

The Italo – Albanian Eparchy of Lungro Towards its first centenary.



It was the 13th of February in 1919 when the venerable Pope Benedict XV, according to the Apostolic Constitution “Catholici Fideles,” founded the Eparchy of Lungro of the Italo – Albanians in Continental Italy for:

“the Catholic faithful of Greek rite, who lived in Epirus and in Albania and fled, at different times, from their Turkish conquerors...were welcomed warmly in the lands of Calabria and Sicily, and there continued to practice their customs and traditions, especially the Greek rites of their Church, along with all the laws and customs that had been passed down from their ancestors and preserved with great care and love for centuries. The lifestyle of these Albanian refugees and their religious practices were allowed to continue by the Pope’s authority, so that beyond their borders, they found a new homeland on Italian soil. [...]”.

The Holy See responded with paternal benevolence to the pressing requests for protection from the descendants of the Albanian leader George Castriota Skanderbeg, known as the “Athlete of Christ” because of his and his brave soldiers’ struggle, for a quarter of a century, in defence of freedom and self - determination for the people of European Christianity.

The immigration of the Albanians to Italy dates back to the XV-XVIII centuries, after the Council of Florence held in 1439 and the fall of Constantinople in 1453 followed by Skanderbeg’s death in 1468. It is after these events that the Albanian Christians decided to flee their homeland remaining faithful to their Church, their language and their heritage.

They sorrowfully abandoned their beloved homeland to save their lives and to remain free as Christians. During their flight they took few things away with them — only the most precious few items that held their memories, their language and the customs of

the Byzantine rite — leaving behind them pain, sorrow, emptiness and desolation. They were kindly welcomed everywhere they settled as brothers in the same Christian faith.

The Roman Pontiffs paternally provided these Albanians the conditions that allowed them to safeguard the traditions of the Eastern church.

The founding of the Eparchy, or Diocese, of Lungro was the completion of this long historical journey. Divine Providence protected this small eastern group of people as they became integrated within the Latin Church without losing their unique identity. With this provision, the Holy See was the first to legally recognize the unity and uniqueness of the Italo-Albanians and grant them a legal and ecclesiastical status.

The Eparchy of Lungro is now in its 98th year and is heading towards its centennial anniversary. Since its foundation, there have been four Bishops. The first was Mons. Giovanni Mele, elected at the age of 33. He was Bishop for 60 years, from 1919 to 1979, and he heroically strove to unify all the parishes belonging to the newly founded Eparchy that had previously been part of 6 different Dioceses—Cassano Allo Jonio, Rossano, Bisignano, Anglona, Penne, Lecce—located in 4 different Italian regions—Calabria, Basilicata, Abruzzo, Puglia.

His successor, Mons. Giovanni Stamati showed the same apostolic zeal in reintroducing Byzantine spirituality and endeavoring to give the Eparchy a uniform ecclesiastical form, continuing and enhancing their ancestral spiritual, historical and cultural inheritance. In 1968, at the time of Vatican Council II, he decreed the liturgical use of Albanian, as their mother tongue, as a sign of unity within the Eparchy but also as a symbol of belonging to those people who were not allowed to pray to God in their own mother country. These faithful in the Eparchy prayed in their old noble mother tongue while awaiting the dawn of a Christian reawakening in the home of their ancestors.

The third Bishop, Mons. Ercole Lupinacci, from 1987 to 2010, committed himself to giving dignity to the liturgical and iconographical patrimony of the parish churches by making them more adherent to the Byzantine tradition. During his ministry, he organized the first Diocesan Assembly which gave life to a compendium of guidelines for the individual and community church life, according to Eastern spirituality.

The present Bishop, Mons. Donato Oliverio, has inherited a Diocese firmly rooted in the West where it clearly offers evidence of the riches of the Byzantine tradition and makes it possible to foresee the wonder of the unity between East and West, between different religious traditions and different languages.

He rules the Eparchy from Lungro, a charming town of about 3,000 inhabitants, southwest of the Pollino mountains, at the foot of Mount Petrosa 600 metres above sea level. His seat is in the Mother Church of the Eparchy, the Cathedral Church of San Nicola di Mira, built between 1721 and 1825. Majestic in its Romanesque – Baroque style and Latin cross layout, the Cathedral has been adorned in recent years with exquisite mosaics and frescoes that make it unique by seamlessly incorporating

icons of Byzantine art and Eastern spirituality. It has come to be considered the most important church of Albanian Byzantine Catholicism in Italy.

The majestic Pantocrator, “Face of the Mercy of God the Father,” dominates the cupola.

Today, about 40,000 worshippers live in the Eparchy in the original Albanian towns, with an equal number spread across various other Italian cities. They are assisted in their spiritual needs by about 50 *papades* or priests. There are about 30 Italo-Albanian Byzantine parishes located in 4 different dioceses in Calabria—Cassano Ionio, San Marco Argentano, Rossano-Cariati and Cosenza-Bisignano—as well as 3 dioceses outside Calabria—Tursi-Lagonegro, Lecce and Pescara-Penne. The residents of these towns all speak Albanian in their homes and streets; in church, during liturgical ceremonies, they pray and sing in both Greek and in Albanian.

The Eparchy is in total communion with the See of St. Peter while maintaining the rich Byzantine tradition with its valuable patrimony which includes liturgy, ceremonial, iconography, theology, spirituality and religious music. These features make the Eparchy, in Calabria and in Italy, a living symbol of what the Church was like in the early centuries of Christianity, when the Greek and the Latin lived in unity and praised the one and only God, each in their own language and according to their own traditions.

Bishop Donato’s pastoral program was clear from the beginning of his ministry. After his enthronement, he led a pilgrimage from the Eparchy to the tomb of the Apostle Peter in Rome giving thanks to God for having protected the Albanians in Italy and confirming total commitment to the Catholic Church and to the Pope of Rome.

In the second year of his ministry, Bishop Donato was accompanied by a delegation of priests from the Eparchy in an official visit to the Patriarch of Constantinople, Bartholomew I, where it appeared clear that, today, Italo-Albanians still maintain their Christian faith in the Byzantine tradition handed over to them by their fathers.

The following year, he travelled to Albania where he kissed the land of his ancestors, met both Catholic and Orthodox Albanian Bishops, and visited the leaders of Muslim and Bektashian communities, all of whom are living symbols of the rebirth of light in the land of martyrdom and symbols of hope for the whole world because they have chosen to follow the path of dialogue and peace.

Bishop Donato wants to guide the Eparchy of Lungro, representing the faithful Italo-Albanians who live their Byzantine traditions in complete communion with the nearby territory of Latin tradition towards the future goals of the Church, towards unity of all Christians: unity in the true faith and acceptance of the abundant richness of ecclesiastical differences.

His leadership has been greatly encouraged by the eminent representatives of the Orthodox Church who, have been blessed and allowed by the Patriarch of Constantinople, Bartholomew I, to visit the Eparchy of Lungro in the past few years.

In October 2013, Stephanos Charalambides, Metropolitan of Tallinn and All Estonia and Athenagoras Peckstad; the latter arrived as Bishop of Sinope and left Lungro after having received the nomination of his elevation to Metropolitan of Belgium; and, in November 2015, Elpidophoros Lambriniadis, Metropolitan of Bursa, Abbot of the Patriarchal Monastery and Stavropigiaco “Holy Trinity” of Chalki.

They all declared to have discovered something they were not aware of: namely, that the Italo-Albanians of the Eparchy of Lungro are brothers and sisters fully belonging to the Catholic Church but likewise totally faithful to the Byzantine tradition of their forefathers.

They have also encouraged the Eparchy of Lungro and its towns to become training grounds for fraternal exchanges between the two Churches, by becoming closer to each other, rejoicing and praising God for the gifts that each have received, healing whatever has divided them in the past in an effort to quicken the reunification of the Christian churches in the hearts of the people, in order to reach the desired and necessary, visible unity of the faithful in Christ, Son of God, Lord and Savior, who prayed the Father: “that they may be one”.

In the hearts and in the minds of Bishop Donato, the clergy and the faithful Italo-Albanians of the Eparchy of Lungro, these strong words are deeply connected to the words that appear in the emblem of the Eparchy: “INA ΩΣΙΝ ΕΝ” – “QË TË JENË NJË” – “UT UNUM SINT,” — that is the specific mission of the little Italo Albanian Church, sent to the world, despite any setbacks, to make the past alive in present times and to continue the will of God and the desire of Pope Francis: unity at any cost!

It is with great emotion and awe that the Albanian people and their Church still remember the words pronounced by Blessed Pope Paul VI, for the fifth centennial of Skanderbeg’s death: “Dear children of Albania...you may consider this Apostolic See...your home...and although through history you have been oppressed and forced away from your home country, God’s goodness has arranged that, wherever you go, you and all the members of your ‘Gjak i Shprishur’ (scattered blood) shall be instruments to promote alliances and cooperation, and this has often made you visionaries of modern ecumenism”.



Protopresbitero Pietro Lanza (Protosincello dell’Eparchia di Lungro)