Pride inspired nation to put all its faith in a saint

Many Albanians apparently needed a figure like Mother Teresa during the 1990s. Known to the world mainly as economic migrants fleeing from poverty in Albania and as political refugees escaping from Serbian persecution in Kosova, Albanians found in the person, faith, celebrity status, and charity work of Mother Teresa a source of immense pride and inspiration.
They felt that she had somehow restored their dented dignity. Through her, Albanians could tell the world that they should not be judged only on the basis of their poverty, that poor as some of them are, they are also an immensely spiritual and humanitarian people who ‘can produce inspiring figures of world stature’.

But while the pride that ordinary Albanians derived from Mother Teresa in the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s was both therapeutic and genuine, the keen interest that several Albanian circles took in her was apparently motivated by the intention to further their political, nationalist, and religious causes.

The growing attention Albanians began to pay to their famous expatriate, especially after her first visit to Tirana in 1989, has been noted by several Mother Teresa scholars in the West.

‘Within a year of her visit,’ notes Emma Johnson, ‘she had become a national hero in Albania, praised by both Christians and Muslims, and was featured on Albanian postage stamps and in its history books.’

Albania’s ‘love affair’ with the religious Mother Teresa, paradoxically, was initiated in the late 1980s by the country’s atheistic leaders. Mother Teresa appears to have tried several times from the early 1960s onwards to obtain permission from the government of Albania to visit the country.

Her requests, however, were turned down every time because Communist leader Enver Hoxha allegedly insisted on keeping her away. Following Hoxha’s death in 1985, his successor, Ramiz Alia, gradually changed the long-held officially hostile attitude towards Mother Teresa because he obviously believed his government could benefit by being friendly to the nun.

By allowing her to visit Albania in 1989, the country’s new Communist leader wanted to signal the West that, although he had been hand-picked for the post by an atheistic predecessor, he was still capable of and willing to steer Albania into a completely new direction of multi-party politics and religious tolerance.

Following Mother Teresa’s 1989 visit, all Albanian politicians - those in power, and those who were trying to come to power - were eager to make public as often as possible their huge admiration for the country’s newly discovered ‘patriot’, and took every opportunity
to honour her. According to a 1992 presidential decree, Mother Teresa was entitled to travel on an Albanian diplomatic passport, if she chose to.

The Communist-turned-democrat president, Ramiz Alia, created the ‘Mother Teresa Prize’ to be awarded to distinguished humanitarian and charity workers.

On November 27, 1996, another Albanian president, Sali Berisha, awarded Mother Teresa the Order of ‘The Nation’s Honor’. The Albanian government announced three days of national mourning when the nun died on September 5, 1997.

Shortly after her funeral, the country’s only international airport was christened ‘Mother Teresa Airport’ and in Tirana, the central hospital and one of the main squares were also named after her.

The Albanians’ veneration for Mother Teresa almost turned into a national obsession in the months prior to her beatification in 2003. The Albanian government set up a ‘special commission’ headed by a minister of state to organise the activities before and after the beatification. Highly publicised events about Mother Teresa - conferences, symposia, exhibitions, the screening of documentaries and feature films, album promotions, and concerts - were held everywhere.

The Albanians, especially those adhering to the Roman Catholic faith, were eager to know where Mother Teresa wanted to be laid to rest from the moment she became internationally famous.

Many celebrated Albanians living abroad over have publicly expressed their wish to be buried in Albania. But Mother Teresa, it seems, was not one of them. Her decision not to be buried in Albania, Kosova, or Macedonia was seen by some of her countrymen in the Balkans as ‘unpatriotic’.

While Mother Teresa’s choice of Calcutta as her burial ground was another testimony to her attachment to the people of the city and of the India she undoubtedly loved and served for almost 70 years, the main reason she decided to be buried in the subcontinent was primarily linked with her lifetime mission to serve Jesus.

No matter how much or how little Christianity takes root in India in the future, Mother Teresa’s grave is likely to remain for a long time as a sacred spot for Christians,
especially Catholics, worldwide, a frontier that will constantly invite and inspire future devout followers of Christ to keep on spreading His teachings there and in other parts of the world.

The fact that Mother Teresa decided to be buried neither in Kosova, her parents’ original home, nor in Skopje, her native city, indicates that she apparently had no intention of becoming another bone of contention for Albanians, Serbs, and Macedonian Slavs after her death.

Her grave in Kosova or Macedonia would have been seen by fanatical Serbian and Macedonian Slav nationalists as a mecca of Albanian patriotism.

Mother Teresa is still venerated by ordinary Albanians of all faiths, but the enthusiasm with which Albanian politicians spoke about her in public on the eve of her beatification in October 2003 had waned considerably a year later.

On the first anniversary of her beatification, many Albanians had forgotten that October 19 was meant to be a national holiday. But it soon transpired that they were not being irreverent on purpose. The Albanian government apparently had simply failed to remind people in advance of the significance of this particular date.

This mistake, of course, did not escape the attention of some opposition politicians, who used it to score points on behalf of their own parties. Albanian authorities were surprisingly reluctant to organise any public event to bring to an end what was announced with so much pomp and media hype 12 months earlier as the ‘Year of Mother Teresa’.

Several Albanian daily newspapers published scathing comments about Albanian politicians’ obvious lack of interest to show up at any ceremony dedicated to the nation’s saint on October 19, 2004, while a year earlier, they - friends and foes alike - had stampeded in droves to the Vatican to attend the beatification ceremony.

Albanian media also expressed disappointment and even anger that, a year after the beatification, the Albanian government had not yet decided where to erect a monument dedicated to Mother Teresa. The statue was finally unveiled on December 9, 2004, in the presence of no less than six Balkan presidents and the prime minister of Norway.
Like Albanian politicians, the Albanian Catholic Church is using the figure of Mother Teresa for its own purposes. Leaders of the Church apparently believe that the sainted sister can be very useful in bringing this institution closer not only to Catholics, but also to people of other faiths.

One effective way of doing this is by highlighting time and again the nun’s ‘devotion’ to Albania. When Albanian Archbishop Rrok Mirdita returned from the nun’s funeral in Calcutta in September 1997, he brought with him a rug which Albanian women apparently had given Mother Teresa as a present when she visited Albania in 1989.

Mother Teresa, we are told, prayed on this rug for eight years until the last moments of her life. The talismanic rug, which is now on display in St Paul’s Cathedral in Tirana, is apparently seen by some of Mother Teresa’s ardent admirers as a sign that she had always been a ‘confirmed patriot’.

Even before 2003, when the Skopje-based Albanian newspaper *Fakti* broke the news about Macedonian efforts to ‘usurp’ Mother Teresa via the proposed ‘daughter of Macedonia’ statue, Balkan media have been at the forefront of a vicious campaign for ‘exclusive rights’ to Mother Teresa’s figure.

Albanian media, in particular, were keen throughout the 1990s to present Mother Teresa as an exclusively Albanian celebrity. Many newspapers, radio and television channels, and websites appeared to be working in unison with Albanian politicians and the Albanian Catholic Church, especially from September 1997 to October 2003, to highlight what an extraordinary patriot Mother Teresa had been throughout her life.

Eager to publicise sensationalist stories and in an effort to endear Mother Teresa to the Albanian public, most Albanian dailies were ready to publish any letter written by the nun in which she referred to Albania.

Mother Teresa preached peace, understanding, tolerance, and forgiveness in India and throughout the world for most of the 20th century, but she apparently failed to inject the same neighbourly spirit into her own native Balkans.

In their bitter row over her ‘blood type’, some Albanians and Macedonian Slavs showed how intolerant they are. In their attempts to appropriate her for themselves or challenge the other party’s copyright claim, they missed a unique opportunity to celebrate and
commemorate together the life, work, and legacy of their internationally renowned fellow citizen, the only 20th century world figure from the Balkans to present this traditionally troubled region in a new and promising way.

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