



Friday 27 March 2015 – Shkodër/Scutari –

Extracts from the Via Crucis

“In the Footsteps of the Martyrs”

**I) Jesus is condemned to death**

*‘Behold, my servant, whom I uphold; my chosen one, in whom I delight: I will put my Spirit upon him; he will bring justice to the nations’ (Is 42.1)*

**From a letter of Don Steven Kurti dated 16.10.1946 to His Holiness Pope Pius XII**

*(Pastor of Tirana. He was arrested two times. The first time in Tirana on 28.10.1946 and was condemned to 20 years of prison, of which he served 17, enclosed in the prison of Burrel. The second time he was arrested in Gurez in 1970, he was imprisoned and a year later was shot).*

«Most Holy Father, [...] the files of the martyrs are increasing every day; in the prisons, terrible tortures are applied indistinctly to all; thousands of men, women, old people and children, stripped of everything and hungry, are deported to concentration camps, in the most isolated and unhealthy places, in houses with no doors or windows, forced all day to work hard for a single piece of bread.

In order to weaken the physical constitution of the prisoners and to make them die from exhaustion and tuberculosis, with a recent order was forbidden to the families to bring them food».

**II) Jesus receives the cross on his shoulders**

*‘I offered my back to those who beat me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard; I did not hide my face from mocking and spitting’ (Is 50.6)*

**From a testimony about Fr Giovanni Fausti**

*(Jesuit, was born in Brescia in 1899. He graduated in theology and philosophy, in 1929, he was sent to Shkodër as a professor of the Seminary. Forced to return home in 1932 for health reasons, returned to Albania after ten years as a rector of the Pontifical Seminary of Shkodër. He was arrested on December 31, 1945 with Fr Danjel Dajanis sj. Both were accused of having favoured the formation of a group of resistance against communism, in the Seminar. Condemned to death, were shot on March 4, 1946)*

Going from the prison to the court, Fr Fausti was vilified, insulted, and spat upon. And this for several days, until the process lasted.

On one occasion, on the road, a woman broke away from the crowd. She came forward and hoarsely shouted angry: ‘A bullet in the forehead!’ and spat in the face of Fr Fausti who replied with a greeting moving his head: ‘Forgive her Father, for she does not know what she is doing!’



**III) Jesus falls the first time**

*‘He was despised, and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised; and we esteemed him not’ (Is 53.3)*

**From the testimony of Mgr Fran ILLIA**

*(He survived the persecution because his death sentence, together with Fr Fausti and Fr Dajanis sj, was commuted to prison and hard labour for life. He was appointed bishop of Shkodër and consecrated by Pope John Paul II during his visit to Albania on April 25, 1993. He died in 1998)*

«We were so tired, so exhausted and full with material and spiritual sufferings that during the interrogations we did not know what to say. We were forced to answer: Yes, yes, all right!

We agreed with closed eyes to their claims. The judge terrified us and yelled: You are enemies of the people! They said that we were spies of the Vatican. With these charges I was sentenced to death».

#### **IV) Jesus meets his mother Mary**

*'Listen to me, you islands; hear this, you distant nations: Before I was born the Lord called me; from my birth he has made mention of my name' (Is 49.1)*

##### **From a testimony about Don Zef Marxen**

*(Priest of German nationality, born in 1906 in the province of Köln, a missionary in Albania. He was arrested and killed at the age of 40 years old)*

Arrested in 1946 by the regime because he was priest and, moreover, foreigner, Don Zef Marxen was locked up in the prison of Tirana. Subjected to atrocious tortures, he was executed on charges of being an agent of the Gestapo. One of his fellow prisoners says: 'He never hesitated to help every sick person and he shared his food ration with prisoners who needed it most. This man enjoyed the respect of all.

His mother in the faraway Germany waited for years his son priest. He had come to serve Albania and was killed without any trial. In the last days he said to his cell's mates: 'I'm happy because even if I'm dying I will be remembered always by the Albanians as a priest of the faith in Christ'.



#### **V) Jesus is helped by Simon of Cirene to carry the cross**

*'I, The Lord, have called thee in righteousness; and will take hold of your hand. I will keep you, and will make you to be a covenant for the people, for a light for the Gentiles' (Is 42.6)*

##### **From a testimony about Don Andrea Zadeja**

*(Born in Shkodër in 1891, he studied in Italy and Austria. Ordained as a priest in 1916, was later appointed as a pastor of Sheldi. Known as a great orator, Don Zadeja was also a writer, a poet and a playwright. Accused of having spoken in his homilies against communism, he was arrested and then shot on March 25, 1945, Palm Sunday.)*

On March 25, 1945, they took out of prison Don Ndre Zadeja, with thirteen other companions, to the place of execution. His fellow priests, before going out, gave him the blessing. Don Andrea knelt together with all the others behind the Catholic cemetery in Shkodër. Don Tom Laçaj approached them for the last absolution. Don Ndre thanked him with these words: 'You came here to relieve my sufferings'.

#### **VI) The face of Jesus is wiped by Veronica**

*'Just as there were many who were astonished at him - his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any man, and his form marred beyond human likeness' (Is 52.14)*

##### **From a testimony about Maria Tuçi**

*(She was born in 1928, she studied in Shkodër in the Congregation of the Stigmatine Sisters, where she entered as an 'aspirant'. With the coming of communism, she took place in the underground resistance group. Together with other young people of Catholic schools and even with some seminarists, she distributed leaflets against the first election-farce of the regime. Very beautiful looking, she opposed herself to the violence that they wanted to make her suffer in prison. For this reason, she was subjected to such harsh tortures that she had to be transported to the civil Hospital in Shkodër, where she died on October 24, 1950).*



On August 10, 1949 Maria Tuçi was arrested and imprisoned for a year in Shkodër.

In prison, she was often subjected to interrogation and beaten wildly up to the point that they disfigured her face. Her prison was a hole without neither light nor air. Once a month, through one friend, she could have from her mother a change of underwear that she shared with her cell's mate. A witness said that in the freezing winter's days, they used to embrace each other to warm up a little. Instead when it rained, the water reached the mattresses that remained soaked for days.

Transported to the hospital, before she died she said to her friend Divida, who went to visit her: 'It came true what Hilmi Seiti (her persecutor) said: 'I will turn you in such a state that not even your family will recognize you!'... I thank God that I die free!'

#### **VII) Jesus falls the second time**

*'Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows; yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted' (Is 53.4)*

### **From a testimony about Don Pjeter Çuni**

*(Born in Shkodër in 1914, he studied in Rome until his priestly ordination in St. Peter's Basilica, in 1940. When he returned to Albania, was appointed as a pastor and distinguished himself for the care and devotion for his pastoral service. He did several translations thanks to his excellent knowledge of the Italian language. In July 1948, he was arrested without charge or trial and five months later he was killed.)*

His cousin says: 'From some time, Don Pjeter was preparing himself to face his Calvary. We used to talk about sentences, shootings that every day increased more. He said to me: 'It seems that Christ has decided that I will be among the last!' Not long after our meeting, he went in bicycle to Koplik, the main town of his parish's area. He was stopped and arrested for no reason. They tied him up and took him to Koplik. Here, along with Fr Aleksander Sirdani, were tied together and hoisted on two donkeys. In this way, they went around for the whole town, while being covered with insults and accusations.

### **VIII) Jesus meets the holy women**

*'He bore the sins of man, and made intercession for the transgressors' (Is 53.12)*

### **From the testimony of Fr Zef Pllumi ofm**

*(Born in Lezha in 1924 and died in 2007. A man of great culture, survived the persecution after serving 25 years in prison and forced labour)*

«On Easter 1949, in my cell n. 7, there was an event of indescribable joy: Christ entered to strengthen us in faith! Here's what happened. Fr Leon Kabashi, Friar minor, asked a pair of slippers to his Sister Rosa who had come to see him. He managed to say: 'In the slippers, put the Easter gift!' The policemen and spies that heard these words did not understand that he asked the consecrated hosts for the communion. On Easter, Fr Leon was able to meet his sister who gave him his slippers. We opened them secretly: inside there was a corporal with fifty hosts! I remembered St. Tarcisus, martyr for the communion at the time of the catacombs... *Lamb of God who take away the sins of the world, have mercy on us!* In the twentieth century are repeated the same scenes as in the Roman catacombs».

### **IX) Jesus falls the third time**

*'By oppression and judgment he was taken away. And who can speak of his descendants? For he was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgression of my people he was stricken' (Is 53.8)*

### **From a testimony about Fr Michael Beltoja**

*(Helped by Mgr Ernest Çoba, he studied philosophy and theology. He was ordained a priest in Shkodër in 1961 while the regime was coming to a total destruction of the Catholic Church and its structures. On April 19, 1973, he was arrested and tortured for four months. During the process that it will bring to the death sentence, Fr*

*Michael was not afraid to speak until the end against communism, sworn enemy of the faith and of the nation. He will pay with his life for defending with passion and courage the clergy and all the intellectuals that the regime had already eliminated with its ferocity)*

He was willing to do anything to serve Christ and the brothers. For this reason, the communists spied upon him and kept an eye on every step he made. One day the agents of *Sigurimi* entered into his house and made a thorough perquisition. Later they reached him and arrested him in front of the church of Beltoja, already transformed into a cultural centre. They pushed him violently into a car. He remaining calm, greeted those who were present at the scene but were all afraid to answer him. Armed guards gathered all the people forcing them to accuse him as an enemy of the people and a reactionary.



### **X) Jesus is stripped of his garments**

*'He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open this mouth' (Is 53.7)*

### **From a testimony about Don Dede Maçaj**

*(Born in 1920, he studied at the Pontifical Seminary of Shkodër, then in Rome. As a young priest, he returned to Shkodër, as a pastor between Rragam and Shedi, where before had preceded him Don Ndre Zadeja. Arrested in 1947, he suffered the same fate of his fellow priests, he was condemned and shot shortly after)*

They took him out of the military zone, in a meadow near the river Vjosa. They took off his clothes as they did to Jesus and a platoon of soldiers fired on him. But he did not fall to the ground. They fired again, but Don Dede remained standing. The Executioner, full of anger, for the third time gave the order to fire. But this time he did not wait. He fell and greeted mother earth that was painted red with his blood.

### **XI) Jesus is nailed to the cross**

*'But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him; and with his wounds we are healed' (Is 53.5)*



### **From a testimony about Don Anton Muzaj**

*(Born in 1929, he studied at the Pontifical Seminary of Shkodër then in Rome. In 1946, he returned to Shkodër, where the communist persecution had already begun. He was arrested in 1947, with the charge to be a spy of the Vatican. He died at the age of 29 years old.)*

In October 1947, Don Anton and Fr Fran Kiri were arrested and subjected to the most terrible tortures. They were forced to remain standing with their nose stuck to the wall, with hands and feet tied, for days and nights while thirst heightened the sufferings.

He was turned to such a state that he could not stand up and for this reason he was beaten even more. Often they threw buckets of cold water on him, and they used to put him in the middle of the open doors and windows, exposed to the drafts of the cold winter months. He fell ill with tuberculosis.

After the trial, the judges realized that he was almost at the end of his life. For this reason, they did not condemn him to death. To his fellow prisoners he said: If one day you will see my family, tell them that I am completely innocent and that I only die for my faith in Christ.

### **XII) Jesus dies on the cross**

*'I will also make you a light to the Gentiles, that thou may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth' (Is 49.6)*

### **From a testimony about Fr Aleksander Sirdani**

*(Born in Shkodër in 1892, he soon lost his mother. He studied in Shkodër at the Xaverian College of the Jesuits and continued his studies in Austria. Ordained as a priest in 1916, he served as a pastor in the Diocese of Shkodër. Peacemaker, he intervened in situations of discord among families. In 1948, he was arrested and taken to Koplik. Subjected to atrocious tortures for five months, he was killed together with Don Pjeter Çuni)*

With simple words and understandable to all, he refuted the materialist theories and the anti-Christian ideas of the atheistic communism. He used to repeat that *only where the Spirit of the Lord abides, there is freedom!* Some witnesses say that one day, after his sermon, the persons at the service of the regime took him outside and threatened him before the people. Then someone begged him: 'Fr Aleksander, you ruin us and yourself!' and he answered: 'To give witness for Christ is an honour for me and for you. I have preached and will preach only the faith of Christ!'



### **XIII) Jesus is taken down from the cross**

*'After the suffering of his soul, he will see the light of life and be satisfied; by the knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities' (Is 53.11)*

### **From the testimony of Fr Anton Luli**

*(Jesuit, contemporary of John Paul II, survived communism and gave a witness in St Peter's on the 50th anniversary of priesthood he celebrated with the Pope. He died in 1998.)*

«In the halls of *Sigurimi*, the moral and physical tortures were unbearable. In the same prison there were with me, two other priests which I knew very well. They resisted a few days of torture. I could hear them shouting for help, asking for water to drink. The first one, Fr Aleksander Sirdani, resisted three days. The second, Don Pjeter Çuni, young, they tortured him with electric current. I was tired to live and I desired to die. When the policemen accompanied me I told them that I would be grateful to them if they would hit me with a bullet in the forehead to put an end to my terrible suffering».

### **XIV) Jesus is buried**

*'He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death, though he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth' (Is 53.9)*

### **From a testimony about Fr Serafin Koda ofm**

*(Born in 1893, he entered the Order of Friars Minor in 1909. Ordained as a priest in 1915, became provincial counsellor and pastor of several villages. He was pastor at Lezhë when he was arrested and brutally tortured for a false accusation, after attending a meeting of the Franciscan Province. He died on May 11, 1947, 54 years old.)*

Fr Serafin, a man of great prudence and goodness, respected by all for his wisdom and courage, was tireless in his mission as a priest and as a pastor. He was arrested in the Franciscan convent of Lezhë by *Sigurimi*: it was the day of his feast day, October 12, 1946. He was held in prison in the stable of the convent, which had already been requisited by the regime and converted into a hospital.

They tortured him by dipping him in a tank of water up to his neck. They sank their nails into his throat to break his trachea. Those who were close to him, said that while they carried him from the prison to the infirmary – also inside the convent - Fr Serafin turned to Mary with this prayer: 'O Holy Virgin, bring soon to fulfilment your work!'



***The blood of your martyrs, Lord,  
became the seed of the Church.***

***Make us worthy to pick up the heritage  
of these brothers who preceded us in faith  
and let that their testimony be always  
an example for us and a guide  
in the joys and difficulties of life.***

***Give us the certainty  
that even in the ruins of man,  
O Lord, you always restore  
and make to rise again.***

***Through Christ our Lord. Amen.***