

## Albania: How St. Ignatius unites Christians and Muslims

*Accounts of peaceful co-existence between Christians and Muslims. Journey to Scutari, home to the Atë Pjetër Meshkalla Jesuit high school. Ronny Alessio and Alda Laska e Dorela Smajli talk about Ignatian education, pupils' enthusiasm, the role of Pope Francis and the beatification of 38 martyrs.*



*Albania - Portraits of the 38 martyrs who lost their lives during the communist regime. These banners went up when Pope Francis visited the country in September 2014.*

**CRISTINA UGUCCIONI, VATICAN INSIDER, 2 NOVEMBER 2016**

**This coming 5 November, 38 martyrs of Enver Hoxha's communist regime are to be beatified in the northern Albanian city of Scutari.** Among them are three Jesuits: Frs. Giovanni Fausti and Daniel Dajani who were executed by firing squad on 4 March 1946 behind Scutari's cemetery, as they shouted: "Glory be to Christ the King! Long live Albania!" and Brother Gjon Pantalia, who broke his legs and died due to a lack of treatment on 31 October 1947, after attempting to escape prison where he had been brutally tortured. **Giovanni Fausti had studied Islam and dedicated a great deal of his time to Christian-Muslim dialogue,** writing a series of articles on the subject for Italian Jesuit periodical *La Civiltà Cattolica*, in the early 1930s. He had worked with dedication and generosity at the high school adjacent to the Scutari seminary founded by the Society of Jesus in 1878. **After the dark days of the communist regime, the high school named after Fr. Atë Pjetër Meshkalla, was re-opened by the Jesuits in 1998.** The day-to-day life of the school illustrates **the strategic role the institution plays in building social bonds** and it also tells a truth that is often neglected in western culture and that is that **every human being is born indebted to others and is destined to live in favour of others.**

### **Muslim teachers**

The high school, which is considered a centre of excellence, has **500 pupils between the ages of 15 and 18. These pupils are Catholics, Orthodox, Evangelicals and Muslims (20%). There are 48 teachers, some of whom are Muslim.** 30-year-old Alda Laska, who teaches Biology, is married to a Christian and has a daughter is Muslim, as is 28-year-old Dorela Smajli who teaches Maths, is married and has a little boy. **They have many Christian friends and a deep respect for the Jesuits** "for the spirit that drives them and for their mindset, which has become an example," says Alda; "for their dedication in transmitting knowledge (including scientific knowledge), caring for the spiritual life of pupils as well," says Dorela, who goes to Meshkalla high school. "We value the school's teaching method and the good rules it imparts, which help pupils become responsible men and women. We share the goal of the Jesuit fathers:

to educate young people in cultivating their strengths, so that they can use them to serve others and help society progress.”

### **Ignatian education**

The school’s headmaster, 42-year-old Ronny Alessio, says: **“Our work is based on Ignatian education principles, which focuses on all areas of personal development, ensuring that young people not only the solid intellectual basis but also that they are emotionally balanced, able to make sound judgements, take on responsibilities and use their best talents to serve others.** With this in mind, we have promoted a series of initiatives: for instance, each year, children participate in social activities and care for people in need (the elderly, orphans, the poor, abandoned children, romani people). As a group, they also take part in a project that takes place over several years, promoted by the American embassy. The project involves Muslim schools too and gets pupils to study specific problems such as bullying and to identify practices that can help Albanian society to overcome these problems.” **Jesuits take special care in training teaching staff: twice a year, a mixed Italian-Albanian team holds Ignatian education courses for all teachers who demonstrate that they share in its principles.**

### **Teaching religion**

**Christian and Muslim pupils get on like a house on fire** says Fr. Ronny, adding: **“The young people are genuinely curious about the faith if their fellow pupils:** sometimes Muslim youngsters attend mass and ask their Catholic friends a myriad questions. The latter, in turn, are also keen to learn about the Islamic tradition, asking questions about it. There is an ideal tension between them, an openness and enthusiasm typical of adolescents: **we, as adults, try to help them give substance, words and a sense to their religious identity and their desire to understand the faiths of others.** Inspired by Ignatian education, we have established that **the teaching of religion is articulated in two subjects: Religious Culture and Ethics.** Teachers examine the characteristics of each religion and identify elements that can form the basis for fruitful dialogue and positive industriousness.”

### **The dark days of the regime**

**By forcibly excluding God from people’s personal and community life, the communist regime left its mark on Albanian culture but did not manage to eradicate faith from people’s hearts.** “Today, people are free to choose and believe in their own God; most Albanians have a faith or are genuinely searching,” Alda and Dorela explain. “Relations between Christians and Albanians in Scutari and the country as a whole are really good and characterised by respect and a spirit of co-operation. We believe that the school as an institution plays a key role in this peaceful co-existence.” Regarding this point, Fr. Ronny remarks: “Here in Albania, **the climate of peace that marks relations between men and women of different faiths is neither fake nor a formality: it stems from an acceptance of diversity, differences are not denied but recognised as such.** I believe that truly religious people (of different faiths) who live together in peace, **can prove to the world that real peace is built on diversity. Differences do not necessarily imply abuse of power and violence but are a starting point for seeking new paths that ensure communities progress in a fair way, together and by talking and listening to one another.”**

**Pope Francis' visit to Tirana on 21 September 2014, touched the hearts not only of Catholics but of Albanians as a whole, says Fr. Ronny. "Despite it being a brief visit, it showed the Holy Father's deep care for this land. This care is demonstrated in the canonization of Mother Teresa, in which the Albanian state was involved, as well as the creation of Fr. Ernest Simoni as a cardinal and the beatification, this coming November, of the 38 martyrs of the communist regime. Albanians have been waiting for this beatification for years. Pope Francis is helping this country to recognise the key role it can play not just in the Balkan region but in Europe too. By rejoicing at the peaceful co-existence between faithful of different religions, considering this co-existence an "inestimable benefit", the Pope supports interreligious dialogue and the path the nation is taking."**

#### **Source of inspiration**

Alda and Dorela had the following to say on this topic: "Francis has shown his appreciation for this country, his visit was highly appreciated by the entire people. **The 38 martyrs who are soon to be proclaimed blessed, are a source of inspiration for us. The fact that we continue to believe in this land and give our best is partly thanks to these men and their testimony, consisting of sacrifice, mercy and courage.**"