

# ALBANIA: A Church Resurrected

by Elizabeth M. Economou

**A**t the end of his visit to Albania in November 1999, His All Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew said, "for all who do not believe in miracles at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, let them come to Albania and see for themselves what has been done here."

To realize the monumental strides that the Orthodox Autocephalous Church of Albania has made in less than a decade, it is worth revisiting the not so distant past.

In 1937, the Church of Albania was granted autocephaly by the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople. After World War II, Albania's totalitarian regime began to limit the work of the Church, and by

Church. In 1964, immediately following his ordination to the priesthood, he set out for East Africa and celebrated his first liturgy in Uganda. Shortly after his arrival, he contacted Malaria and returned to his native Greece. Undaunted by the setback, he realized more than ever the importance of fulfilling the Great Commission of Christ: "Go, then, to all peoples everywhere and make them my disciples and baptize them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit," (Matthew 28: 19).

Realizing the best way

Due to the vision and leadership of Archbishop Anastasios, the Orthodox Autocephalous Church of Albania is now a beacon of tolerance, peace, and hope to the people of Albania and the Balkans.



Peter Williams/WCC

On Pascha 1999, Diaconia Agapes distributes fresh baked bread and milk to a camp for Kosovo refugees in Tirana, Albania. His Beatitude Archbishop Anastasios visits with the refugees as Director of Diaconia Agapes Penny Panayiota Deligiannis (left of Archbishop Anastasios) oversees the distribution of food.

1967, a law was set in motion prohibiting religious expression. This meant for nearly 25 years Christians—Orthodox and Catholics—as well as Muslims were not allowed to openly practice their Faith.

Prior to this "closed" period (1967-1990), there were about 1,600 Orthodox churches and monasteries thriving in Albania and some 335 clergy serving the various communities throughout the country. For a quarter century an ominous communist campaign swept through Albania, destroying religious sites and severely persecuting Orthodox clergy.

In May 1990 when Albania restored religious freedom, only 22 Orthodox clergy were alive and less than five percent of the Orthodox properties were standing.

In 1991, the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople elected His Beatitude Archbishop Anastasios of Tirana, Durres and All Albania to revive the Autocephalous Church of Albania, a church on the brink of collapse.

An overwhelming endeavor by any standards, Archbishop Anastasios has no doubt risen to the occasion. In fact, it's as if the sum of all his choices had prepared him to embrace Albania's plight.

As a young theologian in Greece in the late 1950's, Anastasios Yannoulatos helped found "Porefthentes" ("Go Ye"), a movement aimed at rekindling the missionary conscience of the Orthodox

to influence the Church was through academic contributions, he dedicated himself even more to the study of missions. Through his research, he hoped to glean support for his original thesis—that it is impossible to be Orthodox without having an interest in missions. In 1972 the Church of Greece, recognizing his work, elevated him to the episcopacy as Bishop of Androussa.

Over the years, Bishop Anastasios continued to challenge the indifference of the Church towards missions by writing: "The Gospel is addressed to all peoples, and therefore the work of the Church remains incomplete as long as it is restricted to certain geographical areas or social classes... Mission was not the duty only of the first generation of Christians. It is the duty of all Christians of all ages..."

In 1980, divine providence appears to have led Bishop Anastasios back to East Africa; this time to create a strong Orthodox community by training native leaders. In 1982, Bishop Anastasios officially opened the Archbishop Makarios III Orthodox Patriarchal Seminary in Nairobi, Kenya. His work in Africa, including efforts to assimilate with the indigenous Christians, drew worldwide attention. And despite his departure in 1991, the Church of East Africa continued to grow.

No matter where life takes Archbishop Anastasios his vision transcends the most dire circumstances.

In less than a decade, he and scores of unsung heroes have helped pave the way for a miraculous resurrection of the Autocephalous Church of Albania, where 25 percent of the population is of Orthodox tradition.

A top priority for Archbishop Anastasios when he first arrived there in 1991 was to establish a seminary to train local clergy. In February 1992, The Resurrection of Christ Orthodox Theological Academy opened. So far, more than 100 men have been theologically trained and ordained. In addition, Orthodox parishes thrive in many cities and villages populated by Orthodox Christians, and liturgical, preaching, and catechetical ministries continue to expand. The Church has also mobilized groups of believers to assist in youth and women's ministries.

Moreover, the Church now operates an ecclesiastical high school for boys, nine kindergartens, five medical clinics and the new Annunciation Diagnostic Center, which offers comprehensive medical care, and considered one of the most modern medical facilities in the country. This past February, some 5,000 patients visited the center.

And because of the Office of Technical Services and Construction, which Archbishop Anastasios also set up in 1991, 74 new churches have been built, 65 churches and five monasteries have been renovated and another 130 churches have been repaired. The idea behind this endeavor was to find and recruit local talent, such as architects, engineers, iconographers, and others, instead of importing skilled workers from other countries. What's more, the Church is now one of the largest organizations in the country, creating income inside Albania, boosting economic development and offering jobs to hundreds of workers. In fact, the Orthodox Church is considered one of the most serious investors in the country.

Since 1994, Penny Panayiota Deligiannis of Aurora, Illinois, has been investing her time serving the Autocephalous Or-

thodox Church in Albania under Archbishop Anastasios.

Deligiannis first met Archbishop Anastasios in Uganda in 1990 where she was participating on a short-term mission program. It was there where she first witnessed his profound trust and faith in God. After traveling to East Africa on three separate occasions to participate on mission programs in Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania, she realized her desire to work out in the "field." As Director of Diaconia Agapes (DA), the social arm of the Church, she has also played a role in helping to rebuild Albania.

The need to hoist Albania out of its deep spiritual and economic crisis, in the wake of communism's demise, was the driving force behind Diaconia Agapes (Service of Love), which Archbishop Anastasios created in 1992.

In the early 1990's as the country was opening, DA's primary focus was on delivering relief aid, like food, medical sup-

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Peter Williams/WCC

All Children in Albania—Albanian citizens and Kosovo refugees alike—dream of a brighter future in the Balkans.



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## ALBANIA

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plies, clothing and assistance to Albania's most vulnerable. In 1994, as some of the difficulties began to subside, DA began to shift from short term relief work to long term social development.

Last year, as more than 470,000 Kosovo refugees flooded into Albania, DA was back doing emergency relief work, and Deligiannis was at the helm.

And as her responsibilities have grown so has her faith. "It's a privilege to work not only with him [Archbishop Anastasios], but with all the faithful Orthodox that are here. God has provided all of these years and through so many trials," she says, "this why I continue—because it is so a worthwhile." "Archbishop Anastasios," she adds, "has allowed me to fly."

Undoubtedly, the Orthodox Autocephalous Church of Albania is soaring.

Today, the Church is an active member of the World Council of Churches. And last year, ACT (Action by Churches Together), the relief agency of the WCC, together with Diaconia Agapes implemented an \$8.5 million Emergency Program, assisting more than 18,000 Kosovo refugees. In addition, DA set up a fully operational refugee camp in Ndroq, Albania, located between Tirana and Durres, to care for

more than 1,330 refugees on a monthly basis.

Currently, the United Nations High Commissioner for refugees (UNHCR) relies on Diaconia Agapes to maintain the largest winterized and fully operational camp in Tirana Albania, which is equipped with 100 units, and capable of hosting 600 people. DA also coordinates a litany of service programs for the Kosovo refugees, focussing on daily necessities: food, hygiene, sanitation and water assistance, and education, among others.

As for this year, plans include: implementing a \$2 million Emergency Program in Albania for Kosovo refugees and Albanian communities that hosted Kosovo refugees; renovating and furnishing a number of schools throughout the country; and distributing large amounts of clothing made by local businesses, for thousands of Kosovo refugee children, women, men and displaced people throughout Albania.

Meanwhile, His Beatitude Archbishop Anastasios and scores of unsung heroes continue to personify the mission statement of Diaconia Agapes: *Love that makes a difference.*

And by doing so, they are making believers of those who've never believed in miracles.

## RELATING TO THE FAITH

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listening to Christ's words is that, while the last ones were astonished at Christ's teaching, the first ones do not pay too much attention to Christ's teaching, they rather prefer to "search" gropingly any strange ways "whispered" to them by the Archfiend.

These "ways" are not less diabolically concocted nor less deceptively offered than was the way of disobedience and sin by which our ancestors have been deceived by the Serpent in Paradise. The way of reincarnation is just one of them, and it cannot lead anywhere but to nothingness, eternal estrangement from God.

It is my contention that, the most tragic aspect of today's multitudes' way of living is that, after Christ came and showed them the Way, the only way able to lead them to deification, - the way of the grain of wheat, - they are still looking for the deceptive, rebellious way inculcated in their mind by the devil. They are very stubbornly reluctant to understand that, at the end of this way there is not deification, neither resurrection, nor reincarnation. At

the end of this way there is only perdition, eternal perdition!

In his second theological oration, St. Gregory Nazianzus says: "The divine nature cannot be apprehended by human nature... We cannot even represent to ourselves all its greatness... In my opinion it will be discovered when that within us which is godlike and divine - I mean our mind and reason - will have mingled with its like and the image will have ascended to the Archetype... Abraham, great patriarch though he was, was justified by faith, and offered a strange victim, the type of the great sacrifice. Yet he did not see God as God, but gave Him food as a man. He was approved because he worshipped as far as he comprehended."

Let us worship God, Whose Son, as eternal Grain of Wheat, regained for us eternal life, by offering Him not a strange victim, but the grain of wheat of our own bodies, let us sacrifice them on the altar of our faith, and they will be risen as the limbs of Christ's body to everlasting joy into His unending Kingdom. Christ Is Risen! Christos Anesti!

## RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

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refers to Christians as the "Royal Priesthood of believers" (1 Peter 2:9). By asserting that in Christ we are "priests," Peter commands us to live our lives according to this grand pedigree by "proclaiming the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light" (1 Peter 2:9).

This is the reason why we turn off the lights and extinguish every candle in our respective sanctuaries on Holy Saturday evening prior to the proclamation of our Lord's Resurrection.

This is why only the votive lamp on the Holy Altar is allowed to remain lit. For in truth, it is only through the redemptive power of the Resurrection that we have the opportunity to live in the fashion of our original created nature, as priests, as royal caretakers of the creative order, who are called to continually offer our selves, our talents and achievements back to God with unconditional doxology and selfless love! From what has been discussed to this

point it is clear that *Beauty and the Beast* essentially embodies the story of mankind's inner confusion.

No matter how well we might be able to camouflage our exterior complexion or feed our inner hunger, without the proper celebration of the Holy Resurrection of Jesus Christ, our spiritual kingdom remains in ruin.

No matter how we might try to rationalize our selfish and sinful pride, our exterior world will mirror the ugliness inside. Our world, like the prince's castle, needs repair, re-formation and re-construction, a spiritual labor that we cannot supply on our own.

This is why Jesus Christ, the High Priest, offered Himself on the Cross. Through His passion, death and Resurrection the sting of our ugliness may be vanquished.

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