

# PRESS RELEASE

## General Assembly of UCESM in Tirana (Albania) on March 23-27, 2015 *'Religious men and women in Europe: Witnesses and Shapers of Communion'*

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The many congregations of religious women and religious men are organised in national Conferences. Every two years these national Conferences in Europe come together to consider European matters of common interest under the aegis of UCESM, the Union of the Conferences of European Major Superiors. The meetings alternate between venues in Eastern and Western Europe.

In March 2015, the Year of Consecrated Life, the delegates assembled in Tirana, Albania. The sixteenth meeting had originally been scheduled for the Ukraine in 2014 but could not take place then. The reality of the conflict there came very much alive in conversations with the delegates from that war-torn country, who also made a presentation to the Assembly.

Each Conference had the opportunity to present an account of their own situation, outlining cooperation with bishops, the challenges and problems that they face in vocations and ministries.

The first day of the meeting was animated by two talks from the director of the Centro Aletti in Rome, Marco Rupnik sj. A well-known artist, Fr Marco used images from the history of liturgy and theology to colour his challenge to the group to imagine new ways of embodying in the Church a religious life that genuinely gives witness. It is important to challenge the prevailing individualism, indeed narcissism by witnessing to a life in common, as a body. Those in religious life form a common body whose witness to the resurrection in our time must be experienced as genuinely life-giving in its revelation of God and the discovery of a more profound other.

The meeting took place in the Catholic University Our Lady of Good Counsel, where last September, Pope Francis was speaking on his visit to Albania. He called for an urgent promotion of 'a climate of respect and mutual trust between Catholics, Orthodox and Muslims'.

Our second day began with a welcome from the Prime Minister of Albania with his Ministers of Culture, and Social Welfare. They praised the work religious had done in Albania throughout its history. This welcome took place in the National Museum, and afterwards the delegates received an introduction to the history of Albania with its final optimistic display of Mother Teresa.

This background was extremely helpful in preparing the round table where Mr. Atakhan Derelioglu from the Islamic Beder University drew on surahs from the Q'ran and from the biographical traditions about the Prophet (hadith) to demonstrate the commitment to dialogue among the Abrahamic traditions: the challenge to come to 'a common word'.

The Orthodox archimandrite, Kozma Sovjani, emphasised the distinctively Albanian way that Muslims, Orthodox and Catholics had lived harmoniously together. Delegates had seen in the museum the accounts of the common martyrdom experienced by the three groups. The Catholic bishop, George Frenco, called for new progress beyond this existing harmony, and in the subsequent discussion, there was an appeal to take seriously the hurt, damage and fears that are shaping our current European reality. A member of the Sant'Egidio community urged us to learn from Assisi that peace is possible and to begin to write a new page in interreligious dialogue.

After a day of business meetings, delegates spent a day with the religious of Albania in Shkoder (Scutari) 'in the footsteps of the martyrs of the dictatorship'. It was good to learn and deepen relationships with those living the religious life in Albania.

The delegates were grateful for the presence and interest of the Albanian Conference of Bishops. They were also grateful for the presence of members of the Congregation for Consecrated Life (CICLSAL), the Council of European Bishops' Conferences (CCEE), the Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Community (COMECE), the Union of Men Superiors General (USG), and the Union of Women Superiors General (USIG) whose agency against trafficking, RENATE, made a powerful presentation.

The account of the meeting ends with a message from the religious of the Ukraine.

'In this difficult time in the Ukraine, we find ourselves as religious called to a deeper solidarity with the people and with one another. Religious are engaged in helping soldiers and their families. They are dealing with the refugees who are coming from the east. Visiting hospitals has become very important as well as the ministry of military chaplaincy. The religious from Ukraine are trying to be a sign of that God who has a human face and who loves everybody. We pray for Ukraine and ask you to join with us in prayer. Amen'.

March 27, 2015