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DAUGHTER OF THE EAGLES

Native Albanian Julia Kokoshari speaks with *Road to Emmaus* about her childhood and youth under the world's most repressive communist regime, and how, in a society devoid of even the concept of God, she found her way to faith.

RTE: Julia, what is your background?

JULIA: I was born in Durrës, just over an hour from Tirana, the capital of Albania. There is nothing special to say about the period before I was baptized. We lived in a communist regime, and somehow people know now what that meant for us – the destruction of spirituality by any and every means.

RTE: Although you may not think of it as special, were there things in your childhood or youth that left a deep impression?

JULIA: The most important was how God revealed Himself to me. Often, I hear, “People in communist countries were atheists and didn’t believe.” I am shocked by this attitude because I had so much the opposite experience, belief was always with me. It began with my grandmother’s passing when I was about six, in 1980. She used to sing me children’s songs, and I remember her having a small Chinese doll, at a time when it was a real luxury to have this kind of doll. I loved her very much and when she died I didn’t understand what had happened because no one had ever spoken to me about death.

I was amazed when I saw her lying so still with her eyes closed and I wondered, “What is this all about?” They said, “She has died, she’s never coming back again.” I watched my relatives cry and wondered, “Why am I not feeling anything? Why can’t I cry?” Only later did I understand that death meant a physical separation. Once family friends came to visit and spoke about my grandmother. For them, like many people in communist countries, death was the end, and life was just what we lived on earth, nothing more. I was so upset by what they were saying that I announced very

solemnly, “I am not going to die.” They began laughing. “Julia, what are you saying?” “No, I’m not going to die. You will see.” They were amazed that I could be so determined. My father said, “We will see what? That you aren’t going to die?” I said, “Yes, yes, you will see!”

From that very moment this feeling stayed with me, and as I grew older, my belief that I was not going to die became stronger and stronger. As a teenager I thought, “How can I believe such a thing? I am old enough to now to have sound logic.” I didn’t even know the word “God” at that time. I didn’t know anything.

RTE: You mean that you didn’t know that some people in other places or in the past had believed in God?

JULIA: What we were taught at school was that, because of their need to control other people, human beings had originated false beliefs in gods.

RTE: In your literature classes in school you never read Dostoevsky or Tolstoy, or French or English classics, or poetry or history texts where they mentioned God?

JULIA: No, no, they were prohibited. No way.

RTE: Albanian censorship must have been much harsher than Russian. What kind of literature did they give you to read?

JULIA: The only literature or history we could read in Albania was what the Communist Party allowed and wrote. I had such an interest in reading that I read whatever philosophical books I could find. I was extremely attached to these books, and began reading Marx and Lenin when I was very young, about ten.

My whole life is such a strange experience. I had so many questions, for instance about creation, and I would spend hours on my balcony at home just watching the sky. It wasn’t an escape. I’ve studied psychology and I know it wasn’t that. I was a happy child. I was brought up with a lot of love from my parents and had a very good relationship with my younger brother and our sister who was born later. But I remember watching the sky and thinking, “Such a wonderful thing. How can it be created like that, all by itself?” I couldn’t understand it. I was reading texts of astronomy and biology about the theory of evolution, but I thought, “No way. There

must be a *thing*,” but I couldn’t understand what this thing could be. I couldn’t even conceive of it as an energy. So, I became terribly interested in philosophy, hoping it would give me an answer.

RTE: But that’s wonderful. You were like St. Barbara in her tower. She came to a belief in God by contemplating the nature she could see through the window.

JULIA: Yes, in some ways we were as cut off as she was. So this feeling of eternity unconsciously grew inside of me without any understanding. Finally, in a geography class in high school, just a year before communism fell, one of my classmates passed a small booklet hand-to-hand, called, “A Letter for You,” which had bits from the Bible that said, “God became man.” This didn’t make any sense to me, but I thought, “Right, so it’s not a power, not an energy.” I was trying so hard by this time to imagine what this thing might be. When I read that God became man, I thought “Right, here we are, but... what does it mean?”

RTE: So, by this time you knew what the idea of God was?

JULIA: No, I just knew the word. In high school we were taught, “God does not exist.” We didn’t know what God was, it was just an abstract word that we were to believe didn’t exist. But even when I wondered about it, there was never a mixture of things in my mind about what God might be. I knew exactly what I was looking for, and nothing fit that description. This sense of a *thing* had remained inside of me, and I just had to find out what it was. Being in a situation like that, of not knowing God, but wanting to know Him is like hoping to be saved, although you don’t know what you are being saved from or how it will be done. It is like being a baby. You have a need, a desire, but you don’t know how to phrase it, to put it into words.

I remember one morning in high school – I was about seventeen – they put a big sign in capital letters on the door, with the words, “God does not exist.” I stood there looking at it, and I thought, “Wait a minute. I don’t believe that.” But having been brought up with the communist dogma that whatever is against the Party is a “sin,” I thought, “Oh, what am I talking about – how can I betray the Party even in my thoughts?” Can you imagine? You see, it is possible to have a spiritual way of thinking without even realizing it. In a religious child it would have been, “How can I betray God?” This means that although Albanian people did not know God, this didn’t mean

that He wasn't with them, leading them. So, when I read in this booklet that "God became man," I didn't think so much about it as an idea, the thing that made me really, really happy was the thought, "Right, He's got a face!" "He's got a face and I must find out what He looks like!"

RTE: Because the face meant that He was personal.

JULIA: Yes, because I didn't want to believe that this thing, that He, was just an abstract idea or an energy or something. I needed vivid proof. So when we were in the last year of high school, communism fell and everything began to open up to us. I began my training at the College of Social Work, and throughout Albania, the churches which had not been completely destroyed were reopened. A friend of mine said, "Julia, I'm going to a Catholic church. Would you like to come?" I said, "Sure, why not?" Then she said, "But before you come, read this...do one of them," and she gave me a little booklet full of prayers. She explained to me about God, and about His being crucified, but for me it was mind-blowing. I just couldn't take in the whole picture. And then, my first, my very first prayer I ever said in my whole life was to the Mother of God. "Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee..." and I think it was the Mother of God who led me to the Lord Jesus Christ. My friend took me to the Catholic church for a service but I didn't go back. It somehow didn't match my inner experience.

My Protestant friends said, "Would you like to come and see how we pray?" I went and of course, there was nothing wrong with singing to God, but I couldn't understand clapping one's hands or jumping, because for me believing in God was very serious."

RTE: Did you have any relatives who believed in God?

JULIA: On my mum's side the family was Muslim, but my mother was brought up completely without God like everyone else. She and her relatives never spoke about it, even at home. They couldn't or they would have been persecuted; the mosques had been closed down just as the churches were. But just a few months ago she told me, "I remember my grandmother, who was Muslim, praying at night, saying "Kyrie Eleison!" (This is Greek for "Lord have mercy.") I was astonished! My God, can you imagine!

RTE: Do you think she was a secret Christian?

JULIA: I don't know, but it is possible. We were an Orthodox country from fifty years after Christ, but when the Turks invaded in the 14th century many Christians had to change their religion. I think that Christian principles, the Christian faith, somehow remained inside of them, though, and this is why many Albanian churches and monasteries, and even the relics of saints, were preserved by these so-called "hidden Christians." It is fascinating, because you would think, "If he or she is a Muslim, they would never save Christian churches or artifacts," but I believe that if someone has had even a distant Christian background, although outwardly he may be a good Muslim, he could do such a thing.

Once, I went with my mother and my sister to the mosque, which is in the center of Durres and, centuries ago, was the Orthodox metropolis [cathedral] of the town. I was told that during the Turkish occupation, when they converted some of the churches into mosques, they built another wall inside the metropolis to cover all the frescoes. When you enter the mosque now it is just bare walls, but inside those walls there are icons! This was done very secretly, without the knowledge of the Turkish authorities.

RTE: So they actually built a second wall, they didn't just plaster over the frescoes?

JULIA: No, no. They built another wall, took the cross down and turned it into a mosque. But they built the wall to protect the icons, not to destroy them, and the Turks never learned that this had happened. The architect the Turks had chosen was a secret Christian.

RTE: What century was this?

JULIA: Probably in the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century. So, we went to see this mosque.

RTE: Had you told your mother you were interested in religion, or did she just suggest it?

JULIA: Well, actually, my parents had also quietly begun looking, without our having spoken of our interest to each other. We all had to find out, so we went to the mosque on the Feast of Ramadan. They were giving out sweets; we looked around and greeted them, and they greeted us, and that was it, actually. In Tirana there was a metochion, so to speak, of another mosque,

and by this time I had learned some other prayers, the “Our Father,” and a few other things. As I was facing exams, I prayed to the Lord...

RTE: In the mosque.

JULIA: In the mosque! I remember that as everyone in the mosque was praying it suddenly occurred to me, “I am praying to the Lord in the wrong place. I mean, what does Jesus Christ have to do with this?” I had recently learned that Muslims didn’t accept Christ as God, and I thought, “the Lord Jesus Christ is my God and not just a prophet,” At that point I was really down. I wasn’t finding what I wanted and I thought, “Am I going to be left without finding the house of God, and maybe not even finding Him?” So, I went back home and said to my Dad, “Listen, this and this has happened and you are the only one who can help. You have to help me.”

RTE: Why did you think your father could help you?

JULIA: I don’t know. But I often go to him when I have a problem or something serious to discuss. Through my whole life he has been a tool for God to help me. So I said, “So, what can I do?” He said, “Listen...,” and that was when I learned that he had been baptized in an Orthodox church when he was a child, and that he was born in Athens!

RTE: In Athens!

JULIA: Yes, I had never known. He simply couldn’t speak about it under communism, because anyone who had any link to the outside world was persecuted, and not only that individual, but their entire family. “I was baptized,” he said, “and my parents were Orthodox.” “Is there an Orthodox church here?” I asked. He said, “There is a church at the top of the hill dedicated to St. George. If we want to, we can all go there.” So we went as a family. I remember it as if it was just a moment ago. Entering the church made me swallow hard – I had a miniskirt on, and when I stepped through the door I felt, without anyone telling me, that it wasn’t decent for me to go in like that. But what struck me was that the priest met us so warmly at the door, despite my appearance, and welcomed us, saying, “Why not come on a Sunday, then you will see what this is about.” So, we thanked him and left, and I thought, “No way, it can’t be here. The church can’t be here.”

The reason I was so shocked was because just a few years before, this

church building had been a restaurant-club with an outdoor courtyard, and when I was young we danced here in traditional costumes. Who would have imagined that the very place in which I had danced without a thought of God, was in fact, His house. So, we went on Sunday. I had barely stepped over the threshold when I felt inside myself the question, “Will you accept me?” I really believe I was like the prodigal son returning to his father, and asking, “Will you accept me?” I cannot describe the feeling. But the great happiness for me was when I saw the icon with the face of Christ. It was the first time that I saw the face of God. I was amazed and thought, “Yes, yes, there He is, there He is!” I didn’t need to ask anything. I knew I had found what I was looking for.

So, we went home. This happened during Great Lent, so although most of the family was not baptized, we went to the church for Pascha. That first service was indescribable and we were baptized two years later.

RTE: Two years?

JULIA: Yes. We had some catechists – they were going from one church to another, from one ruined Albanian monastery to another praying and teaching, and we went with them. That’s what I did during these two years, just followed them from church to church, being catechized during vigils. It was the most extraordinary time of my life. I will never have another like it.

Finally, the woman who catechized us, said, “Julia, I think it is time for you to join the Church.” In the end my aunt became my godmother, and my mother and I were baptized together. A few months later my brother and sister were baptized. I remember the priest asking me what name I wanted. I said, “My name is Julia, are there any saints who have this name? He said, “Yes there is Julia of Rome, and he mentioned a few others. I said, “Yes, I want to keep it.” I was so happy that God had changed me inside that I didn’t need an outer change.

My baptism was indescribable, and when I remember the things that happened then, they revive me even now when I am down or am losing hope. Like everyone who has been baptized as an adult in Albania or Russia or eastern Europe, there were many tears of repentance, of joy, of hope. But after I was baptized I was two years without confession because it was very difficult to find a priest who had been blessed to hear confessions.

RTE: Why was that?

JULIA: There were a few priests, but they had not been trained theologically or pastorally. Their training had been transmitted orally from elderly spiritual fathers who were underground priests: how to do liturgy, how to serve, etc. In the beginning they brought out these very, very old service books that had been hidden and treasured, and that meant a lot to us. (Around the same time, I was in the very first youth camp organized by the Church, and met there one of the only surviving priests from all the years of communism, who also later became a bishop.)

So, I just confessed to God directly, without any sacrament or words of absolution being done. Then, after two years, when the Metropolis was founded by His Eminence Archbishop Anastasios, a Greek bishop who had been working in Africa, a seminary was opened at St. Vlash's [St. Blaise's] Monastery in Durres. Priests began being ordained but they themselves were not yet deeply part of the tradition, so they also couldn't hear confessions yet. They brought some spiritual fathers from Greece, priests who had learned a little Albanian.

I think that the Albanian people were really blessed by God, even under communism. God was with us then, even as He is now. One of the respects in which we are blessed is with the gift of languages. Albanians are so good at languages! By the time I was seventeen I knew Albanian, Italian, French and English, so I was fortunate to be able to confess in English, or in French – some of the Greek priests knew French as well. Almost all of us were confessing in other languages. Can you imagine? Giving your first confession in another language? I didn't know what to say, but the priest was very kind to me and he clarified many points of confession. I came out so grateful to God for having found someone whom He could work through to take away my burden.

So, after we were baptized, time passed and we attended church regularly. We were very linked to the services, and we went on many pilgrimages: to the Monastery of Ardenica, dedicated to the Mother of God, to the Monasteries of St. Vlash and St. Charalampos. We went to Orthodox churches in other towns as well. During this time I also continued my studies in social work.

RTE: As you have begun to speak about your people, could you now tell us something of the Christian history of Albania? It has received so little attention in the West that we are often limited to stereotypes: a mountainous land, filled with villages of poor, semi-literate Moslems who were terribly oppressed by communism and don't have much education. Sadly, most of

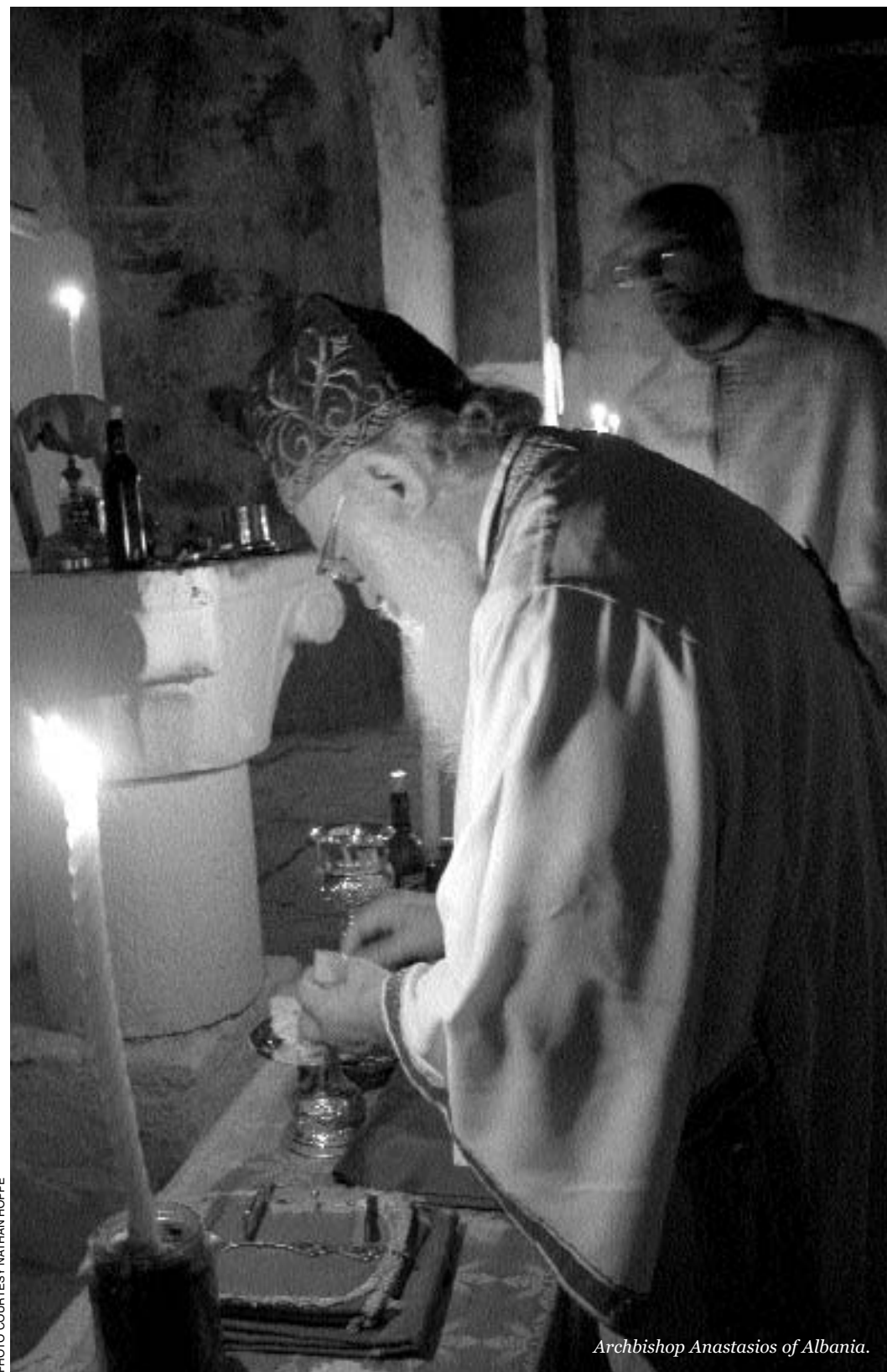


PHOTO COURTESY NATHAN HOPPE

Archbishop Anastasios of Albania.

us know so little about your country that, if we were asked, our first image would be this grossly unfair picture.

JULIA: Yes, ancient Illyricum was a great geographical area. Although it was part of the Roman empire, the Illyrians were mostly native peoples, although there were influxes of Italians, Greeks, and other Balkan groups as a result of trade and military action. Several centuries before Christ, the southern part of what is now Albania was Epirote, a distinct group of people with their own monarchy who at various times were both allies and enemies of the Illyrians. Illyrians at that time were known as great fighters, merchants and shipowners. There were many links between Illyricum and Italy, Spain, and other European countries. They had a flourishing port at Durres and widespread shipping. In the Benaki Museum in Athens there is a helmet of an Illyrian soldier from the Roman times and you can see how sophisticated the metal work is. They were very talented people.

In the Book of Acts, St. Paul mentions Illyricum as one of the places he passed through and perhaps even preached in. When he made his way to Rome he crossed the borders of what is now Albania.

There is an ancient tradition that says that he stepped on the earth of Durres. This was transmitted from one generation to another and because of this Durres has always been called a “second Jerusalem,” a real holy place. Even now it is a blessed place. During our civil war of 1997-1998 Durres was almost the only town left untouched.

RTE: Who were the disciples who brought Christianity to Illyricum?

JULIA: There was Bishop Caesarius, one of the Seventy, and after him, St. Asti. St. Asti was martyred by being tortured and then his body was hung on a tree and covered with honey so that all the bees and wasps swarming around that very hot summer stung him to death.

During Byzantium the entire region was Orthodox Christian until the Turks came. It was then that our country came to be called Albania because of the white-capped mountains. In the Albanian language, however, Albania is called Shqipëria (pronounced “Shki-peria”) which means “the place of the eagles.” It had to do with the many eagles in our mountains, but even more because the Albanians themselves were eagles – we had to be so to protect our country, traditions and culture. So, in Turkish times, Illyricum vanished as a political entity and became Albania.

With the Turkish invasion people often had to change their religion to Islam, and what I am going to say about this now might seem a paradox. I believe that one can be forced to change his religion, and yet inwardly remain a Christian. I believe this has happened. Also, let me say that I believe that God will judge people according to their intent, and the intention of people in those days was to save not only their own lives but their children as well. Probably they hoped that outward submission, living publicly as Moslems would only be temporary. I don’t know how much one can call this apostasy. People say, “But they could have died as martyrs,” but we cannot judge this.

RTE: The Church fathers say that martyrdom is a gift from God.

JULIA: Yes. Of course, and you cannot take it upon yourself so simply. This is why I do not believe that today’s Albanian Muslims are pure Muslim. They are Muslim with a Christian background. This is why in our days Muslim people will come to church for Pascha, for Christmas, for the blessing of the waters, for feasts of the Mother of God. They take holy water to sprinkle their houses. How can a Muslim person do this? During our Great Lent or Pascha, they have their own feast, and it is Islamic law that when celebrating a Muslim feast they cannot even step into a Christian temple. But in Albania this does not apply. Muslims come to the church, light candles, pray. That is why there are hundreds of Muslim people being baptized in the Orthodox Church – they are finding their roots, they are repenting.

RTE: Even if those roots are from six hundred years ago?

JULIA: Yes, as I said before, if you find your past you won’t want to lose it again, because it is part of your life, your soul, a bit of you. People do come back to their roots, and that’s why, when people say, “Oh, you have a lot of Turks in Albania,” I think, “For God’s sake, how can you say he’s a Turk? Because he’s Muslim doesn’t mean he’s a Turk any more than saying, “Because he’s Orthodox, he’s Greek.” Orthodoxy has its own geographical roots far away in the Holy Land. Christianity passed through Greece as it passed through other countries. It didn’t originate there, and I feel sorry when I hear Greeks say, “Oh, if it’s Orthodox, it must be Greek.”

RTE: Part of that feeling may be because the Greeks are still recovering from their own five hundred years under the Turks.

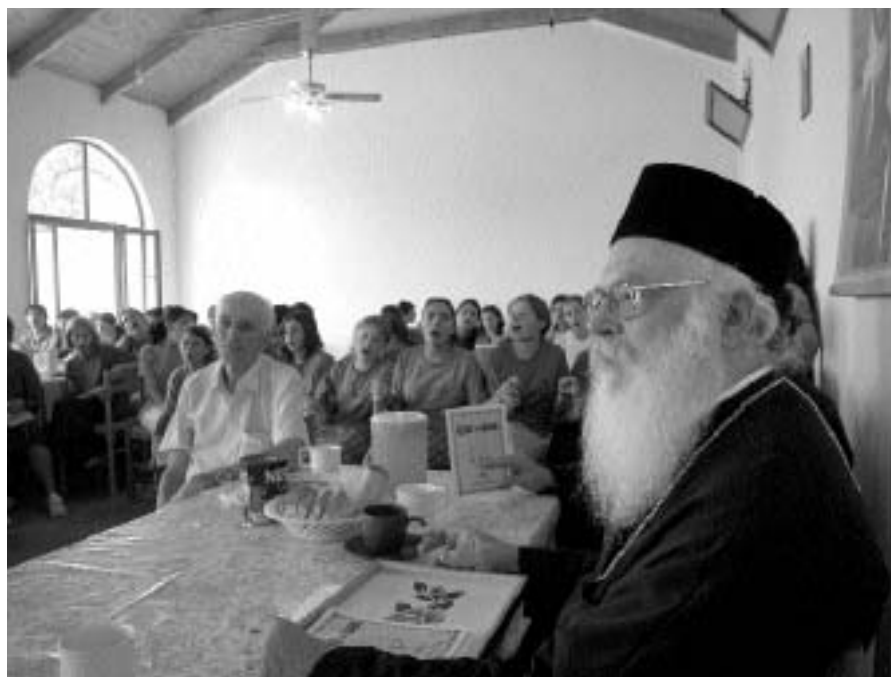


PHOTO COURTESY NATHAN HOPPE

Summer camp assembly with Archbishop Anastasios.

JULIA: Yes, but God gave Orthodoxy as a gift. What we have to be grateful and proud of, as St. Paul says, is the Lord Himself, not what we were born into. I can become an atheist in a second if God leaves me. Whether we are in Albania or Greece or Romania, this earthly life is all passing.

So, in Albania there are no Turks, but there are Muslims who have deeply Christian hearts, because it was these people who protected the relics of saints and the churches. They would turn the churches into storerooms to protect them from destruction by the communists. In some places they even continued secretly lighting the lampadas throughout the communist period. They also protected some of the monasteries and we don't know how many of them lost their lives helping monks and nuns escape from the communists.

RTE: Then we Christians owe them a great deal. Just now, you spoke of saint's relics. Who are the saints you particularly honor in Albania?

JULIA: Actually, I know more about my own town of Durres. Our protomartyr, St. Asti, was in Durres, as well as St. Ioann (John) Koukouzeli, who was born and raised by Albanian parents. He wrote beautiful music for the

Orthodox Church. We have a school of music in Durres named after him, which existed even during the communist times.

There are many Albanian saints whose memory was lost for decades and who are now being rediscovered. For example, St. Angelina, the wife of St. Stephen the Despot of Serbia (the title despot means "prince"), whom the Serbians love very much and name their daughters after, was an Albanian princess. Also we have St. Nicodemos of Berat and St. George.

Also, I know from one of my friends, who was told this story by his great-grandfather who died only ten years ago, that during the communist times there were a few people who transmitted religion to their children secretly, in ruined places in the forest where they would not be overheard. One young man often went to the ruins of the Monastery of St. Vlash, which had been destroyed to the foundations – there were just a few fragments of walls left standing. This young man was a real believer, and he loved St. Vlash very much. He said to his friends who weren't believers, "You know, I love St. Vlash so much that whatever I say to him, he will do." His friends said, "You're joking." But he said, "No, let's go and you will see. I will throw a coin in the air and St. Vlash will catch it, in mid-air. Come, you'll see." They didn't believe him of course, but couldn't refuse the challenge and went to the monastery. The boy threw the coin, and St. Vlash appeared and caught it. Only the boy who was the baptized believer saw him, but the other boys could see the coin hanging suspended in mid-air. St. Vlash said to the believer, "Listen, my child, I did it this time (and the coin slowly descended through the air into his hand), but you shouldn't do this again because you are tempting God and His saints. You mustn't ask this kind of thing again." This is a widespread story in Albania, and I'm so sorry now that I didn't have the chance to talk to these old believers and get stories about the Albanian Church before communism. Our church tradition is so rich, we have such wealth here.

RTE: And you have the relics of St. Cosmas of Aitolia, of course.

JULIA: Yes, he was martyred in Albania and we have his grave in a monastery dedicated to him, the original monastery that Ali Pasha ordered to be built in his honor. In Albania he is not known as St. Cosmas of Aitolia but as Shen Kosma of Kolkondas. After the Communist period his relics were taken up, placed in a museum, and finally returned to the Patriarchate.

Another interesting story is that of St. John Vladimir. He was a king of Serbia and was martyred in Albania in the ninth or tenth century, and his

relics were protected by a completely Moslem village near Elbasan. After the destruction of the original church – I’m not clear if this was during the German occupation of World War II or by the communists around the same time – these people found his coffin floating in the river near the village. They opened the coffin and saw they were the relics of St. John Vladimir. One of the villagers put them in his house and hid them throughout all the years of the German occupation and the communist regime. The entire village understood that they were under the saint’s protection.

After the German occupation, the Serbs found out that the relics were kept in the village and came to take him as one of their Orthodox kings. What happened though is very interesting. When the Serbs came to take his relics, they started off in procession (both Moslems and Serbs were carrying the coffin), but the coffin became so heavy that it was impossible to go any further and the Serbs themselves said, “No. He doesn’t want to leave.” They begged him, they did a paraclesis and prayed saying, “Come, please come, you are the king of Serbia.” The saint appeared (or somehow told them) “You Serbs will take three or four of my fingers, but the rest of me you will leave here.” So, the saint himself chose to stay with us.

They wanted to call the village after Saint John, but during the communist times it wasn’t allowed, so they made a contraction of the name and called it Shiion. Now they have made a beautiful church and many of the Moslems have been baptized. They have taken his relics to the Metropolitan Cathedral in Tirana, but on his feast they take them back to the village in procession.

When I went with my family to venerate his relics in the village, the church still only had the outside walls standing and nothing else. The relics were inside the church in the place where the altar had been. People would go there to venerate them. (There was a nearby family who kept the relics in their home at night, and took them to the ruined church for people to venerate during the day.) People would go to pray and their prayers would be answered.

In addition to our spiritual riches, we also have a great cultural legacy. Albania is still particularly strong in such things as singing, in old traditional costumes and dancing. For instance, if you could hear one of our men’s choirs, there are so many different voices – not just tenors, basses, altos, but about twenty different ranges and parts. You wonder, “How can the human voice make such music?” The Albanian people are also very talented in art, in languages, in handicrafts. We used to export many handicrafts, including rugs and traditional clothes. We need to revive these

things. And the language! The language is so beautiful! When I pray in my language, every word means just what it sounds like – the sound forms the meaning of the word.

RTE: Do many people have higher educations?

JULIA: Under communism, we were not only obliged to finish high school, but eighty percent of the people had a higher university or institute degree, that is further training after high school.

RTE: Eighty percent! Would you say that the education was on par with the rest of Europe?

JULIA: Oh, yes. Particularly after having taken my M.A. in England, I can say that every Albanian student I knew who later went abroad to study did brilliantly. We had very, very good teachers who gave their hearts to their students.

I learned my fluent French from an Albanian high school teacher. Her teaching was so vivid. Teachers gave not only the language, but the living culture of that country. Our schools of art and music were also amazing. We have a brilliant violinist named Edi Papavrami in Europe whom they are calling the second Paganini. An Albanian named Karl Von Ghega was the architect of the beautiful spiral tunnel through the Alps in Switzerland and Austria. Centuries ago, Sadefqar Mehmeti, who built the Blue Mosque in Constantinople, was also Albanian. We also have Ismael Kadarel, who is now in France. He is one of our great contemporary writers, like Solzhenitsyn is for the Russians. Historically, the ruler of Egypt, Mohammed Ali (1769-1849) was Albanian and his family reigned for four hundred years. It’s so sad now that economic and political issues cover this real beauty and talent. I’m so sorry for my country.

RTE: And what direction did your life take after your baptism?

JULIA: I suppose that, like my father, I am a bit of an innovator. As I look back now, every step in my life has been a pioneer step. The fall of communism occurred just as I was entering adulthood, and it was also in my generation that the first school of social work opened. I am one of the pioneer social workers of Albania. I finished the university – this was four years after communism fell – and then the first free government collapsed. It was

a very difficult time. After I left school I worked for the Church for a year as a translator, translating children's books and working at home and part-time in a children's center. What really helped me in my social work career was doing a year's practicum in a psychiatric hospital while I was at the university, then another year at an orphanage.

After the year at the orphanage I felt that I had reached a wall professionally. I just couldn't move forward. At that time, I had a spiritual father who gave me an icon of St. Silouan the Athonite. He said, "Pray to him, he is a really wonderful saint." So, I did, thinking, "Even though I don't know anything about him except his name, I must pray to him to help me to help the children, to find some special training that will equip me."

I was still praying to St. Silouan, when seemingly from nowhere, a British charity sent a team of psychologists and social workers to visit our orphanage. They looked around and said, "We want to train the staff, and we want to begin with the social worker. We can give her three months training." I thought, "Right, here it is," and I mentally thanked the saint. So they took me to England – it was good to see England and to be challenged again professionally. The course was in Coventry, Kent and Oxford, but it wasn't the extensive training I had hoped for. It was an exposure to British social work, but it didn't give me the experience and credentials that would help me in my own work. I struggled a lot.

So, I said to myself, "Right, now you have another battle to fight, young lady – how to get a scholarship and proper training." With the help of a priest in the St. John the Baptist Monastery in Essex, which was founded by Fr. Sophrony, the disciple of St. Silouan of Mt. Athos, I met with a professor who introduced me to the Tavistock clinic, the training center for the Social Work and Psychotherapy Department of East University of London.

I went to Tavistock Clinic and told them about the orphanage and how I had to have this training. They said, "Alright. We are going to give you a scholarship, to pay the fees for the courses you will follow. You will do an M.A. in social work and psychotherapy here, but we cannot give you a stipend for living." I was very grateful.

A few weeks later, through my friend Esther Hookway, the former assistant secretary of Syndesmos in Albania, the Church Mission Society based in London very kindly offered to sponsor my traveling expenses and food. I still needed a place to stay but my main problem now was my visa. I said to



PHOTO COURTESY NATHAN HOPPE

Albanian Pascha, 2003.

the priest in the monastery, "What shall I do?" "He said, "I don't know, we will have to pray." But I thought, "Julia, you can't leave now, you've got most of the stones in your hand!" Within a short time, a family who often came to the monastery offered me a room in their house for free, for the full time I would be at school! I thought, "God, only God can be doing this. No one else. No way!" Then, I thought, "I've got a home now, but what about my visa?" Another man came and said, "I've got a lawyer. Let us ask his help and tell him that you can pay him a little now and the rest later when you receive your stipend." We went to the lawyer and he said, "This is what we will do. I will take your passport, and write that you need a student visa. By the time they get around to giving you a reply, you will already be finishing your course. Things move so slowly here that it may be two or three years before you even get your passport back." I knew then that anything was possible.

RTE: Amazing.

JULIA: Yes, and you know, my whole life has been like that. I have had to come to the very edge before the problem is solved. His Beatitude,

Archbishop Anastasios of Albania has said that our God is a God of surprises. Have you ever noticed how when all the doors are closed and then God open one, we turn quickly to see Him, but He is already gone? This means that when the doors were closed, He was *inside*. We have to trust that God is there, and not be afraid.

When I was in London, I studied very hard, often from 7:00 in the morning until midnight, because I had to learn the professional social work terminology to write my dissertation in English. Because this clinic was attached to a university, I was able to do the practice in a kindergarten next to the clinic and was given a free hand in working with the children. I wrote my dissertation on containment. This was what always struck me as a need in children in the orphanage, or in children in general. Containment is when a mother tries to contain a child's feelings – either fear or sorrow, or excitement, or extreme joy. You hold him, or at least show him that there is an adult nearby who can help carry these unbearable feelings. It is the same with us as adults. We can be shaken, but when we feel God is there helping us we come to an inner peace. This whole process is called containment. In the end I did get my M.A. and I thank God for this every day.

RTE: And what are you doing now?

JULIA: I am living with my family in Athens, my father's birthplace. We left Albania for the same reasons that other Albanians did, it is simply too hard to live now, but I hope that in the future I will be able to return to help rebuild my country. For several years I had no luck finding work, even with my English M.A., as the unemployment here is high, but I knew that I had to wait on God. Now I am working with a program for immigrants and refugees.

You know, I have found a similarity in parts of my life with a few other people – for instance much of my early spiritual awakening happened because of my grandmother's death, as did Fr. Artemy Vladimirov's in Russia.* Another part of my life is similar to that of His Beatitude Archbishop Anastasios of Albania. He was previously the Archbishop of Kenya, and had studied Islam extensively. He once said that he did not know how God was going to use all of his training until He called him to go to Albania. God gives you things, and He knows where He wants you to use them. It's not for you to decide. He will use the gifts He has given you in unforeseeable ways.

* See *Road to Emmaus* #3, Fall 2000.

Since I've come to Athens I've been very involved with the Church here in Greece, especially with Syndesmos, which does a wonderful job of uniting young Orthodox people from all over the world. They recently sent representatives to Strasbourg, France to a meeting sponsored by the Council of European Churches. I was fortunate enough to represent Syndesmos there, along with a number of other young Orthodox from different European countries as well as Protestant and Catholic representatives. From our Orthodox clergy Metropolitan Daniel of Romania, Metropolitan Jeremiah of France, and His Beatitude Archbishop Anastasios of Albania were present, as well as two others from Greece and Cyprus.

RTE: What was the purpose of the gathering?

JULIA: The purpose was, "Let's not deal with theology. Let that be the second step, but let us first come together to pray that God will help us all to repent, and that through this prayer of repentance God will enlighten us with the truth. We have only one truth and that is Jesus Christ Himself and what He teaches." So this is what we did. Some Orthodox say that it is not useful to have ecumenical discussions, but what is useful is prayer. But one of the questions we asked was, "For us as individuals what does this prayer come out of? And whom should it include? Just myself, my family and my circle of acquaintances?"

If I don't have love and faith in God, I won't have love for my neighbor and that is what real ecumenism is all about. If people see Orthodoxy from the perspective of love, they will understand it, God will show them. But if they meet Orthodoxy from the perspective of a fanatic who wants them to accept the dogma without showing any fruits of love or brotherhood, it will be dead and tasteless.

RTE: That is a very good point. One of the fears that many people in Russia and Greece have about ecumenical gatherings is that they are somehow a betrayal of their Orthodoxy. How did you deal with that?

JULIA: At Strasbourg we all met as one conference during the day, we talked and presented papers, but we prayed in our own denominations. For instance, we didn't mix worship services or liturgies. Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox services were all held separately.

You know, we Orthodox are often called reserved, or mysterious or "tra-

ditional” in quotes by non-Orthodox, which means, “You will never get to know what Orthodoxy is about because they won’t speak about it, they won’t deal with you.” But Christ never ever ignored anyone. He had everyone in His heart and when He prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, He prayed with tears of blood, and not just for the Jewish people... He said, “Take this cup from me... I will be sacrificed for the whole world,” not just for “my people,” or for “the people of Israel.” The people of Israel is everyone in the world, we are all a part of God’s creation. I think it is our duty as Christians to come together, if only to get to know each other better. When God sees that we have humbled our hearts, that we are thirsty to learn about Him, He will open Himself to us.

At Strasbourg I was asked to give a speech on God’s creation, but rather than speaking about ecology, and how we can preserve nature, I just spoke about humility, about repentance, about love. If someone has humility he will never damage any part of creation. Fr. Paisios of Mt. Athos said that if you have true humility and repentance you will never even cut a leaf because you already understand how painful it is for her to bear this sinful fallen state of yours. If we were saints, all of nature would be transformed, but because I am not yet at that stage I not only give her the pain of bearing my sinful state, but I give her also the pain of mutilation, or even of complete death if I uproot her.

The response of delegates at the conference was positive. “It’s good to talk about God’s creation from a spiritual basis. This is what we are lacking.”

So I left Strasbourg grateful to God for having given me this opportunity. At the beginning of the conference I must say that I was confused, not knowing properly how one should speak or behave with non-Orthodox Christians. But it all came clear when Archbishop Anastasios spoke one night to a small circle of Orthodox representatives. He said, “Listen, do you see this plant?” (There was a beautiful pot in the middle of the table with a flowering plant in it.) He said, “As the flower has roots, we have our roots, which is the dogma and tradition of the Church. When we come into contact with other people we keep our roots secure. We don’t force the dogmas on people, but the flowers and the fruit can be given freely to all. And what are the flowers and fruit? What Orthodoxy is all about: humility, love, repentance. Nothing else. If you manage to transmit the fruit, they themselves will want the root.”

RTE: That is a very clear and serious approach to dialog with other Christians. What do you hope now for the future of Albania?

JULIA: My hope is that God will bring the Albanian people to the path of salvation, and that these people who were Orthodox Christians centuries ago will return to their roots. I do not care so much about anything else. As we used to call Pascha, Passover, our life on earth is simply a passing over.

RTE: And the churches are thriving?

JULIA: Many churches have been rebuilt from the ground up, or if they were churches used for other purposes, we have reopened and restored them. There are hundreds of churches now open, and this amazing resurrection is due, once again, to the incredible love and efforts of Archbishop Anastasios. (His name, of course, comes from the Greek word Anastasy which means Resurrection.) I thank God so much that He brought us someone with a godly way of thinking. Archbishop Anastasios himself said that when he saw doors were closed, he just waited. He didn’t do anything by himself. So that is why God helped him. We have dozens of Albanian priests now. Under communism we were three and a half million people in Albania. Now one and a half million are here in Greece, and another half million are in other places. Many of us hope to return.

RTE: May God bless you all.

JULIA: Thank you for letting me speak about my country. And to all of you who are reading this, I would like to say, “May the Lord Jesus Christ be resurrected in your hearts.” ✚