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# MY CALABRIA

## An Interview with Antonio Mauro

In October 2006, *Road to Emmaus* met with Italian social activist Antonio Mauro at the Athens home of Greek journalist George Alexandrou, who *Road to Emmaus* readers will remember for his engaging article on the missionary journeys of the Apostle Andrew. Here Antonio draws a vivid portrayal of his Greek-Italian heritage, his Calabrian homeland, and his Orthodox faith.

ANTONIO: I come from Calabria in southern Italy, from Bova Marina, a mountainous area near the sea, whose people have spoken Greek for 2,700 years. The first migration we are sure of was from classical Greece, although there may have been a Mycaenian migration 1,000 years before. During the Roman period and for 900 years after Christ, we had a living Greek Orthodox tradition. The heart of the whole area was Greek, and Greek immigration continued under the Roman Empire. Many Orthodox monasteries were built in these areas, and today you can still see a mixed Greek-Italian influence that is evident in literature, art, and architecture from Naples southward. Officially, we are all Italians now, but if we go back in time, my grandfather on my father's side, who died in 1948, was from Bova and spoke nothing but Greek. The Italian language did not exist for him.

RTE: Your grandparents were taught in schools that still used Greek?

ANTONIO: Because they were considered to be a lower-class people, they never went to school. Under the Fascists, the Italian government tried to suppress what was traditional and original in these areas, claiming that Greek was the language of stupid people. Because these places were poor, they called it the "language of vagabonds" and so on. But these "stupid people" used to call the stars "*astra*" as in Greek – in modern science – astronomy. They called the heart "*cardia*" – cardiac, a friend was "*filos*," the sea – "*thalassa*." "*Kosmos*," of course, meant "the world" or "people," as in cosmopolitan, and the children were "*pedia*" – pediatrics. So, humanity is

using all of these Greek words, and Calabrian Greek wasn't the banal language the Italians claimed.

In the 20th century, the Italian Fascist government made teachers pressure ethnic Greek parents not to transmit their language and culture to their children, so that they wouldn't be "inferior" to the Italians, and the Greek that had been spoken in Calabria since 700 B.C. began to die out. Some elderly people still speak the language as their mother tongue, but they are more

and more the exception. For thirty years there was little interest in the language, but with an awakening to our history and a desire on the part of younger people to seek these old ones out, the language has begun to revive.

There is also interest in this area from Greeks in Greece, and for the past fifteen years there have been Greek professors and teachers helping in the schools of these municipalities.

Organizations of the political Left have also tried to assist the cultural revival, not only for the Greek community, but also for the Albanians and other nationalities in Calabria, by building cultural centers. Now, there is a European Union law protecting these minorities and safeguarding their traditions. All of this has brought about an awakening of interest.

RTE: The Italian government isn't afraid of a strong Greek-speaking Calabrian minority standing up for itself?

ANTONIO: No, this is now part of the official school program in minority areas. The Italian government has passed laws supporting this, and there are programs in different areas for these minorities.

So, all of these organizations: local Calabrians, the Greeks in Greece, the Italian government, the EU, and leftist political organizations – are helping to revive the culture and encourage interchange between the Greeks of southern Italy and the people of Greece. We now have a center for Greek Studies. I'm ashamed that I haven't learned Greek, but it's very hard at my age, although, as I said, my father and grandfather both spoke it.

RTE: What was your childhood like?

ANTONIO: I was brought up in a very traditional way, the only boy in a family of five sisters. We were very poor, but the sense of family was strong. Although my father wasn't interested in religion, my mother was Catholic, and as a young boy I remember serving in the altar in the Catholic Church, taking communion, being very pious. As I grew up I lost interest. I met other philosophies, and became more interested in social concerns. I thought that religion could help overcome personal problems, but not economic ones, and I wanted to work on social issues. Still, I always had a very great respect for people who believed.

But in fact, somewhere in my soul, faith in God hadn't died. It was like a small fire that my many trips to Greece with George Alexandrou caused to spread, fan out, and finally overcome me. On our trips to Constantinople, George would beg me, "Come to Mt. Athos, come to Mt. Athos," but I would just shrug my shoulders. One night in Thessalonica we got a room, and lying on our beds, I got to thinking, "Why not go to Mt. Athos?" I knew it was nearby. George was so surprised: "I've begged you for such a long time, and now you just come up with it, like that. Do you really want to go?" So he completely changed the program. It was very difficult to get in so suddenly – you have to have a visa, which usually takes weeks – but he managed very quickly and we went to the Monastery of Vatopedi for a few days. I found an inner peace there.

One night, just before we went to sleep, I said, "Why don't you baptize me?" George said, "What! You're joking with me, aren't you? After all these years of asking you..." "No, I really want to be baptized." But do you believe?" "Yes." So, he spoke to the abbot of the monastery, and coincidentally, there was a Fr. Demetrios there who spoke Italian. The abbot, Efraim, asked me some questions, and because they have some responsibilities – no one can be baptized just like that – they gave me some days to think it over, to read, to talk with Fr. Demetrios. Then they took me to an elder and he told the abbot that I could become a good Orthodox Christian, so I was baptized.

After being baptized, I went and laid down on my bed, facing the ceiling. I



*Antonio Mauro making his baptismal promises on Mt. Athos.*



*Antonio Mauro's baptism at Vatopedi Monastery, Mt. Athos. George Alexandrou to his right, Italian-speaking Fr. Dimitrios behind the vested priests.*

was lying there awake, when an image of a man appeared on the wall, a man with a white beard. I told myself that this was certainly just a result of my emotions and feelings about being baptized. He was speaking in my heart, saying that life is hard and that you have to fight. I related that to my life, which had been hard. When George came in, he had an icon in his hands. He said, "Toto, I wanted to bring an icon of St. Antonios, but I couldn't find one, so I brought you an icon of St. Andrew. I said, "George, I just saw that man!"

Now I can smile, but at the time it was shocking. "Maybe it's like telepathy or something," I thought. We have a very strong friendship and I knew that George had a deep love for St. Andrew, so I connected many things to that. But I had never before seen an image of St. Andrew, I'd only heard of him. I said to myself, "Since he appeared, this is a beautiful thing to be carried in my heart, even if I myself projected this image without knowing him, there is still something good here."

Years later in Bova, I was in a place called Buchissà. I was very tired as I'd walked to the village, so I sat down on a hillside, under a tree. In a field, 300 meters away, I again saw the same image, the same man as on Mt. Athos. He had a stick in his hand. He knocked on the ground with the stick and then disappeared. I was so surprised, and thought, "What on earth is this? It must be because I'm tired."

So I went back to my village and told one of my friends, Filippo Voli, a researcher of Italian-Greek culture, what I had seen. He took out a book that he had in his car and said, "Read here." It turned out that this area, not so far from Patras where St. Andrew preached, was also linked to him and under his protection.

This book said that in 1300, the Greek-speaking Orthodox minority in Calabria were pressured to become Roman Catholic. When a Roman Catholic bishop arrived in Bova, he took the relics of St. Andrew from the Orthodox church and threw them into a field, in order to do away with everything that was Greek.

This doesn't necessarily mean that the relics are in that field in Buchissà, but still, this is an area that has always been linked to St. Andrew. We can't prove it, but there was written testimony from 1300 that this happened. I go there often and have even dug around, but there is no sign that there is anything there.

But now I have the idea of building a church to St. Andrew in that place, if God helps. This is not only my idea, there are also other people who want

this. Later, I discovered something else about St. Andrew. The traditions about him all say that he used to walk with a stick in his hand.

RTE: Patras, where St. Andrew lived and was martyred, is so close to southern Italy. Could he have come to Calabria himself?

ANTONIO: We don't know if he was physically here, but I can find his presence in his name everywhere in the world. We have a beautiful cathedral to him in Amalfi, but there is so much known of him everywhere, it must mean that he traveled widely.

RTE: Are other Calabrians interested in Orthodoxy?

ANTONIO: The percentage here is very small, but there are other areas where there are more. Many are converts. We also have about 700-800 immigrants from Moldavia, Romania, and Ukraine. Ninety percent of them are Orthodox. There is an Orthodox renewal through these immigrants. I've spoken to some of them, and we have promised each other that we will get together and do something. The faith can flourish, even through different nationalities.

RTE: How do the local Catholics view this?

ANTONIO: They don't make a fuss about it; there's great tolerance. This is what God wants – that each one keeps his own faith, and respects others.

RTE: What was your profession?

ANTONIO: Politics. I worked in the villages as a Communist activist. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, I've completely retired from the political arena, but I haven't given up some of the social ideas that I had before. Leaving it behind left an emptiness inside of me, so in order to fill this emptiness, I began to write the 20th-century social and economic history of the Calabria-Bova Marina area.

The first book included my own life story, and Calabria from the end of World War II until our own days. The second was built on stories told by the old people from the beginning of the century to the fall of Fascism. But still, there was an emptiness, so I decided to try to fill it with my faith, and I gave up writing. But probably in the future I will write again. It is very beautiful to write. ✦

With special thanks to Julia Kokoshari ("Daughter of the Eagles: Orthodoxy in Albania," *Road to Emmaus*, #16, Summer 2004) for her Italian-English translation of Antonio Mauro's interview.