

Experience among earthquake victims in Albania

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It is the day November 26, 2019; I open my eyes as every day, I go to the Chapel for the prayer of Lauds and Holy Mass. Father Paolo asks me: "Is everything all right in Albania? Your family? The communities?" I replied: "Yes, why?" And he said: "There was a strong earthquake in Albania this morning!" I said: "I do not know anything" Very thoughtful, I continue participating in the Eucharistic Celebration by presenting the whole situation still unknown to me but known to the Lord. After the Mass, I hastened to open the internet, where everything spoke of the tragic situation in Albania.

It is painful: watching the news, seeing terrible videos and images and not able to do anything!

Many messages begin to arrive immediately, phone calls from friends and colleagues asking: are your family and Sisters in Albania fine? Having already made contact with them, I could reply that they were all right. In fact, the tremor occurred in Durres, about 100 kilometers away from our villages. The news is increasingly staggering: the number of victims rises more and more; I am looking for serenity, but the earth continues to tremble in the land of the Eagles. Emergency aid came from all nations: firefighters, civil protection, professionals of various kinds and financial assistance. The Albanian Church makes a heartfelt appeal to mother-tongue psychologists to give their availability because fear and trauma are intense. Presence and speech are two reassuring criteria in this phase of chaos. This call pushes me a lot to act and do something concretely.

In the news searches, I find a notification that a bus leaves Rome for Albania to bring aid. We also decide to contribute as a community, and besides, we send a message to a small group of WhatsApp. This message immediately expands into the various groups and in 24 hours, blankets, and many other necessary things fill our garage. Given the amount of material collected, the driver calls me: it would be nice if a Sister could accompany me in the distribution of aid in Albania. This is for me and my community a confirmation that I have to travel to Albania.

It is on December 1st. We arrive in Albania; we stop where no one had yet come for help, we find many families, we distribute the aid, everything is appreciated and everyone thank. As soon as we get off the bus, a 5-year-old boy (with difficulty in speaking), making his way, approaches me, takes me by the hand and tells me in the ear: Let us go away; do you take me with you?

I see an old woman sitting near the bus, trembling with cold and fear, only one shoe on her feet, I approach her and offer her a blanket, and she benevolently replies: "Thank you, but see if some child needs more than me."

Among the fifty families, that were there to take something for the cold, a family man tells me how they lived the moment of the earthquake. He said, "My wife who is pregnant and I, as soon as we heard the strong movement, we ran to take our children Kiara of five and Matia of three who slept in the next room. We took them in our arms to bring them out, but when we reached the door, we saw the roof fall right over the small beds. The door did not open; from there, we saw the sky, raising our eyes to the sky, we said a thanksgiving prayer. And he concludes by saying: we have nothing, but we have everything."

Around noon, I listened to another family composed of seven members. They had managed to flee to safety, but the house was utterly destroyed. While the family told in detail their experience of lucky escape, his wife calls us and behind the curtain, we find the table prepared for lunch. She had prepared

a tasty chicken broth from their poultry. They obliged me to share lunch with them. Without having anything, they offered everything.

I had not forgotten the reason why I travelled to Albania but this way to be among the people, far away from the city where no one was concerned to be there before our arrival, touched me very much. It was enriching me, confirming my faith and turning upside down my professional structures.

In any case, I decided to join the team of psychologists of Durres. I received lodging for seven days in a luxury hotel located on the Golem promenade, the hotel Fafa, which boasts a private beach, an outdoor swimming pool and a fitness centre. In the beginning, I felt uncomfortable about the high comforts that were offered to us. The environment was full of lights, but the faces were lifeless. Five hundred displaced people were welcomed into this hotel: the structure was safe, but everyone felt insecure. An incredible panorama of beauty but people did not even have a change of clothes. The guests did not practice a single religion, but every one spoke of God. Among them, they did not know each other, but you could notice that they had become like a big family.

I immediately begin to relate to them. Everyone talks about the terror experienced in the moment of the earthquake; they say: the horror is not forgotten, we are not sure of returning to our homes, and we are not even sure of precise time. Resilience is difficult, confronting the fact that nothing can be enough to compensate for the pain caused by the loss of affections, of one's goods and one's stories. It is enough to hear them tell how they found themselves on the street at night and were unable to return home even to recover memories. Now they try to support the reconstruction of everyday life and a possible future.

I wanted to tell these episodes, which represent only some of the many special moments that I have lived in this experience, to make people understand that they have not yet approached this reality: the beauty of giving. A volunteer who donates part of his/ her time to others receives more than they can imagine!

I learned that often it takes very little to make another person happy and that still more often the frenetic rhythms of our life do neither give us time to realize that there are situations that we can help with simple gestures. Sometimes we seek happiness in temporary and complicated things while it is often all there ready to hand, it is sufficient to help another person to feel better and give meaning to everything. Even now that many years have passed since I made my choice (to give my life totally to Christ at the service of all), I am still not able to understand who between them and me, has received or given more ... also because the feelings and the affection are not weighed. In this case, we talk really about this ... I think that life offers all kinds of difficulties to all of us that make us all small and helpless in our way, and the only way to overcome them often is only sharing and mutual help that is never one-way. For all these, I would like to thank all my colleagues and especially my Salvatorian Italy-Albania Province that gave me this opportunity.

