualities that he embodies he could serve as a excellent mediator in helping remove the obstacles that still stand in the way of resolution of the property claims between our two countries and the resolution of the property issue of the Cham population. The Cham population was

⁴ Archbishop Janullatos was interview and asked on the matter by journalist Mentor Nazarko.

forcibly driven from their lands and their properties where confiscated by the Greek state or were disposed of by the Greek Orthodox Church.⁵

While Greece, like Albania, is a secular state, the great influence that the Church undoubtedly has there could make the intermediation of Archbishop Janullatos much more effective. In the exercise of this mission, the Archbishop could truly provide another concrete contribution to peace, dialogue and understanding between the Albanian and Greek people. For the Archbishop, the Chameria mission is a possible one. The Archbishop has demonstrated with works that he is up to the task of meeting such challenges!⁶

Tirana, January 30, 2006

⁵ James Pettiffer, an analyst on the Balkans, in an interview given to Mentor Nazarko and published in weekly A.B.C of January 23, 2006 says that the Greek church is against restituting the properties to Albanians because a large part of the properties who were owned by the Albanians that were deported from Greece after WW2 are now under the administration of the church. This is the main reason behind their strong resistance to restituting the properties to the Cham population.

⁶ Following the publication of this article the Party for Democracy and Integration that represents the interest of the Cham population in Albania made an official statement where it sought the intervention of Archbishop Janullatos on the matter of the restitution of the Cham properties. There was no comment forthcoming from the Church either on the article or the Party statement.