



SALA STAMPA DELLA SANTA SEDE **BOLLETTINO**

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BIURO PRASOWE STOLICY APOSTOLSKIEJ دار الصحافة التابعة للكرسي الرسولي

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Audience with participants in the pilgrimage from Albania

At 17.00 this afternoon, in the Clementine Hall of the Vatican Apostolic Palace, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the participants in the pilgrimage from Albania, in Rome on the occasion of the 550th anniversary of the death of George Castriota Skanderbeg, Albanese national hero.

The following is the Pope's address to those present:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters,

I am glad to give a special welcome to you, gathered here on the occasion of the 550th anniversary of the death of your national hero George Castriota Skanderbeg. I thank Madam Ambassador for her kind words. I address a thankful greeting to those present and a thought to all Albanese people, in their homeland and in other parts of the world who, in the name of the ancient bond of friendship and the customary relations, always look with affection to the See of Peter. And in this sense I like to remember that fifty years ago Saint Paul VI wished to receive an Albanese representation.

Albania, land of ancient and glorious history, is an integral part of Europe, and through its most noble and living traditions it documents the origins of its own civilization. Today we remember and celebrate George Castriota Skanderbeg, the heroic son of a strong and generous people, who defended with courage the spiritual values and Christian name, to the point of meriting the title of "*Athleta Christi*", and who forged with his gestures the Albanese cultural identity, becoming the undisputed symbol of national cohesion and unity, and the supreme interpreter of the values of scrupulous fidelity to freely-undertaken commitments.

The peculiar relevance of the figure and work of Castriota is well represented by your flag, with the double-headed eagle on a red background, after the hero's coat of arms. Only on few occasions in history has a single individual has incarnated the virtues of a people so clearly and so broadly, to the point that it is difficult to

understand the spirit of the people without considering the principles and values that animated that individual character.

After the hero's death and the invasion of Albania, a lot of Albanians preferred to emigrate, and many settled in Italy, in the centre of the peninsula and in the south, especially in Calabria and Sicily, giving rise to the Albanian ecclesiastical circumscriptions of Lungro, Piana degli Albanesi and Grottaferrata.

The presence today at this meeting of a group of *arberesh*, that is, Italo-Albanians, with their traditions and linguistic expressions that have been handed down over the centuries, leads us with the imagination to the atmosphere of Skanderbeg's Albania, and confirms that the Albanian hero remains a valid "bridge" for maintaining fruitful bonds between the *arberesh* and their land of origin.

Given the particular significance of this figure and the work accomplished by George Skanderbeg, it is understandable that Albania wished to proclaim the present year "*National Year of Skanderbeg*".

I sincerely hope that this anniversary is not limited to the celebration of the glory of the past deeds, but it may also be for Albania a good opportunity for a renewed commitment on the part of all, institutions and citizens, in favour of authentic and balanced development, so that the young generations are not placed in a position of choosing emigration, weakening the country of the forces and skills essential to its human and civil growth.

Concerted action by all with a view to achieving this goal will prove to be the best way at this time of embodying the love for the homeland which inspired George Castriota Skanderbeg. By interpreting the character and traditions of your people in the best way, he well expressed "Albanesity", a term used by the nineteenth-century writer Pashko Vasa to indicate the spiritual identity that united all Albanians despite distinctions of a religious nature. This conviction gave to Albania an impetus for the peaceful coexistence of people belonging to different religions, which over time became collaboration and fraternity. We see the example here.

As I had the opportunity to affirm on the occasion of my visit to Albania, "the climate of respect and mutual trust between Catholics, Orthodox and Muslims is a precious gift to the country. This is especially the case in these times" (Meeting with the Civil Authorities, 21 September 2014: Teachings II, 2 [2014], 271). It shows that the peaceful coexistence of citizens belonging to different religions is a concretely practicable way that produces harmony and liberates the best forces and creativity of an entire people, transforming simple coexistence into true collaboration and brotherhood. The willingness to consider differences as an opportunity for dialogue and mutual esteem and knowledge, also favours the development of authentic spiritual paths and becomes a valid example to which we look with real interest in building lasting peace, based on respect for the dignity of the person human.

In the grateful memory of the holy martyrs who witnessed their faith to the price of life, as well as Saint Teresa of Calcutta, I am pleased to ask the Lord to bless all of you present here. God bless your family and all the Albanian people. Please do not forget to pray for me. Thank you
