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*Albania: in search of membership in the EU*

I am very happy that today I have the opportunity to speak to you about my adoptive country, Albania, where I, Maltese by origin, have been living for the past twenty three years. This country has also honoured me by granting to me Albanian citizenship. Albania has therefore become my second country. At present I am the President of the Albanian Episcopal Conference. Also present with me here is the Secretary General of the Conference, Monsignor Gjergj Meta, who is Albanian.

I am very grateful to COMECE for offering me this opportunity, since receiving the news last October (I would say the “bad” news) that Albania has been denied the opening of EU accession negotiations. This was a big disappointment for all the Albanian Republic. Unlike some other countries, which today are members of the European Union, Albania is overwhelmingly in favour of joining the EU. Surveys carried out a few

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<sup>1</sup> Mons. George Frendo was archbishop of Tirana until October 2021 and president of the Albanian Bishops' Conference. He presented this report in 2020 at the meeting of the COMECE (Committee of Bishops of the countries in the European Community) by invitation in Brussels,

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years ago showed that 94% of the population was in favour of joining NATO, whereas 97% were in favour of joining the EU. In an interview that Romano Prodi had with the review *Osservatorio* in December 2017, when asked about Albania's relations with Turkey, he admitted that Turkey has a huge influence in Albania; yet he added: "But I think Albania is a European country and I think that Albanians consider themselves Europeans".

I am happy that I am here only a few weeks after Croatia, a neighbouring country, which has assumed the six-month rotating presidency of the EU Council.

There was a time when there was a certain reluctance to open the doors of the EU to more member states, on the part of some countries which were already members of the EU. This was towards the end of the last century, when Romano Prodi was elected President of the European Commission. In an excellent discourse he delivered at the European Parliament in Strasbourg on the 15<sup>th</sup> February 2000, entitled "Shaping the New Europe" he made this bold statement: "Today's scepticism and anxiety cannot be overcome by harking back to yesterday's successes: ordinary Europeans have to be convinced that Europe's policymakers and decision-makers are capable of decisive and effective action assuring all that they can modernize Europe and steer it towards a bright future." And he added: "This task is becoming all the greater and all the more urgent now that enlargement is under way. Enlargement is essential if we are to spread peace, stability and shared values throughout the continent". He also drew the attention to the countries which were already members of

the EU when he affirmed: “We must reassure public opinion in our Member States that enlargement is not just an awkward necessity: it is a unique historical opportunity which is in our joint political and economic interest”.

However, Prodi did not fail to point to these provisos: “Depending on how we and the candidate countries implement the enlargement process, it can weaken or strengthen Europe’s capacity for prosperity and progress”. And again: “The enlarged Europe will certainly need strong institutions. But they must democratically legitimate institutions that operate in a transparent and accountable way and enjoy the full confidence of the citizens.” This implies, I think, that once a country has been granted the opening of EU accession negotiations, it does not mean that it will automatically achieve the right to become a member.

Allow me to refer to some other pertinent points in this same discourse of Romano Prodi, where he refers to the Balkan countries. Referring to Croatia, he said: “The people of Croatia have confounded the pessimists by showing that democratic change is possible. We will back the new government to the hilt as it embarks on the reform agenda it has promised to the Croatian people”. Croatia became a member of the EU thirteen years after Prodi delivered this discourse, and at present it is undertaking the role of presidency of the EU Council.

After referring to Croatia, Prodi added: “We will back reformers across the region, implementing the Dayton accords in Bosnia and Herzegovina, supporting the democratically elected government in Montenegro, embarking on Stabilisation and Association negotiations with FYROM

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(today known as Republic of Northern Macedonia) and working towards that objective in Albania”. The last two mentioned countries are the ones that expected to be granted the opening of EU accession negotiations last October, but were left disappointed with the outcome.

One final word from Romano Prodi. In this same discourse he stated: “The situation in South-Eastern Europe shows how important it is to stabilize our continent and to secure peace, democracy and respect for human rights throughout Europe. That is why it is essential to make a success of enlargement and to develop a coherent policy of cooperation with our neighbours”. These words show the importance that due attention be paid to the Balkan countries and to make possible their accession to the EU.

Illyria (which included present Albania) and Greece are among the oldest civilizations which, together with Rome, provided the basis of European civilization. In his Letter to the Romans Saint Paul states that he preached the Gospel from Jerusalem to Illyria. So Illyria was among the first countries that embraced the Christian faith. Emperor Constantine, who established the Christian religion as the religion of the Empire, was himself Illyrian. As you all know, the Christian religion was one of the main factors that have fashioned European culture.

Is Albania ready to become member of the European Union? Perhaps not yet. But, as I stated before, had Albania been granted the opening of EU accession negotiations, this would not have implied that it would become a member state the following day! Opening of negotiations for Albania’s membership would have been very good news for us, not only in order to

facilitate Albania's rapprochement to the EU, but also to monitor the reforms needed to maintain the rule of law.

In an Albanian review, *Europa* (nr. 16/2017), some Ambassadors for Albania expressed their opinion concerning Albania's possible EU membership. The ex-Ambassador of the EU for Albania admits that Albania has made big steps forward, although there is still a long way in order to achieve the required standard. However she adds that most important is the fact that Albania is on the right track in its efforts to arrive at the necessary reforms, and has the ability to achieve this standard. The Ambassador of Germany, while stating that she is in favour of Albania's membership, emphasizes the need for reform in the judicial system and the fight against organized crime and corruption. The Italian, Greek, and Polish Ambassadors spoke along the same lines, the latter adding the comment: "You help us, so that we will be able to help you". In the same review, Dr Eralda Çani, professor of Public Law at the University of Tirana, stated that the reform in the judicial process, the war against the cultivation and circulation of narcotics and against corruption, are *sine qua non* conditions for the opening of negotiations; but she is optimistic that such measures are already taking place.

Edward Zammit Lewis, Minister for Justice, of my native country (Malta), in an article published last November with the interesting title "Enlargement Delayed, Enlargement Denied", has written: "The EU believes that an enlargement policy is a geo-strategic investment in peace, stability, security and economic growth within the whole of Europe. Preparing candidate countries to meet all membership requirements

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continues to be one of the EU's key political priorities". And referring to last October's decision which blocked the opening of negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia, he comments: "Many member states, including Malta, regret this decision and are looking forward to its reversal at the EU-Western Balkans Summit to be held in Zagreb in May. The decision of the October European Council to postpone the opening of negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia has shaken the credibility of the EU among the Balkan candidates. It is imperative to restore this credibility for the sake of stability in this most volatile region in the heart of Europe".

Finally, I would like to mention the "religious factor". It is possible that some countries might be afraid of Albania because they think that Albania is a Muslim country, and that makes them imagine that this might pose some danger to the security of the EU. According to the last census of the population held in 2001, 57% of the Albanian population are Muslim. However this does not mean that the Albanian nation is Muslim. One must not identify Islam with terrorism. And it would be a big mistake if we were to compare Islam in Albania with that of radically Muslim states. Moreover, the Constitutions of the country explicitly state that Albania is a secular country, and that all religions are treated as equal.

I have given many talks or interviews on inter-religious peaceful cohabitation in Albania. I can here quote from one of the talks I gave in the European Parliament in Strasburg in 2008, in a meeting on inter-religious relations in South-Eastern Europe:

“Albania has always boasted of its tradition of peaceful inter-religious coexistence, and rightly so. Prior to his visit to Albania, on the 25<sup>th</sup> April 1993, John Paul II said: “I earnestly desire that this visit will serve to strengthen the traditional bonds of fraternal cohabitation which have characterized the relations among the different religions in your country.” Religions, by their very nature, are for peace, solidarity, and fraternal love. G. K. Chesterton has very duly observed that toleration “is not the virtue of people who do not believe anything”; on the contrary, it is the virtue of those who believe that fundamental rights (such as the right to religious freedom) are God-given rights. Moreover, Albania has been fortunate in never having an Albanian politician who has instrumentalized or manipulated religion for his own political ambitions. In its history there has been no political leader who made use of religion for political aims. On the contrary, we have seen politicians governing Albania in the post-communist period, who have been very keen in fostering inter-religious relations. I would dare add that it is not just a case of tolerance; it is inter-religious harmony, whilst at the same time I must add that there is still room for collaboration on many social issues.

Alfred Moisiu, ex-President of the Republic, in an address to Albanian Ambassadors on the 30<sup>th</sup> August 2002, emphatically declared: ‘We cannot ignore the existence of different religions in our country, nay rather we appreciate their role for the creation of an atmosphere of tolerance in our society. Albania can boast of the harmonious co-existence among religious communities. A fundamental characteristic of Albanian civilization is its

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religious tolerance, and this leaves no room for fundamentalists of any religion whatsoever.”