



A JOURNAL OF ORTHODOX FAITH AND CULTURE

ROAD TO EMMAUS

Help support
Road to Emmaus
Journal.

The *Road to Emmaus* staff hopes that you find our journal inspiring and useful. While we offer our past articles on-line free of charge, we would warmly appreciate your help in covering the costs of producing this non-profit journal, so that we may continue to bring you quality articles on Orthodox Christianity, past and present, around the world. Thank you for your support.

Please consider a donation to Road to Emmaus by visiting the Donate page on our website.



“TO HELP THEM SAFELY FROM THE SEA...”

The Heroism of Lesvos’ Greek Villages

Just four miles from the Turkish coast, Lesvos is Greece’s third largest island and the frontline of Europe’s refugee crisis. At the height of the refugee influx of 2014-2016, villagers hosted over 800,000 Syrians and other exiles fleeing the war-torn Middle East: ten times the island’s native population.

Despite Greece’s disastrous economy, further impoverished by European Union-imposed austerity measures that have left many jobless, Lesvos’ islanders have been internationally praised for their compassionate generosity in aiding hundreds of thousands of frantic arrivals. Several residents were singled out as nominees for the 2015 Nobel Peace Prize, representing the heroism of the entire island.

The exiles streamed into Turkey from war-torn Syria, but also from Afghanistan, Iraq, and other parts of the Middle East, often on foot, and then by sea to Lesvos. Without visas and with little more than the clothes on their backs, the refugees were transported by Turkish smugglers eager to make an easy profit at \$1,500 per head. Men, women and children were crammed into inflatable rubber dinghies that often collapsed into the sea under the weight of three times as many people as they were designed to hold. Thousands drowned.

Opposite: Syrian refugees land on Lesvos. Detail of 2016 Pulitzer Prize Photo by Sergey Panomarov, Moscow.

As the closest island to Turkey, most of the refugees who survived the crossing washed ashore on a 7.5 mile stretch between the tiny fishing village of Skala Sikaminias and the vacation port of Molyvos.

In mid-2015, one resident commented, “As early as 1997, there were 200 refugees a year, but now it’s 2,000 people daily in Skala Sykaminias alone. During the summer there were 9,500 people in one day. We counted 150 boats. The population of a whole country is passing through a village of 100 residents.”



Aimilia Kamvisi feeding Syrian refugee baby with neighbors Konstantina Mpalli and Marista Mavrapiidi. Photo Lefteris Partsalis.

Christ’s words, “I will make you fishers of men,” took on a grim meaning along this seacoast as local fishermen stopped their fishing runs, some for years, to help rescue hundreds of thousands at the peak of the refugee crisis. Stratos Valaminos, one of the Nobel nominees, recalls one of his early rescues in October of 2009. It was before dawn when a cold north wind and high waves beat a boat carrying refugees against the hard rocks of the coastline. Stratos, together with his father-in-law Yorgos and his neighbor, Dimi-

trios, were the only ones around to help: "When you are fishing and a boat is sinking next to you and they're screaming for help, you can't pretend not to hear them.... The rocks surrounding the lighthouse are the worst place to land on the whole island. The refugees didn't have life jackets, and half of them were already unconscious." Stratos jumped into the water, carrying child after child to Yorgos and Demetrios. Then they got the mothers to safety, and finally, the fathers. Ten were saved from the water, ten died. In another massive shipwreck, local fishermen pulled out over 240 refugees from a sea of dead bodies: "It was like a war zone; babies just died in our arms.... I have been so worried for the people taking the journey over the sea that I have been out with the boat all night long, every night. Just in case...."

Welcoming the Desperate

The arrivals of soaking, frightened survivors, shivering in the cold night wind, signaled a village turnout. They were first taken to a local café, whose owners had opened its doors to the incoming refugees, eventually turning the café into an impromptu medical station and storehouse for warm clothes. As word spread of the landing, women, young and old, would appear from local houses with food and warm dry clothes to comfort survivors, some of whom had lost children, parents or spouses in the merciless sea.

Once Germany announced that they would accept refugees, Valamios told reporters, "People are now coming in much bigger numbers and we don't know what to do. There are too many for us to handle by ourselves, and people need to sleep.... The only solution is to stop the war, but people keep coming, and for me, that means to help them safely from the sea." He adds softly, "No one wants to leave their home, to take a suitcase and five babies, to walk for five months and then get on a plastic boat. These people have started a journey to a better life. I will not let the sea stop them..."

The islanders soon set up a rescue system. Lighthouse volunteers operated a night watch in the nearby village of Korakas no matter how bad the weather. If someone on the shore saw a migrant boat in trouble, they would alert the fishermen to head out. Residents gathered to meet incoming boats and help survivors, who at one point numbered around 5,000 a day.

Local fishermen are not the only heroes. As the refugees came ashore, women, led by village grandmothers, took the newcomers to a small house, where they dressed them in donated clothes and gave them hot food and

drink, allowing them to rest before they began a forty kilometer hike to the refugee camp. (Greek law did not allow transport of illegal aliens).

One of these women, another Nobel Peace Prize nominee, is Aimilia Kamvisi, an 86-year-old grandmother who flashed into fame when she and two friends, Konstantina Mpalli, and Marista Mavrapidi, aged 89 and 85, were photographed bottle-feeding a Syrian baby at the port. When she was told of the nomination she replied, “What did I do? I didn’t do anything.” Later she admitted: “In this old age, I will die with a clear conscience.”

Aimilia later added, “We knew we gave the refugees courage. And the refu-



Orthodox priest Fr. Efstratios Dimou (Papa Stratis) of Kalloni, Lesvos.

gees understood that. We hugged and kissed them. I feel like I have helped a brother or sister.” Here, her friend Marista chimed in: “We all wanted to help. It’s natural to want to help. Having babies safe in my arms is a blessing.”

The Greek government, facing economic meltdown with a third of the population out of work, and teetering on the edge of withdrawal from the European Union, was unable to step in. But when the worsening war in Syria turned the stream of refugees into a flood, island administrators finally

opened a refugee camp at Moria, a former military base outside the port of Mytilene. A local activist group formed a second camp known as PIKPA, which now takes the most vulnerable refugees. Local communities and individuals helped by distributing water, food, and clothing – often under the radar of the international press.

Local Orthodox clergy were, as always, part of the local response. As early as 2009, Papa Stratis Dimou, a well-loved priest from Kalloni, founded Agkalia (Embrace) to assist refugees and migrants. Joining with the island-based volunteer group, The Village of All Together, Agkalia dispersed over 100 tons of food donated by villagers, as well as clothes and supplies, without any outside help. Although dying of cancer, and wearing an oxygen mask to relieve his obstructed breathing, Fr. Stratis daily prepared sandwiches and set out bottles of water for the newly arrived refugees, who usually reached the village by noon on foot on their way to the refugee camps.

“Every day between one and two hundred people come to Kalloni,” the 57-year-old Orthodox priest said. “The local people tell them to come to us for help. We give them food, water, milk for the babies, shoes, clothes. They can stay here too: we have blankets, mattresses on the floor.” Father Stratis has helped reunite many families who lost contact with one another in the frantic offloading of the boats.... “One day we helped a refugee family find their father; we took to the streets until we found him. He was a Muslim, I’m a Christian priest, and he hugged and kissed me. God is love. He doesn’t know gender, race or borders.”

Just weeks before his death from cancer in September of 2015, Papa Stratis said to a reporter, “Our life is extremely short, so let’s fulfill it by doing good deeds....” In 2016, the Council of Europe awarded Agkalia the Raoul Wallenberg Prize for its work on Lesbos.

Why Such Remarkable Hospitality?

Why is this Lesbos community so hospitable? In the port of Mitilene town stands a statue: “The Asia Minor Mother,” depicting a refugee woman sheltering children in her arms and the folds of her skirt; over 60 percent of Lesbos’ population of 86,000 are the children, grandchildren, or great-grandchildren of Greek Christian refugees who were forcibly exiled from their ancient home in Asia Minor (now Turkey) in the Exchange of Populations of 1923.

Marista Mavrapidi explains, “Our mothers came here as refugees from Turkey, just across the way, and they were girls at the time. They came without clothes, with nothing. That’s why we feel sorry for the migrants. Another Lesvos resident recalls, “My father came here from Smyrna when he was six years old. My grandparents were dead and someone just pushed him into a boat.”

Fortunately, Greece’s response is kinder than that of the European and American ships who were anchored in the Smyrna harbor when the ancient Greek Asia Minor city of Smyrna (Izmir) was set on fire by Turkish troops in 1923. In the ensuing massacre of Christian Greeks and Armenians, those who were able fled to the port, while the strongest attempted to swim to the ships. Tragically, most of these anchored vessels belonged to various Allied powers, including the US, who, citing “neutrality,” refused to pick up the frantic survivors. Military bands played loud music to drown out the screams of those being massacred or who were drowning in the harbor, and threw those who managed to swim to the ships back into the sea. Over 100,000 people died.

Two bright spots stand out in this callous and shameful tragedy: one Japanese freighter dumped all of its cargo into the ocean to take on as many refugees as possible, and over 350,000 people were rescued via an impromptu relief flotilla organized by a heroic tubercular-ridden, hunchback, YMCA-sponsored American Methodist missionary named Asa Jennings.

Greek Response, and Eventual International Aid

In the present Syrian refugee crisis, it is not only locals from Lesvos who help. In cities like Kavala, Kozani and Trikala in northern Greece, local residents rushed to improvise welcome centers and mobile medical units to care for crowds of refugees who arrived in their town with just a few hours’ notice. In Athens and Pireaus, Greek Christians, many uncertain of their own day-to-day wellbeing, can be seen in town squares and ports feeding refugees, handing out needed clothes and supplies, and even tending the children. Eleftheria Baltatzi, a 73-year-old pensioner, is one of the many Athenians who saw images of sick children on television and turned up to help: “I made toasted cheese sandwiches. We also have people who are hungry and need help, but these people have a bigger need.”

In Greece, it is the Orthodox churches and monasteries who often spearhead relief initiatives. For years, parishes in the larger cities and towns pro-

vided hot meals for low-income pensioners. Their lines grew longer as EU austerity measures drastically cut Greek salaries and threw tens of thousands out of work. Now with the additional flood of desperate refugees, many volunteer-staffed church kitchens and aid centers operate around the clock to provide food, clothing and comfort.

After months of politically-motivated evasion by self-interested governments and news services (particularly from the US, which maintained an eerie indifference to the plight of millions of Syrians), a September 2015 photo of a drowned three-year-old Syrian refugee went viral and finally catalyzed the arrival of support to bolster the island's efforts. This was the first reprieve for Lesbos volunteers after years of laboring alone to alleviate the staggering misery. An array of island government and volunteers and large and small foreign NGOs, together with the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, set up a complicated network of reception, transportation, medical, and registration services, along with search and rescue.

But hundreds of thousands of refugees know that it was the local Greeks of Lesbos and neighboring islands who initially saved them. At the height of the crisis, Marian Steinstate, an Austrian political analyst, commented, "It's ironic that in the poorest nation in the European Union, and the one whose citizens have been hit hardest by EU-imposed austerity, are the people showing true compassion and shining a bright light to the rest of us."

Perhaps Sappho, the island's 7th-century B.C. poet, described it best in lines about her own era's wartime refugees:

*Some men say an army of horse
and some men say an army on foot
and some men say an army of ships is the most beautiful thing
on the black earth.
But I say,
it is what you love. ✦*