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ALBANIAN DIARY: TEN DAYS IN SHQIPERIA

by Mother Nectaria McLees

In April 2003 I set out on journey to Albania – Shqipëria, as the Albanians call their country, “The Land of the Eagles.” My fascination was not only Albania’s rich Christian past and spiritual resurrection after decades of repressive atheism, I was also on a personal quest: to follow in the footsteps of St. Cosmas of Aitolia, the great 18th century Greek preacher who had himself invigorated Christian life under the Turks and preached widely in Epirus (now northwestern Greece and southern Albania), where he met his end. What I found was not a remnant of people who needed to be reminded of their past, but Christians and Muslims who eagerly told me of their own legacy of St. Cosmas and the return of worship to their land.

Saturday, April 5th

The Monastery of Molivoskepaste

Dimitri Christopoulos, an Orthodox friend from Ioannina, and I drive to the 10th century Monastery of the Dormition Molivoskepaste¹, four hundred meters from the Albanian border in northwestern Greece. The old stone monastery, about an hour from Konitsa, lies tucked into the April-green hills of Epirus, on the bank of a small river that feeds into the Albanian Vjoses. Twentieth-century fathers of the monastery included the young Fr. Paisius of Mt. Athos, who was a monk here prior to his departure to the Holy Mountain.

¹ Molivoskepaste: “The Lead-Covered One”, referring to the lead-covered cupola on the roof of the monastery church. When the Turks occupied Epirus in the fifteenth century, they melted the lead, recasting it into bullets that they used on the area’s defenders, many of whom had worshipped in the church.

During the horrific persecutions under Hoxha's communist Albania,² where every church, mosque or synagogue was closed, and all foreign contact forbidden, the monastery was often the first stop for the few Albanian refugees who managed to escape the bullets of Albanian border guards. After Metropolitan Sebastianos of Dhriinoupolis was consecrated in 1984, he served each Pascha, not in his episcopal cathedral in Konitsa, but at Molivoskepaste Monastery accompanied by the cathedral choir and many of the town's residents. The ground covered with snow, he and his flock would celebrate the Resurrection matins and liturgy out-of-doors, loudspeakers aimed into southern Albania so that Christians could hear the midnight services for miles across the border.

Metropolitan Sebastianos and Konitsa

A few hours later we drive up the winding mist-covered road to Konitsa. The town lies near the mouth of the Viktoros Gorge, one of the most breathtaking natural wonders of Greece. Nestled into an incline in the mountainside, Konitsa is surrounded by huge, ragged peaks, referred to locally as "the Greek Alps," and retains its characteristic "Greekness" with a dignity that hasn't yet sold itself as a tourist attraction. Houses on the steep hillsides are of local stone, with tile and slate roofs. We stop at the Cathedral of St. Nicholas, where we had hoped to find Fr. Ioul (Joel), a local priest, but the church is locked and we fear it is too late to visit. As we pull away, we see Fr. Ioul making his way down the steep incline, on his way to the episcopal residence to take the current hierarch, Metropolitan Andreas, his dinner. His Eminence eats the same food prepared for the old folks home and the students.

Fr. Ioul invites us for coffee at the episcopal offices at the top of the hill. He is a young, energetic priest, a spiritual son of the late Metropolitan Sebastianos (+1994), who was active in raising international support for the



Greek-Albanian border.

persecuted Orthodox Albanians under Hoxha's regime. The Metropolitan frequently appeared before the Greek parliament, U.S. Congress, and various international groups to bring attention to Albania's plight. When I ask Fr. Ioul what he attributes the Metropolitan's success to, he replies, "Three things." "He was humble, he ground his knees down in prayer, and he could talk to all different kinds of people. He would go anywhere to meet anyone he thought might help."

The early Christian diocese of Dhriinoupolis is now partly within Albania and Metropolitan Sebastianos took his responsibility to his unseen flock across the border seriously. Years before, he had begun printing Orthodox texts in Albanian. Making up hundreds of little waterproof packets of New Testaments, crosses and icons, he floated them down the Sarantaporos River into Albania, to be found when they washed ashore. Decades of 24-hour broadcasts from the diocesan radio station also had their effect.

Hoxha's own choice to succeed him after his death was his protege, Ramiz Alia, who was forced to grant reforms after the fall of eastern block communism. Asked in the late 80's if Orthodox from Greece would be able to visit Albania he replied, "Anyone can come except *him*," referring to Metropolitan Sebastianos, who had long been a thorn in the side of Albania's repressive government. When the comment was relayed to him by journalists, Metropolitan Sebastianos retorted, "Alia, I am always in Albania."

Fr. Ioul shows us the well-equipped radio station, still operating, with a tutorial classroom for foreign refugees who hope to enter the Greek public school system and local Greeks who would like to obtain a better understanding of Orthodoxy. Tonight several young Albanian refugees and a few

² Hoxha's Communist Albania: Born in 1908, Enver Hoxha became the head of the Albanian Communist party (Party of Labour) in 1949, after the Tito-Stalin split, and remained in power until his death in 1985. A harsh dictator who imposed an almost hermetic isolation upon his people, Hoxha broke with the Soviet Communists in 1960, and with China in 1976. He boasted of having created the first truly atheist state, and indeed, during his rule every church, monastery, mosque, tekke and synagogue was closed and religious practice of any nature completely prohibited. Clergy of all faiths were martyred and imprisoned. Contact with foreigners was strictly forbidden, and Albania's borders were closed to most outsiders. Textbooks and teaching materials in public schools were strictly limited to what the Albanian Communist Party produced; even classic foreign literature was prohibited. Hoxha's intense nationalism alienated him from other Communist countries, and his distrust and fear of being overthrown induced decades of rule by "guile, terror and secret intelligence."

African immigrants were present. In the building next to the radio station is an old folks home. The small but energetic diocese also runs a children's summer camp.

It's a cold, clear night, and from the roof, Fr. Ioul points out the moon rising over a beautiful old square stone tower, built for the mother of the 19th century Albanian tyrant, Ali Pasha. Konitsans say that it was to this house that she summoned her son, saying, "Come, I've found a prophet," and where Ali heard St. Cosmas of Aitolia prophesy his rise as pasha.³

Wednesday, April 9th

Into Albania

At 4:00 AM I take the Athens-Tirana worker's bus from Ioannina, crossing into Albania at dawn, then on to the capital of Tirana, about 300 kilometers away. When we reach the Greek-Albanian border at Kakavi, the passengers pile out to have their documents stamped. The driver guides me to a separate concrete block office for foreigners, with a battered desk, a chair, and a light-bulb dangling from a cord. The wall clock has stopped, but the office's Soviet-era guardian remains on watch: a faded framed Hoxha-era lithograph of a wrathful Albanian woman with a German Shepherd at her side. Bundled in a coat and scarf, the woman kneels in the snow behind an icy barricade, rifle in hand, vigilantly surveying the frontier.

The sleepy Albanian customs officer, routed out on a freezing night to deal with an American foreigner, stares first at my passport, then at me, and final-

³ St. Cosmas of Aitolia and Ali Pasha: The first encounter between the two was in 1775, when Ali was an ambitious young regional governor harassed by Kurt Pasha, then ruler of Epirus. Local tradition relates: *When the Saint was preaching in Albania, near Epirus, he was threatened by local Turks. Hearing of the threats, the mother of Ali Pasha took St. Cosmas under her protection as a man of God and was so impressed with his teaching that she sent word to her son, "Come to me. I have a prophet here." Ali Pasha came, and demanded of the monk, "Will I rule Epirus? Will I have Ioannina?" The Saint told him that he would. Then Ali Pasha asked, "Will I go to Constantinople [riding in as a conqueror]?" St. Cosmas answered, "Yes, you'll go to Constantinople, with a red beard."*

Twelve years after the prophecy and eight after St. Cosmas' martyrdom by Kurt Pasha, Ali was named Pasha and Vizier of Ioannina and proceeded to subdue Epirus to his rule. When he ceremonially entered Berat as the new governor, he ordered Bishop Ioasaph of Belgrade to uncover the relics of St. Cosmas and build a monastery in his honor. Thus, the Saint's relics were translated and his skull enshrined in a silver reliquary, through the gratitude of an Albanian governor who became one of the most influential rulers of the Ottoman Empire. In 1822, Ali Pasha was killed by order of the Sultan and his head was taken to Constantinople to be presented on a silver platter. Thus, his "red beard." See [The Prophet and the Pasha: St. Cosmas of Aitolia and Ali Pasha, Road to Emmaus, Issue #6, 2001.](#)

ly asks loudly in Albanian what I take to be, "Why are you coming to Albania?" Three Albanians, who hold naturalized Greek passports and need to have them stamped, crowd up to the desk to be sure they catch my answer. I take a stab in Greek, "I'm visiting Orthodox churches." He looks at me suspiciously, then light dawns. "ANASTASIOS??" he roars. I nod, silently thanking God for the much loved Orthodox archbishop. The officer gives a loud grunt of approval, stamps my passport with a dramatic flourish, and waves me out in school-boy, sing-song English, "Thank-you-very-much."

The Albanians on the bus are generous and hospitable: three women, a child, and thirty male laborers returning from Greece with hard-earned savings. The chilly dawn begins to wake the passengers. The back half of the bus takes turns playing with the child, and then come back to try out a few words of English or Greek: "Are you cold?" "Do you need something to eat?" One man offers me his lunch, another his jacket. Three argue over who will buy me coffee at the rest stop. They laugh when I tell them I'll accept all three.

Through the window, an enormous range of jagged, towering mountains, the Lunxherise, rim the horizon. As the sun rises, the snowy peaks flush rose against an already brilliant blue sky and I think that I have hardly ever seen anything more beautiful. Barren, rocky fields burst with spring grass and budding trees of pink and white flowers.

Mountain villages fly past. Beside one tiny red-tile roofed house rests a long, narrow barn built of sticks and mud and thatched with hay. Every home has a rough wooden trellis over the porch or part of the roof where the grapevines will soon be leafing out. The villages are poor, but not as dismal as northern Russian villages. The promise of early warmth and the memory of a thousand returning springs have left a measure of hope.

Between the border and Gjirokastra I see a dozen churches within as many minutes of driving. All have been restored or built anew since the fall of communism. Southern Albania has had a substantial Orthodox population for centuries and during Roman, Byzantine, and Ottoman periods northern Greece and southern Albania had a shared identity as the region of Epirus. Ottoman conquest brought an end to the Byzantine Christian state, with many forced or socially convenient conversions to Islam. Twentieth-century treaties gave birth to the modern state of Albania, with many Greek-speaking villages left behind the Albanian border.

As the morning wears on, the hillsides come alive with men and women sowing their fields, a wooden furrow harnessed behind donkeys or mules.

One worker guides the mules, while the other drops seed into the ground. The patchworked plots are full – I count seven teams on one mountainside. Occasionally, a farmer without mules drives the hand-plow himself. There are already haystacks in evidence, not the usual rounds but conical, like the little turban shapes you see on the top of Moslem graves. Scarecrows dot the fields dressed in shabby coats and pants.

An old man walks by the side of the road in a short braided mountaineer's jacket and a Turkish fez. Farther on are shepherds, or more often shepherdesses, young girls on the hillsides with their flocks. One sits on a roadside bank, braiding her glossy black hair in the morning sun. As we round a curve, a man gallops by on a brown mare, long hair and dark coat flying out behind him.

An hour after the border, we pull into a village with a sign that says "Tepelene." I'm suddenly wide awake, thrust two centuries back in time – Tepelene, the rugged hillside birthplace of the tyrannical 19th century despot Ali Pasha. It is a name of legend to me and I had no idea that the town still stood. My mind spins around like an unengaged clutch and I remember an identical morning, seeing my first road sign matter-of-factly announcing, "Bethlehem." I strain to see through the fog-clouded windows. One of my Albanian companions calls out to catch my attention: "Ahlee P'sah, Ahlee P'sah." There, in the middle of the town square, reclines a giant Ali Pasha, comfortably ensconced on his stone-cushioned divan, pulling on a hookah. Most of the bus turns around to see if I can appreciate this bit of Albanian border history. I nod, "Shen Kosma and Ahlee P'sah," and they grin broadly, giving me thumbs up. Less than a fourth of them will be Christian, but everyone knows St. Cosmas, who prophesied Ali's rise to power and his death.

Farther on, a long wooden suspension footbridge spans the icy river. The connecting cables with wooden slats strung between them look shaky and I wonder if the laden donkeys can manage it. Our own paved road regresses to gravel and finally heavily rutted dirt as we wind down the Drinos River Valley, every turn a new panorama of fields and villages. A few hours from the border the road descends into a fantastic crater-like circle of mountains, the Shendelisse range; an immense lake mirrors the snow-covered peaks. Near the craggy pinnacles are small specks, large birds circling high in the air, the ever-present mountain eagles, Albania's national symbol.



*Albanian shepherd at
Shen Kosma.*

The market town of Patos. The road becomes excruciatingly potholed, and we crawl through a jumble of small villages. Every bump brings an avalanche of bags and food from the overhead racks, and a jarring disarrangement of spines. We can't be going more than two miles an hour, and I wonder what will happen if I beg to walk to the end of the bad stretch. But if the bad stretch doesn't end until Tirana? Seemingly hours later, we speed up to 30, and by the time we hit Durres, the end of the old Roman Via Egnatia, we're cruising at 45.

Even the wildest parts of Albania are crowded with small round monuments of Hoxha's abiding fear of invasion. Sunk into the ground like flying saucers that crash-landed and petrified ages ago, seventy thousand concrete bunkers dot the landscape at seaside resorts, lonely valleys, and in apartment backyards. Horribly heavy and impossible to remove by hand, they are simply left. In the villages they are sometimes used as livestock shelters. A large one in Dropoli has been converted into a chapel.

Crowds throng the makeshift outdoor bazaars, sometimes long wooden booths, but more often an upside-down cardboard box where merchants squat displaying their goods. At one market, twenty donkeys line the road wearing old-fashioned wooden saddles. We pass a shop where a cow has just been butchered. The head lays off to the side as the blood drains into the street.

Closer to the capital, the road is increasingly lined with bare concrete shells of houses and cafes; people build a little at a time as they have money. Near Durres the cement skeletons extend as far the eye can see. Some families have closed off part of their half-finished house and live in it while they complete the rest. A gray, flat Adriatic Sea peeps out between solid blocks of holiday hotels. Albania has had a rough jolt into the late twentieth century, and the dusty concrete high-rises are no one's idea of a Mediterranean watering place.

At Home in Tirana

We arrive in Tirana at noon and I wait for the Orthodox Albanian church workers who are coming to retrieve me from the tiny concrete-walled bus yard. I didn't realize the time change from northern Greece, so have miscalculated my arrival by an hour. As I wait, four Albanian men come up to me over the next twenty minutes, offering the use of their mobile phones, worried that no one is picking me up. I thank them with the universal "OK," to

let them know that everything is fine. The passersby are almost always dark-haired and dark-eyed, but I see a few Albanian blondes and even red-heads. People are casually or poorly dressed, but one woman, in stiletto heels and an Italian designer dress, picks her way gingerly through the sidewalk debris. On the street outside the bus yard is a dilapidated hot-dog stand – I buy a lemon Fanta and sit down at a plastic street-side table. The owner comes out with a bucket of water to wet down the dust-choked road in front of me, motioning that he doesn't want the dust to settle on my clothes. A golden gesture of hospitality.

An hour later, I'm in the home of Lynette and Nathan Hoppe, an American missionary couple living in Tirana with their two young children. Both of the Hoppe's were born into Protestant missionary families: Lynette spent much of her childhood in central Africa and Nathan in Columbia. After their marriage they converted to Orthodoxy and following a Master's at Holy Cross, came to Albania. Nathan is now the acting director of the Albanian Orthodox Seminary at St. Vlash Monastery, filling in for Fr. Luke Veronis, a long-time Albanian missionary who is teaching a semester at Holy Cross in Boston.

Lynette, a professional graphic artist, works with Archbishop Anastasios on church publications and edits the archdiocesan English texts. In the afternoon she homeschools her young son. All of the American missionaries I meet are remarkable people; combining practical common-sense with trained professionalism and good-hearted willingness to face the immense task of helping to rebuild the Albanian Church. The Hoppe's are matter-of-fact about their life in Tirana; hopeful, but no romantic gloss.

The Monastery of Shen Vlash

This first evening we go to a pre-sanctified liturgy at the Resurrection of Christ Theological Academy, built at the site of the monastery of Shen Vlash (St. Blaise) in Durres. The original monastery church was destroyed in 1967 by a group of enraged atheist youth who, not satisfied at razing the building, even dug up the foundation. A few of the other monastery buildings were spared but fell into extreme disrepair. The church, rebuilt from the foundations in 1996 and rededicated to Shen Vlash, is as large as a cathedral in the U.S. Its white walls await their frescoes, but the iconostasis is complete and the gold leaf glimmers in the dusk. It's a Wednesday night,



Altar attendants, Tirana.



Shen Vlash (St. Blaise) Monastery and Seminary, Durrës.

and the academy difficult to get to from Tirana, but the church is full.

The choir is made up not only of St. Vlash's seminarians, but many of its women students who study theology, iconography, church music and catechesis. Most of the seminarians will be married priests. There are few monks in Albania and little movement yet towards monasticism in a country where every monastery and church was closed and the clergy silenced or killed. At the end of the communist regime only 22 out of 440 clergy remained alive, a few having served secretly for decades.

The choir uses Byzantine tones, but the words are in Albanian, their style a full-bodied unison singing with a lively spirit. I try to mentally classify Albanian. At first there seem to be Greek overtones, then Italian, and finally even Scandinavian; later I learn that it is an ancient Indo-European language, unrelated to any other tongue.

After the service we drive back to Tirana with a car full of warm-hearted Orthodox young people, singing their native folksongs. I can't imagine western youth singing traditional songs with such spontaneity and unself-consciousness. As everywhere in the small Orthodox world, friends of friends quickly appear: John Lena, an Orthodox theology student, who shares a close friend in Thessalonica; Panayiotis Sakellariou, a Greek-American recently returned from a missionary year in India to teach English and computers at the seminary; Jezuela Barathi, the Albanian Orthodox youth worker who has organized the weekend gathering.

With us in the car is Shannon Robinson, a new American volunteer. Sponsored, like all of the American missionaries here, by the Orthodox Church

Mission Center in Florida, Shannon has just opened an elementary school for the Albanian Archdiocese. She's been here nine months and seems to negotiate her Albanian grammar with relative ease, as do all the missionaries. She explains that although her school is supported by the Church, and employs Orthodox teachers, "by law its teaching must remain completely secular. The government continues to forbid any religious instruction in public or private schools, and catechism can only be taught outside of school in churches or private homes." The children at Shannon's school are from a diversity of backgrounds, and "although we prepared a small St. Nicholas Day and Christmas celebration, we presented it publicly as a cultural education event."

Thursday, April 10th

Skanderbeg Square

Downtown Tirana's Skanderbeg Square is bordered on the north by the huge Soviet-style Hotel Tirana International, built on the site of the former Orthodox cathedral. The cathedral and the Mosque of Efem Bey on the far side of the square co-existed peacefully until Hoxha pulled the cathedral down in 1963. The mosque survived, closed, and the cathedral is now being rebuilt elsewhere. On the opposite side of the central fountain is a small amusement park, and, at the end of the square, Skanderbeg, the great Albanian national hero, surveys his domain from a great bronze horse.

A small park backdrops Skanderbeg's statue but there isn't much other greenery in central Tirana. Shady, tree-lined streets, planted during the Hoxha regime, were cut down in the riots after the 1997-98 economic collapse. Some fell victim to the need for firewood, but most were destroyed simply because they had been planted under the communists. Churches and mosques seem to be the only visual relief in blocks of concrete landscape.

Metropolitan John of Korca

This afternoon, Lynette and I go to speak with Metropolitan John, himself an Albanian convert to Orthodoxy, whose diocese extends over much of southern Albania. In his late forties, medium height, with dark hair and eyes, His Eminence is obviously a "working bishop," and his insight into his

country's faith and culture, both Christian and Moslem, deftly remolds my amorphous ideas of modern Albania. In our hour-long talk his tone shifts from sober spiritual reflection to flashing humor and deep conviction, with an electric energy that I'm beginning to find characteristic of many Albanians. (See the interview with Metropolitan John in this issue.)

The Nazareth Workshops

Later we drive to "Nazareth," the new building complex that houses the archdiocesan technical and artistic workshops. Woodworkers in the furniture shop are making fifty wardrobes for the new orphanage, and one of them shows us a subtly designed double-faced icon that he has constructed out of interlocking wooden slats. Hung flat against the wall, one icon appears if viewed from the right side, another if viewed from the left. The immaculately clean printing house houses an icon painting studio. Josif Cano, the director, trains young iconographers in painting and restoration, and himself paints traditional icons that capture Albania's warm spirituality.

Nearby, we find the diocesan candle-making factory: huge vats of wax overhung with large metal circles, intricately strung with wicking and ready to be dipped. After the hundreds of candles dry, they will be cut from the metal wheels and sent to local churches. The candle shop provides all of the candles for Albanian churches – from large liturgical candles to small "egg" and "Easter basket" candles for Pascha. In a country struggling to get on its feet economically, church supplies have to be imported or made by the church itself.

Friday, April 11th

Archbishop Anastasios of Albania

Saturday of the Akathist and Archbishop Anastasios is serving. Before the service begins he stands near the episcopal throne, and at a signal, dozens of children begin burrowing their way through the crowd. He blesses each one and the children saunter back to their parents smiling – they feel the grace. Older children and a few adults line up behind them. No one wants to be left out.

As a layman in the late 1950's, the future Archbishop had begun working actively to promote international mission, beginning with a decade-long journal dedicated to the history and theology of Orthodox mission, and later directing the *Porefthendes* ("Go Ye") Mission Center. When his hopes of a lifetime of missionary service in Africa were dashed by recurring bouts

of malaria, he returned to Greece to become a professor of religious history at the University of Athens and within a few years was consecrated bishop.

In 1981, Archbishop Anastasios was called back to Uganda to resolve a crisis in the African church. This time he remained for a decade. With the fall of communism in Albania, the Ecumenical Patriarch asked him to visit Albania as exarch, to see what could be done to revive the Church. His Beatitude never left. Immensely popular among

Albanians, in 1994 a government-supported bill requiring the head of the Albanian Orthodox Church to be a native-born Albanian was rejected by an overwhelming popular vote (two-thirds of the population are Moslem).

His efforts to better the lot of his adopted country has brought him respect from all sectors, and he has not only sponsored the rebuilding of Orthodox churches and seminaries, but medical and dental clinics, schools, and technical training programs. In the late 90's during the Kosovo conflict, the Church organized a camp that housed and cared for the needs of 1,200 refugees, and distributed food, medicine, and clothing to another 30,000. But there are deeper roots to his wide acceptance. One Albanian woman said, "Even more important than the material help is that he sees the image of God in each person he meets, and every Albanian feels this. In every town he visits, Moslems and Christians alike come for his blessing."

During the violence of 1997, Archbishop Anastasios and most of his American missionaries remained in Tirana when other international workers were forced to leave, saying simply, "I'm the captain of the ship. I must stay." Although shot at in the ensuing anarchy (the bullet hole remains in his office window) the Archbishop continued directing round-the-clock relief until order was restored.



PHOTO COURTESY NATHAN HOPPE



Albanian woman in Kruja.

Historic northern Albanian blood feuds, clandestinely continued under communism, have also revived in the past decade. Regulated by a centuries-old set of proscribed laws and customs called the *Kanun of Lek Dukagjini*, the feuds are often carried on for decades; families and clans avenging killings in an almost endless cycle of violence. A blood feud reconciliation agency was formed in 1994, and today, posters and billboards displaying a red hand with the caption, MJAFT (Enough!), are seen throughout Albania. Over Christmas of 2002, Archbishop Anastasios sent food, clothes and medical supplies to over 200 families who were barricaded inside their homes, marked down for clan revenge.

His has been a constant voice of reconciliation. In the early 1990's Archbishop Anastasios helped calm tensions between Albania and Greece and assisted in conflict resolution in FYROM. In 2000 he received a well-deserved nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize for peacemaking efforts during the Albanian political anarchy of 1997 and the 1999 Kosovo crisis.

Saturday, April 12th

The Linderman Family and a Youth Weekend

Today, I'm with the Linderman family, Dr. Charles and Maria, and their children George, Anthony, Joanna, Adrian and Melania at a young adult weekend in a sea-side forest near Durres, where the Lindermans are giving a joint lecture on "Suffering and Love."

The Lindermans are also American OCMC missionaries. Dr. Charles works in the Annunciation Medical Center in downtown Tirana while Maria home-schools their children and assists in the archdiocesan prison ministry. The family lives in four small rooms, along with a young Albanian mother and her four-year-old son and an Albanian grandmother named Tefta, who teaches catechism to Tirana's Orthodox children and young teenagers. (Later, we attend one of the catechism lessons in a room adjoining the Tirana Cathedral. George Linderman, Dr. Charles and Maria's twelve-year-old son, is co-teaching the thirty students from age seven or eight to fourteen whose chairs line the walls. At every question, ten hands go up, some waving frantically. The eagerness is tangible.)

The university students here for the weekend are intrigued and puzzled



Dr. Charles and Maria Linderman and family.

by the mystery of suffering. There are poignant questions; many of these young people and their families have suffered tremendous privation and they are hungry for opportunity.

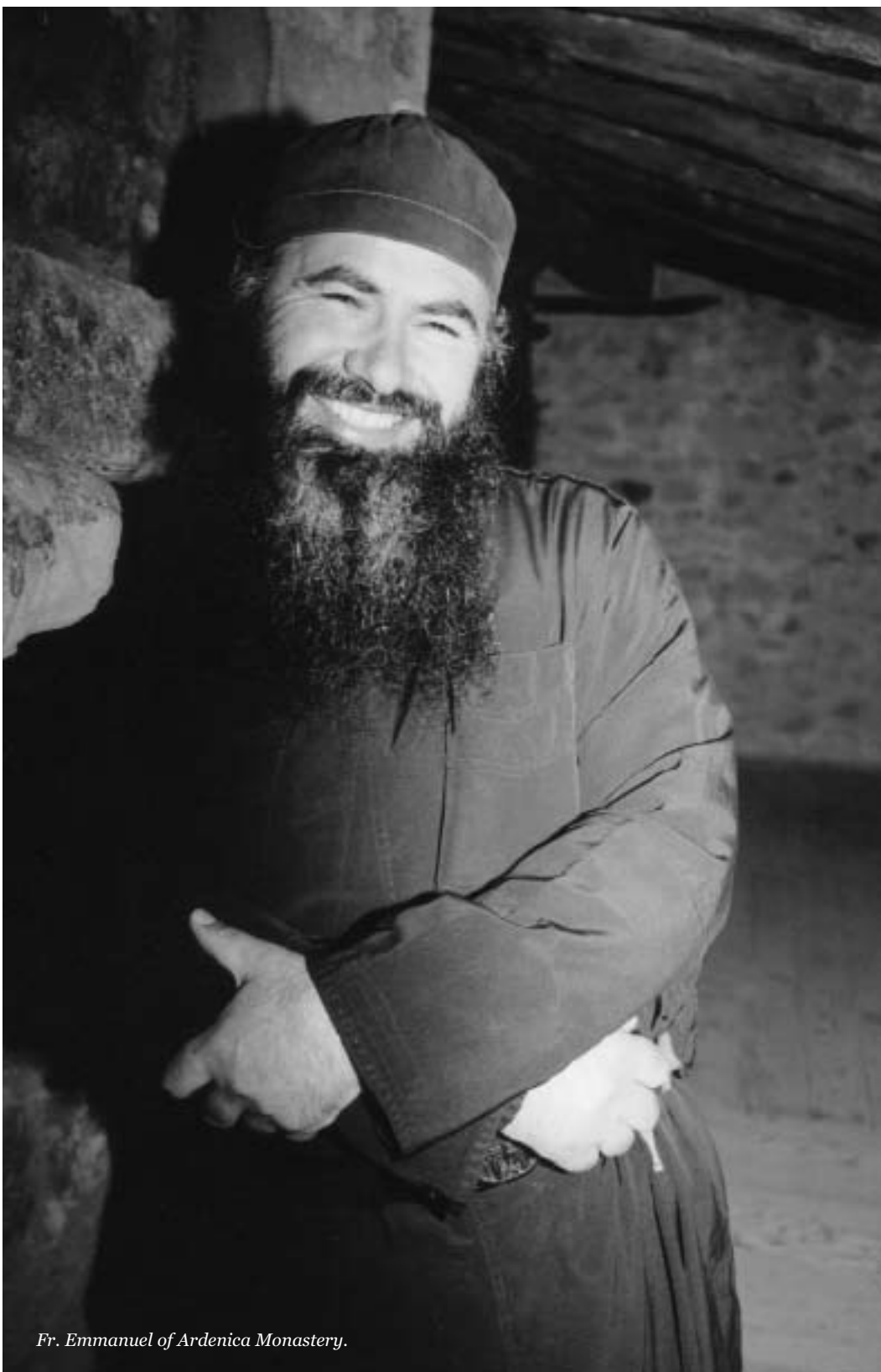
One of the youth workers who has experienced other eastern European and Balkan countries remarks, "There is an almost innocent openness among the youth here that I haven't found with young people from other Balkan countries who are often much harder to reach than our Albanians. Even in traditionally Orthodox countries like Serbia and Bulgaria, young people can be hardened against the Church, and few of them understand that Christianity is something you can live in your ordinary life in the world. Some have told me that the only way you can really be a Christian is to be an ascetic and a monk."

Sunday, April 13th

Annunciation Cathedral in Tirana

Liturgy this morning at Annunciation Cathedral in Tirana. Again, Archbishop Anastasios is serving. The small alley that runs to the church is lined with beggars. The old, the sick, children, cripples, gypsies, young indigent mothers with babies, – everyone is there. I watch as Lynette and Dr. Charles and Maria stop to give a little money or food, and exchange a few words with each one. I have my camera with me and everyone lining the road asks to have their picture taken. Mara, an older woman, sitting under an umbrella in a red windbreaker, hails us. She has no feet and her legs have atrophied. She lives in our neighborhood and each time we pass her on the street, she is eager to talk. Maria Linderman tells me, "When Mara found out that my American parents were coming to visit, she asked someone to go buy gifts for them out of her little collection of coins – my father a pair of socks, and my mother, a hair ribbon."

It is not only the beggars that line the streets to church. Services are full and on Pascha, tens of thousands of Albanians, both Orthodox and Muslim,



Fr. Emmanuel of Ardenica Monastery.

come for the midnight Resurrection Matins and Liturgy. To accommodate the immense crowds, Archbishop Anastasios and his clergy hold the service in the boulevard outside the Cathedral. Streets are closed to traffic, and from dusk until midnight, worshippers crowd for blocks. After-dark photos of the service show miles of candle-bearing crowds.

There is less informality in dress and manners here than I am used to in Western or Greek churches. Men are often in suits and ties, and women in nice dresses. More informal clothes are limited to the young. Although the children move around freely there isn't much as much talking as in parish churches in Athens. In the older people particularly, years of forced atheism have left its mark – a serious, almost determined concentration on the service.

Monday, April 14th

Ardenica Monastery

Lynette, I and the children are off to the Monastery of Ardenica. Villages along the way are bursting with new life: colts in the fields, lambs and ducks in yards and on the roadside. Not a few villagers keep turkeys. Turkey is the main food for New Year Day, the most popular secular holiday in Albania, and it is quite common to come across turkey herders with their free-ranging flocks.

Houses are surrounded with bright budding trees of pink and purple. History lingers here. The craggy stone outcroppings on flat plains, roads that have existed from pre-Roman times, and the surviving walls of centuries-old churches and mosques give the land a conscious, wakeful memory. For Edith Durham, an early 20th century traveler, Albania was, “the land of the living past.”

The Monastery of Ardenica is on a high hill overlooking the plain of Myzeqe and surrounded by cypresses. Dedicated to the Nativity of the Virgin, the 13th-century church with its richly ornamented iconostasis has the deep peace you find in old monasteries. The late 19th-century wall frescoes by Constantine and Athanasios Zografos are beautifully intact, including one of the Albanian Athonite monk St. John Koukouzelis receiving his coin from the Holy Virgin⁴. A 19th century paper icon of St. Cosmas of

⁴ St. John Koukouzelis: In the Monastery of the Great Lavra on Mount Athos is the chapel of the Virgin Koukouzelissa. This chapel contains an icon before which one of the monks, John Koukouzelis, a cultivated Albanian with a remarkable voice, fell asleep after a long vigil as he was singing stichera on the Saturday of the Akathist in Great Lent. As he slept, he dreamt that the Mother of God placed a gold coin in his hand to reward him for his hymn. When he awoke, he found the coin in his hand.

Aitolia, who was buried nearby, is enshrined under a wooden canopy in the center of the church.

When communist youth came to destroy the church in 1967, Irenaeus, the bishop of Appolonia, met them at the gate, saying, “It isn’t good to destroy a monastery. This is a cultural site as well as a holy place, and it is part of the heritage of our people.” The mob left peacefully. Quickly, Bishop Irenaeus and a group of Albanian scholars petitioned that the monastery be named a national cultural monument, and it was placed under the protection of the Ministry of Monuments and Culture for the duration of Hoxha’s regime. Although this saved the buildings and frescoes, the monastery was later given over as tourist hotel.

International pressure forced the Albanian government to return the church to the archdiocese in 1990, and on Pascha 1996 the Orthodox reclaimed the entire monastery, with seminarians moving in to watch over it through the summer. Although portions of the monastery have been restored, the huge stone buttresses supporting the walls have begun to crumble from moisture and settling of the earth and are in much need of reinforcement. There was not only physical deterioration to repair – daily monastic services and prayers have gone far in restoring the spiritual integrity and peace of Ardenica.

After praying in the church, Fr. Emmanuel, the present monastic caretaker, takes us to an upstairs guest hall, a huge 18th century wood beamed room with an open fire burning in the grate. Old iron hooks still hang from the top and side of the fireplace chimney for cauldrons and spits. Cushioned wooden divans are ranged along the walls in the eastern style, and brightly-colored hand-loomed rugs cover the floor. A balcony at the far end of the room looks out on the valley far below. Over small, strong cups of coffee, we talk of Ardenica’s history, and of St. Cosmas of Aitolia, the 18th century “Equal to the Apostles” who almost single-handedly revived Orthodoxy in Ottoman-occupied Greece and southern Albania. A monastery named after the saint lies in the plain below, built on the orders of the Vizier Ali Pasha. Fr. Emmanuel tells us, “Shen Kosma’s final prophecy before his death was in Kozani, now in northern Greece. The saint preached under a huge plane tree, and at the end of his sermon said, ‘There will be a large church built next to this tree.’ This was finally fulfilled three years ago, when local people began gathering materials for the church.”

The Monastery of Shen Kosma

From the top of Ardenica, one can see the distant ruins of Roman Apollonia, and the Byzantine Monastery of the Dormition. Closer at hand is the Monastery of Shen Kosma, hidden in a large thicket of trees next to the Seman River where the saint’s body was pulled to shore and buried:

“After being falsely accused and quietly condemned to death by Kurt Pasha, the Turkish executioners had Fr. Cosmas ride out with them under the pretext of going to the ruler. After two hours, the soldiers stopped, and told their captive to dismount, that they had orders to kill him. The saint received the news with joy – his final days had made it apparent that he knew his death was imminent. Kneeling down, he thanked God that he was allowed to give his life for Him and then arose to bless the entire world, in each of the four directions.

The executioners sat him next to a tree. The saint would not let them bind his hands, but crossed them himself over his chest. The soldiers slipped a cord around his neck, but they had barely begun to tighten it when Fr. Cosmas reposed. On the night of his death, local Christians reported seeing a heavenly light shining above the cross which he had planted at the site of his last sermon.

The executioners took his clothing, and putting a large stone around his neck, threw the martyr’s body into the river. When the Christians learned what had happened they set out with boats and nets to try to find the relics, but gave up after three days of fruitless searching. Finally, a pious priest named Mark from the Church of the Entrance of the Mother of God at Kolikontasi, prayed fervently and went out to search himself. As soon as he set out in the boat he saw the relics floating upright on the water, as if the saint were alive. He clothed the relics in his riassa and buried them nearby.”⁵

Fr. Dimitrios Prifti, a young priest from the village of Ardenica, drives us to Shen Kosma in his four-wheeled jeep. The dirt road spirals down the steep incline from the monastery to the plain below and the jeep plummets into ruts the size of craters. When we arrive at the gate, the little graveyard near the entrance is covered with flowers, real and artificial; farther down

⁵ The Prophet and the Pasha: St. Cosmas of Aitolia and Ali Pasha, *Road to Emmaus Journal*, Issue 6, Spring, 2001.

the dirt track, green with grass and budding trees, is the sunlit roof of the monastery, fresh in the spring afternoon. There are no monks here yet but the monastery is watched over by a village caretaker.

We make our way down the footpath, the roof of the isolated Church of St. Cosmas just visible over the trees. An older church, dedicated to the Entrance of the Virgin in the Temple, is now only two ruined walls with faded frescoes. The church originally belonged to the nearby village and St. Cosmas served here when he preached in the region. By the 19th century the church in the bend of the river was virtually an island. Years of flooding raised the water level and in 1935 most of the monastery, including the bishop's residence and school, were washed away. The Church of the Entrance of the Virgin sank into the mud.



Fr. Dimitri Prifti with two young visitors.

The 1813 Church of St. Cosmas survived intact although it was later despoiled of its original icons. It had been built thirty years after the saint's death on the orders of Ali Pasha, who wanted to honor the monk who had prophesied his rise to power. A tablet over the door inscribes the pasha's order.

It was at the north wall of the Church of the Entrance that St. Cosmas was buried by Fr. Mark, the village priest who found his relics floating in the Apsos. In the 1980's the saint's relics were taken to the Archeological Museum at Fieri. In the following decade, it was learned that the museum was secretly negotiating to sell the relics in Greece, and the Albanian Archdiocese was forced to pay a high ransom for their return. There are small portions now available for public veneration in the Annunciation Cathedral in Tirana and in Kozani, Greece. St. Cosmas' jaw is enshrined in the Monastery of St. Nicholas on the Greek island of Andros and is taken annually to Athens, where tens of thousands of Orthodox Christians file past to venerate it.

Later, I speak to a woman from the village of Yerma, near Sarande. She tells me that her village has always been poor, and although neighboring villages under the same circumstances have prospered, Yerma has not. The village's inhabitants attribute this to their ancestors' refusal to allow St. Cosmas to preach there. Yerma was one of very few places where he was refused entrance, and today's inhabitants insist that their lack of success is because the saint's blessing never rested on them.



Monastery of Shen Kosma (St. Cosmas of Aitolia).

Tuesday, April 15th

Annunciation Medical Clinic

The impression of downtown Tirana is one of dusty, traffic-clogged streets bordered by piles of concrete debris and pre-fabricated Soviet-style buildings in various states of disrepair. There are small attempts at improvements: one of the central boulevards has been planted with young trees, beautiful street lamps have gone in, and the mayor has had some of the large central apartment buildings painted like a clown's suit of patchwork colors, neon greens, blues, red, ochre. Paint fades fast in this hot, dusty climate; if it is not applied brightly, colors don't last more than a year or two.

On one of the main streets leading from Skanderbeg Square, Dr. Charles Linderman and I pull up in front of the first handsome modern building I've seen in Albania, Annunciation Medical Clinic. Open to anyone, regardless of ethnic or religious background, the clinic's immaculate interior outshines the city's best hotel. Dr. Charles is having general office calls this morning and there are about twenty patients waiting, their number increased four-fold by entire families who have come to support their ill relatives.

Several people come in with hernias, which Dr. Linderman will operate on later in the week. In a country where cars are at a premium, hernias are frequent from decades of hard manual labor. The clinic has a same-day surgical unit for minor surgeries; more serious procedures and surgeries are done in the local hospital. Specialist physicians and surgeons from the U.S., Greece and Europe occasionally come to Albania to volunteer their services at the clinic.

One man new to the clinic is quite nervous at the news that he needs to have his hernia repaired. Dr. Charles tells the Albanian resident who is translating for him, "Tell him we doing this by the book, and that I would give my own brother the same advice. I am treating him like my brother, because he is my brother."

A baby is brought in with large welt-like mark marring her face. Dr. Charles explains to the mother that although unsightly, it is not serious and will reabsorb within a year or two. He then turns his attention to the child's grandmother, who has accompanied the infant and her parents. She has a large open abscess covering much of her nose, and he asks if she would like to have it treated. The family answers, "Perhaps it's not necessary, it often

heals over by itself." Dr. Charles explains to his resident in English that this is a cancer that sometimes appears to heal over but never actually does. A specialist will arrive soon from the U.S. and he gives them an appointment.

A woman who has never been to the clinic before speaks anxiously about her son's Crone's Disease and a local doctor who, she complains, is not treating him. Dr. Charles calls the doctor to ask about the boy's therapy and finds that the Crone's Disease was a misdiagnosis: an alternative treatment has been prescribed. He explains to the mother until she is satisfied that her child is taken care of.

A dozen more patients – one woman returning from the pharmacy after having found that her mother's diabetic blood sugar monitor is more than the family can afford. Dr. Charles pulls his wallet out and gives her the money. Others who cannot afford necessary medicine are also helped and the sums written in a log. Although some patients pay, medical care is often highly subsidized by Archbishop Anastasios. Free care is provided by Dr. Charles for some of the poorest patients through funds donated to the Orthodox Christian Mission Center in America.



Dr. Charles Linderman (left) with Albanian resident and clinic patients.

A Talk with Archbishop Anastasios

After the morning clinic, Nathan Hoppe and I go to the archdiocesan offices to meet with Archbishop Anastasios. A gracious, soft-spoken man, His Beatitude speaks at length about the necessity of a wider view of Orthodoxy, especially of missions, and of his sadness that many of the most intelligent and capable Albanian young people have left for opportunities in Europe and the U.S. Even among those whom the archdiocese has sponsored to study abroad in preparation to work with the Albanian church, some have simply not returned.

Missions are the Archbishop's life's work, and in one recent talk he addressed the Lord's last earthly words in the Gospel of St. Matthew: *All power*



Pascha in Tirana.

PHOTO COURTESY NATHAN HOPPE

is given to me in heaven and in earth. Go Ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen.

His Beatitude remarks, “...The revelation that all power in heaven and in earth is given to Christ implies a specific obligation on the part of the apostles and their successors... It is upon the fulfillment of their apostolic duty that they will have the guarantee of Christ’s presence.

“Countless local Orthodox Churches, with thousands of clerics and monks, are circumscribed within their ethnic boundaries. They dare not, rather, they do not even consider sending even a handful of properly prepared missionaries trained with correct ecclesiastical understanding to work in other places, to strengthen the already existing, often small, cells of Orthodox believers. But the exclusive, inward-turning to one land or one people simply does not correspond to the meaning of apostleship, of mission, as it is defined in the New Testament....



PHOTO COURTESY NATHAN HOPPE

Archbishop Anastasios.

“If humanity had waited for the Orthodox to make a move towards evangelization, innumerable areas – Africa for example – would have been lost to Christianity. And the great victor would have been Islam...

“What we do not need are a few isolated missions in faraway lands. It would be a great mistake to restrict apostolic awakening in our generation to the exotic escapades of a handful of zealots and others – to consider mission as the peculiar, marginal activity of a few romantic types with an appetite for adventure. Nor do we need to propagate the rumor that missionary work represents Protestant influence on Orthodoxy, whereas the true Orthodox spirit is expressed through asceticism and monasticism. Instead, firm foundations must be laid: first of all through serious theological efforts; secondly through probing deeply into the dynamic meaning of the Church’s apostolic identity; thirdly, through educating the ecclesiastical congregation, both clarifying and invigorating the apostolic awareness of

the faithful. Fourthly, we need honest self-criticism as to the direction Orthodoxy is taking and should take, with a true disposition toward repentance. And finally, we must always be sensitive to the contemporary world, to its new challenges and inclinations...

“Nonetheless, the Church continues to impart the message of salvation and the grace of the Mysteries to all nations; she continues to give meaning to life and death and to the history of the world. Her mission preserves both its historical and eschatological dimensions. “The failure of all utopian hopes cannot overshadow the Christian message and the Christian hope. The King came, the Lord Jesus, and His Kingdom shall come.”

Wednesday, April 16th

Skanderbeg's Castle, Kruja

On my last day in Albania, Lynette and I drive north, into Skanderbeg country. Little known in the West, Gjergj Kastrioti Skanderbeg is Albania's epic hero.

Born in Kruja, Skanderbeg's father, Gjon Kastrioti, was the hereditary ruler of much of central Albania. In 1420 Ottoman armies began their first advances into the region and Kastrioti's four sons were taken hostage. Three were poisoned and the fourth, Gjergj, was taken to Constantinople where he was converted to Islam and trained in the Ottoman military school with the name Iskander Bey (Lord Alexander), from which “Skanderbeg” was eventually derived.

Distinguished in Ottoman campaigns in Asia Minor and Europe, Skanderbeg by some accounts rose to the rank of general, and the Sultan bestowed on him the title, Vali, making him the honorary governor of central Albania. Skanderbeg, however, was biding his time. In 1443, after the Battle of Nish against the Hungarians, he raised a troop of 12,000 men and drove the occupying Turks out of Albania. After recapturing his father's seat at Kruja, he declared himself a Christian and raised his standard, a black double-headed eagle on a red field (modern Albania's flag), rallying his countrymen with the words, “I have not brought you liberty, I have found it here.”

Over the next twenty-five years he fought, rarely with more than 20,000 troops, against the Ottoman army, then at the height of its power. In 1450

he won a pitched battle against the vastly greater Ottoman forces led by Sultan Murad II, conqueror of Thessalonica. Between Murad and his son, Mehmed II, who took Constantinople in 1453, the Ottomans repeatedly set the vanguard of their immense army to destroy Kruja. In two and a half decades they attacked twenty-four times, and twenty-four times they were defeated by Skanderbeg's Christian army. This was perhaps the longest string of victories in military history.

Deeply shaken by the fall of Constantinople, four succeeding popes of Rome, along with the city-states Venice and Naples, supported Skanderbeg's campaign to hold Albania as the last bridgehead against the Ottomans. Named *Athleta Christi* (Champion of Christendom) by Pope Nicholas V, Skanderbeg died of a fever in 1468 while negotiating for Venetian reinforcements in Lezha. Within decades Christian Albania fell. So legendary was his reputation that when Lezha was taken by Ottoman troops, Skanderbeg's coffin was eagerly unearthed and his bones broken into fragments by the Turks to wear as talismans.

We drive into the mountains through a lovely pine forest and the high rocky outcropping that is the site of Skanderbeg's castle. At the top of the town is a lovely old-fashioned red-roofed wooden bazaar. The stores are decorated with beautiful woodwork; women in open doorways labor at rug looms, and lace, old brass and wood objects are abundant. We mount to the ruined castle. Little is left of the old structure except a high stone tower and the small church where Skanderbeg prayed before his battles. The church has deteriorated to waist-high walls, now protected under a plastic roof. One of the walls has a remnant of faded fresco, but we cannot make out the subjects. A large museum, designed by Hoxha's daughter, is the focus of the mount, and it is here that the story of the country's great Christian hero is preserved.

The Kruja Tekke

Having spoken to Metropolitan John earlier about the local Bektashi Moslems, we decide to visit the small Kruja tekke, a few hundred yards away. Built in 1772, the tekke is masterpiece of traditional architecture, and its distinctive roof is easily spotted from the top of the castle. As we make our way down the cobblestone hill, a pleasant-looking older man comes out of a small house to ask:

- “Are you on the way to the tekke?”
- “Yes.”
- “Would you like me to go with you or will you go by yourselves?”
- “Is the priest there?”
- “I am the priest, I am the baba.”

His name is Baba Sali and, of course, we ask him to accompany us. We sit on cushions on the carpeted floor of the small tekke as he tells us of local Bektashi history. Three tombs line the intricately patterned 19th century frescoed walls. One is that of Baba Sali’s great-grandfather. Four succeeding generations of his family have been the babas of this tekke. Like Kruja’s Orthodox church, the tekke was despoiled and closed during Hoxha’s regime, but as soon as religious observance was again allowed, Baba Sali set about restoring it single-handedly. Before we leave he explains the Bektashi hierarchy and shows us a photo of Reshat Bardhi, the present head of the Bektashi order, who, by his own account, is the spiritual leader of 53 million Bektashi worldwide. For the past decade Reshat Bardhi has worked with Archbishop Anastasios for peace between Albania’s Moslems and Christians.

In a 2001 interview in *Touchstone Magazine*, Archbishop Anastasios spoke of his not infrequent meetings with leaders of Albania’s Moslem community. “During my long journey I have learned one must always respect the other and regard no one as an enemy. At first it was a surprise to the Moslem leaders, but I always visit them on holidays and other occasions. We must help each other for the sake of our communities. Tolerance is not enough – there must be respect and cooperation. If we turn our backs on each other, only atheism benefits...”⁶

We make our way back up the cobblestone road. At a sharp turn between two high walled houses, a donkey bursts around the corner laden with huge empty metal drums. We barely make it out of his way as he dashes past. Whether he is racing uphill in fear of the clanging blue drums, which float and bob on either side like water wings, or because of the two breathless men running behind with switches, we can’t tell. As if on cue, the three come to a sharp halt at a nearby house, where our last glimpse is of the two husky muleteers shoving their beasts’ recalcitrant hindquarters through the narrow gate.

Durres’ Roman Amphitheater and Christian Dyrrachium

⁶ “Albanian Resurrection,” *Touchstone Magazine*, July/August 2001



Baba Sali of Bektashi Tekke, Kruja.

From Kruja we drive to the old Roman amphitheater in the port town of Durres. Built in the second century for gladiators and wild animal shows, the theater seated 15,000. The grounds are slowly being excavated, revealing the reconstructed tunnels for chariots and the wild animal enclosure. In a gallery beneath the seats is a sixth century Christian chapel, with an ancient inscription dedicating it to St. Alexander, perhaps a martyr in the arena. South of the chapel is an early Christian grave and marble headstone. Carved on one of the walls is a stylized cross. Local tradition holds that there were martyrdoms in this arena, and certainly the second, third and fourth centuries were eras of intermittent Roman persecution. The chapel is protected by iron bars, but one can still glimpse eighth-century Christian mosaics of the Mother of God, St. Stephen and the Archangels Michael and Gabriel. The site of the chapel, under the amphitheater is a living witness of the early catacomb church – hidden but thriving under the colossus of Roman power.

The ancient Roman Durres (Dyrrachium) was the end of the Via Egnatia. Stretching from Constantinople through Macedonia to the coast of modern Albania (where a short voyage over the Adriatic linked the ancient travelers to Rome) the Via Egnatia was one of the most important of the imperial Roman roads. There are no traces of the road left in Durres, but there are remnants in Apollonia where a small offshoot of the route joined the Dyrrachium road near Elbasan.

St. Paul would certainly have traveled the Via Egnatia on his missionary journeys in Thessalonica and Philippi, and in Romans 15 he says, *“Through many signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God, so that from Jerusalem, and round about unto Illyricum, I have fully preached the gospel of Christ.”* Roman Illyrium (Illyricum) included Dyrrachium, and the town at the end of the Via Egnatia would have been a reasonable place to finish his overland journey. While there is no other existing evidence that St. Paul was here, the hope of local Christians in the tradition is strong enough to have dedicated the new Durres Orthodox Cathedral after the apostle.

The Christian lineage of Albania is one of the oldest in the world. The first hierarch of the region was St. Caesarius, one of the Seventy, who, according to some sources, was made bishop by St. Paul himself. By 58 A.D. there were seventy Christian families in Dyrrachium, and the town was considered a center of early Christianity. St. Astius, Caesarius’ successor, suffered martyrdom here under Emperor Trajan around 100 A.D., and other early martyrs included St. Eleftherios, Bishop of Avlona and his mother Anthia, St. Donatos,



PHOTO COURTESY NATHAN HOPPE

Liturgy in reconstructed church, Durres.

Bishop of Phoenicia, and St. Assios, Bishop of Dyrrachium. A cultured Byzantine province, Epirote bishops participated in the First and Fourth Ecumenical Councils, and the modern region of Albania was the birthplace of both Emperor Constantine and Justinian the Great, St. Martin of Tours and St. Jerome: a heritage unquestionably early and unquestionably Christian.

The roots of that tradition bear fruit until now, and even a brief glimpse of Albania will convince a passing pilgrim that although the country’s venerable Christian past is almost as unknown as its dynamic present, both are securely in the hands of God. †