EAST-WEST CHURCH REPORT

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Special Issue: Christians and the War in Ukraine

Editor's note: This issue of the East-West Church Report *features a range of Christians in Ukraine relaying their experiences of—and responses to—the ongoing armed conflict in the country's eastern Donbass region.*

As of February 2019, this conflict had claimed approximately 13,000 lives—a quarter of them civilians—and injured a further 30,000 people, according to the United Nations. Following particularly heavy fighting during 2014-15, the struggle between Ukrainian government forces and Russia-backed separatists remains locked in an uneasy stalemate. A 300-mile contact line now divides two separatist-controlled entities—the unrecognized Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics—from the rest of Ukraine. Mandated to log ceasefire violations, the OSCE [Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe] Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine has observed hundreds of thousands of such instances, committed by both sides.

Outsider analysis of—and factional commentary on—this conflict are ubiquitous, especially on social media. Seeking to convey the insights of local Christians as fully and authentically as possible, the Report *here presents their voices in largely unmediated format.*

Turning Ammunition Boxes into Icons:
An Interview with Oleksandr Klymenko

Icon of the Savior by Oleksandr Klymenko (Source: O. Klymenko)

While in Kyiv in late 2018 the editor of the East-West Church Report *encountered Oleksandr Klymenko, a local icon-painter. Currently unaffiliated with a particular Orthodox jurisdiction in Ukraine, during the 2014 Maidan protests Klymenko was among a small group of Moscow Patriarchate Orthodox who tried to prevent violent clashes by standing between demonstrators and police. (For some of his comments on Orthodox identity in Ukraine, see the* East-West Church Report, *vol. 27, no. 1, 4-6.)*

Following Maidan, Klymenko became unexpectedly and intimately involved with the Donbass conflict through a project to turn its spent ammunition boxes into icons. Here, he tells the Report about this work, recently exhibited in North American as well as European cities outside Ukraine. The original conversation took place in Russian.

How did your project come about?

In 2014 a group of local artists organized an exhibition at one of Kyiv's museums to aid the Kyiv Central Military Hospital. Some of the exhibits were icons, and several of them were sold. The person who purchased the icons decided to give one of them to a military unit so that the soldiers, alongside having to defend their country, might think about God. That is more important than anything else, after all. It was not my icon, but—being one of the exhibitors—I went along to where this military unit was

(continued on page 2)

Ammunition Boxes into Icons *(continued from page 1)*

based. There I was struck by a huge mountain of boxes left over from ammunition for Kalashnikov assault rifles: Everyone knows that terrible symbol of murder, responsible for killing all over the world in the 20th and early 21st centuries. I noticed that the wooden boards from which the boxes were made were very similar to the wooden boards used to paint icons. I picked up one of these boards and asked the soldiers, "What do you do with these?" They told me, "We use them as stools and chairs, or else we burn them." So I took one board and painted my first icon on it—a Byzantine icon of the Mother of God. I thought that a Byzantine icon would sit very well on this dark, shabby board.

From this, the idea for the project arose. I suggested it to two artists: my wife, Sofia Atlantova, and Natalia Volobueva, who is no longer involved due to time pressures. At that stage it was just an art project, in which the language of the ancient icon—which has existed in Ukraine for more than a thousand years and so is readily understood by Ukrainians—could speak about modern warfare. The key idea arose at once: the transformation of death, of which weaponry is a symbol, into life, of which the icon is a symbol in Ukrainian culture. Icons only became possible after the Resurrection of Christ—the embodiment of victory over death. Transforming symbols of death into life also belongs to the Christian tradition, as Christ turned the cross—a symbol of death, of *ganebnist'* [Ukrainian: disgrace]—into the symbol of Resurrection. I understand this as a pacifist project. It shows that life conquers death, that good conquers evil; an icon can testify to this.

We prepared for several months—this was at the time of heavy fighting in the town of Debaltseve [January-February 2015]—before opening an exhibition at St. Sophia's Cathedral in Kyiv later that winter. [Founded in the 11th century,] St. Sophia's is one of the oldest churches in Ukraine, and so we tried to show where the tradition of icon-painting originated and where it had come—a kind of dialogue.

How do the icons reference the war?

It was very important to me in the context of this project that these icons have come from the front. These boards were all in battle; they were all at the front. They are witnesses to this terrible war, where boxes of shells and all kinds of armaments are being used. When you go there, you hear artillery fire for days—Boom! Boom! Boom! It is scary. I have tried to convey the subject of frontline combat to people elsewhere in Ukraine and other parts of the world, so that they would see that this war is still going on. Every few days someone is killed, whether combatant or civilian. In this way, I hope to bring people out of the virtual experience of war. The internet is useful, but we are starting to perceive war in virtual space, as a war game. But when you hold a wooden board from an ammunition box, you understand this war completely differently; it still smells of war. You understand that all these armaments have gone towards someone else's death.

Another thing that is important to me is the attempt to make the soldiers who fought on the front lines—the fact that they brought these boards to me—participants in the project. As you can see, in Kyiv we do not live as during wartime. Even in Mariupol [a southeastern city close to the front] there are cafés, discos, and wedding parties. But if you travel just a few miles, there is a war going on, with dirt, soldiers, and death. And the soldiers feel forgotten: "We must be cannon fodder, and we must die." They were really enthusiastic about being a part of this, about bringing back these ammunition boxes even while under fire. So we artists are not the only participants in this project.

How does the project assist casualties of the war?

People began to buy these works, and I decided that it would be better to give the money I earned from their sale to charity.

At the start of the project, I knew of people organizing the Pirogov First Volunteer Mobile Hospital. We became close in very interesting circumstances. Not long after my visit to the military base where I first saw these wooden boards, a monk from St. Jonah's Monastery in Kyiv phoned me. He said, "Oleksandr, I heard you are collecting money for the hospital, and I have money here." So I went to see him, thinking maybe he would give me 1,000 or 2,000 hryvnias [under $100]. But there turned out to be a huge bag of money, about 100,000 hryvnias [nearly $4,000]. This monk said, "I left my cell this morning and was on my way to services. As I approached the church I was stopped by a stranger who did not tell me who he was. He gave me this packet of money saying, 'Please give it to whomever needs it, people who have suffered from this war in the east.'" [For

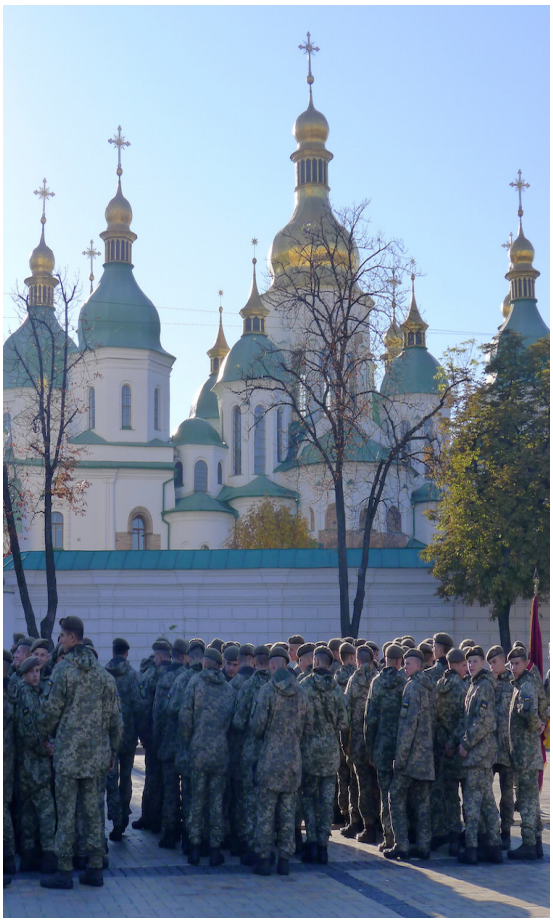
an interview with the abbot of St. Jonah's Orthodox Monastery, see the *East-West Church Report*, vol. 26, no. 4, 7-9.]

A few days earlier I had read on the Facebook feed of someone I know—our paths had crossed a couple of times—that the Pirogov Volunteer Hospital needed help to buy a mobile operating theater to take to the front. So I gave this money to one of the hospital organizers, Gennadiy Druzenko. It was a Friday, and it turned out that they had to pick up a mobile operating machine that Saturday. If they did not have the money, the contract for it would be annulled, and they would not be able to travel, because it was to be their only machine. They told me that they just stood up and prayed for God's help, because they had nothing. They had contacted everyone they could and received some money, but they still needed about 70,000 hryvnias [nearly $3,000]. It was at that point that I contacted them. I just wrote on Facebook, "Gennadiy, I have money." Thanks to that money, they were able to buy the machine, fill up with fuel, and go to the front.

Oleksandr Klymenko (**G. FAGAN**)

In the years since, this mobile hospital has continued to operate and is now the largest volunteer medical project in the zone of military activity. To begin with, it was a project to treat soldiers, but now it mostly helps the local population because the medical system there has been devastated. The mobile hospital has tens of thousands of patients along the line of division, from Luhansk in the north to Mariupol in the south. Around 5,000 doctors have worked for it. I understand that without our project the hospital would not exist, as we are their main sponsor. ♦

"In the trenches, there are no atheists": An Interview with Fr. Ihor Maiak



Ukrainian troops parade outside St. Sophia's Cathedral, Kyiv (**G. FAGAN**)

Fr. Ihor Maiak hails from Kharkiv and is an Orthodox chaplain at the Northern District Military Medical Center, a military hospital in that city. As the Center is off limits to non-Ukrainian citizens, his October 2018 meeting with the editor of the East-West Church Report *took place in its reception area. At that time the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Kyiv Patriarchate) into which Fr. Ihor was ordained—an entity never recognized by the wider Orthodox world—had not yet been subsumed into the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, recognized by the Patriarch of Constantinople in January 2019. (For more on those developments, see the* East-West Church Report, *vol. 26, no. 4, 1-9, and vol. 27, no. 1, 1-9.)*

The Northern District Military Medical Center cares for approximately 1,000 patients. Fr. Ihor first began visiting twice a week in 2016 and was formally appointed chaplain the following year. His interview with the East-West Church Report *was punctuated by warm exchanges of Ukrainian greetings with frequent passers-by, suggesting that his presence at the hospital was much valued. The original conversation took place in Russian.*

What led you to become a priest of the Kyiv Patriarchate?

As a person of faith, I just followed God. God brought me into the Kyiv Patriarchate. There are many priests here who transferred from the Moscow Patriarchate to the Kyiv Patriarchate—my friends who serve alongside me. But that did not happen to me. I came into the Kyiv

(continued on page 4)

Fr. Maiak Interview *(continued from page 3)*

Patriarchate when I was already an adult, a fully formed person. From the beginning, I had no prejudices against the Moscow Patriarchate, and I still have none. It is of no great significance where a priest serves. What is significant is if he is honest before God or not. It is significant if he has love, or if he has none.

The Moscow Patriarchate is not necessarily a stigma. It is not better or worse. It is just that the Moscow Patriarchate serves Moscow, while the Kyiv Patriarchate serves Ukraine. But both Russia and Ukraine need to serve God. No, the questions I have are in another sphere. The thing is, there is a great deal of lying, of untruth, unfortunately. There is a great deal of state pressure [from Moscow] upon the Russian Church. In most cases, they do not do what they want, and that is not right for the Church. That is not honesty before God. If they had been honest from the beginning and said that they were the Russian Church on the territory of Ukraine, it would be one thing. But there is a lot of hypocrisy, where one thing is declared, but another is done. They say, "We are for peace, we are the Ukrainian Church." But when people who died for Ukraine were commemorated in the Verkhovna Rada [national parliament], they did not stand to honor them. How can you not stand if you are the Ukrainian Church? God says that our deeds should not diverge from our words.

[On 8 May 2015 senior clerics of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate)—including its leader, Metropolitan Onufry (Berezovsky)—remained seated in the Verkhovna Rada as then-President Petro Poroshenko read a roll of honor of Heroes of Ukraine. Metropolitan Onufry later explained that they had refused to stand not out of disrespect, but as an act of protest against the war in Donbass.]

Is this hospital exclusively for soldiers?

In principle, yes, although civilians can also arrange for treatment here privately. Soldiers are treated free of charge, as this is a military hospital. They are mostly in active service—for veterans there is a separate hospital.

Are those admitted here generally contract forces or volunteers?

Almost all are contract forces now, not volunteers. There are also conscripts, but those on the front lines are mostly contract forces, so they account for most of the wounded brought here. There are also trainees, the officer corps, and logistics personnel. It's very varied, the whole army.

What is the soldiers' attitude to faith in your experience?

We have a saying: "In the trenches there are no atheists." These are people who have come face to face with death. In any event they start to think. "What next?" "What is death, anyway?" "What happens afterwards?" "What is this life for?" A person lived and lived and then ends up in war. If he has no faith, there is no place for him in war. For if a person lives and has only this life, what is the most precious thing? It is life itself, because there is nothing more than that. That means he must protect that life at all costs. It means not going to war; it means he should desert. Because if there is nothing more, why should he sacrifice the only thing he has? When a person ends up in war, he understands that life is very fragile and transient. It can be lost in a moment. If you don't have faith in God, if you don't have the knowledge that this is only something partial in the run-up to eternal life, then it is very difficult to fight—even to live, actually. Very many among the soldiers are therefore believers. Very many of these guys want to discover, to listen, and to pray—or at least to learn how to pray.

Fr. Ihor Maiak (G. FAGAN)

Plus, you understand, a hospital is not a place full of happy, healthy people. It is where people are mainly sick—moreover, here they are wounded. Many are amputees. A person who has had his arm or leg amputated is forced to think, "What next?" He was a young, healthy guy, and now he has had his leg removed—how is he to go on living? How will he deal with this? There are psychologists here, of course, but a psychologist works on a somewhat different plane. A psychologist only serves this body and this life. A priest leads a person further; he leads them by the hand to God.

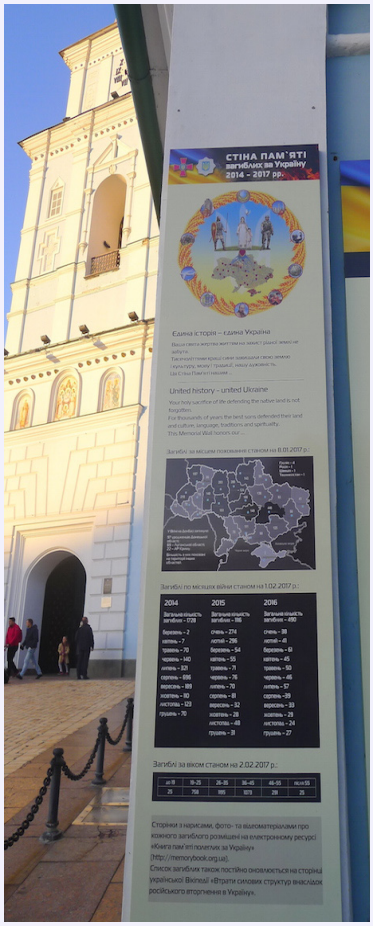
A soldier is also someone who fights and kills. A normal person does not want to kill. For him, that is wrong. Generally speaking, it is unnatural. But when that is what is happening, a soldier wants to understand: "I have killed. What do I do with this next? How do I live with this? Did I do the right thing?" There are so many questions. These are just the main points.

The emergency room here gets filled with guys who urgently need to be operated upon. Helicopters fly the wounded to an aviation center, and then ambulances bring them here. I often start to talk to people when they have not even seen me yet. They are lying unconscious, and I am already praying. When God gives them strength, we start to speak, but spiritual care starts before they are even aware of it, when they are brought here lying unconscious. That's how it is.

How has the Donbass conflict affected these soldiers' attitude towards Russia, especially the younger ones who have no memory of being part of one state in the Soviet Union?

Well, there is nothing new in this world. You recall Cain and Abel. Who were they? Brothers. Cain did what? Killed his brother. Why? Because he was jealous. But they were brothers, so their relationship was probably brotherly before that. And so there are two peoples, Ukrainian and Russian. The majority of the Ukrainian people still speak Russian. What might their relationship be like? Fine. Brotherly. But when a brother comes and stabs you in the back instead of holding out his hand to assist you, how will you regard him, even if you loved him before that? At a minimum, you will re-examine your relationship. The same thing is happening now. People go to the front and see their "brothers" with weaponry pointing towards them and killing them. Ukrainians did not come onto Russian land and kill; Russians came onto Ukrainian land and are killing people they call brothers. It should not be that way, but that is how it is. Relations are therefore changing, and people who end up on the front line naturally cannot preserve their formerly positive attitude, if it existed. At a minimum, their attitude is one of wariness. At a maximum, unfortunately, it is the opposite of love. ♦

"Always Protecting": a promotional poster for the Armed Forces of Ukraine in downtown Kharkiv (G. FAGAN)



A 250-foot stretch of the perimeter of St. Michael's Monastery in central Kyiv forms a Memory Wall displaying the names and photographs of 3,367 Ukrainian combatants killed in the Donbass conflict during 2014-17. The highest share of these losses is reported as coming from the central regions of Dnipro (448) and Kyiv (332). Almost a quarter of those killed were aged 25 or younger (783).

Founded in the 12th century, the original monastery complex was demolished by the Soviet authorities in the 1930s. In the late 1990s it was reconstructed and transferred to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Kyiv Patriarchate), which split from the Moscow Patriarchate following the break-up of the Soviet Union.

During the 2013-14 demonstrations centered upon nearby Maidan Square, the monastery provided refuge to those fleeing police batons. With the incorporation of the Kyiv Patriarchate into the Orthodox Church of Ukraine in 2018-19, it became the headquarters of the latter body.

"There is no army in the world that can deal with this, except for the Church of Jesus Christ":

An Interview with Pastor Petr Dudnik

Petr Dudnik leads Good News Church in Sloviansk [Russian: Slaviansk], a city with more than 100,000 residents in Ukraine's eastern Donetsk Region. Formed as a youth group in 1980, Good News is now one of approximately 100 Pentecostal congregations in mostly central and eastern regions of Ukraine that are affiliated with the World Assemblies of God Fellowship.

Pastor Petr was raised by devout Baptist parents in the town of Oleksandria [Russian: Aleksandriia] in the central Kirovohrad Region. Now aged 50, he is among the last generation of Protestants who were barred from higher education in the Soviet Union. Following military service, he was touched by the sparks of spiritual awakening apparent in 1989 and made a personal dedication of his life to God. He has lived in Sloviansk since 1991.

Sloviansk was held by pro-Russian separatists for three months during 2014. While it has since remained under Ukrainian government control, the front line is only around 50 miles away. The editor of the East-West Church Report *met Pastor Petr at Good News Church in the city in mid-October 2018. The interview took place in Russian.*

Pastor Petr Dudnik (G. FAGAN)

What is your experience of the Donbass conflict?

On 12 April 2014 war came to our city. Sloviansk was the first city to be seized by pro-Russian separatists and Russian military personnel. Today the war has gone on for nearly five years, but back then it was a shock to everyone. We were forced out of our church building; 100 fighters lived here, where you are sitting. There is a film on YouTube shot by the separatists, showing them firing tanks from the church's territory in the direction of the Ukrainian army. The narrator of the film says, "Look how Russians fight!"[1]

These are the people who killed four of my brethren. These are the people who led members of my own church out to be shot. Last week we buried one of our people, a musician in the church named Nikolai Simakov. He worked as a security guard at the conscription office. When they decided to shoot him, the gun kept misfiring. They said, "God is preserving you," and let him go. He died due to all the stresses of these past four years. He was around 60 years old. In total, four members of our church were held captive, including our bishop, Aleksei Demidovich. They tried to shoot another of them, and the gun also misfired.

Who were the four who were killed?

They were from a neighboring Pentecostal church, the Transfiguration of the Lord. Two deacons—Volodya [Volodymyr] Velychko, who was married with eight children, and Viktor Bradarsky, who was married with three children—and two of the pastor's sons, Ruvim and Albert Pavenko.

Why were they targeted?

There is a whole host of reasons. The first and main one is that the war which is going on now in Ukraine, in my view, is an absolutely religious war. Radical Orthodoxy is among the rebellious demons—along with Communism and the spirit of hatred—shaping the ideology and strategy of the people who seized our city. For example, their Constitution—quite short—said that we were to have only one Church, Orthodoxy of the Moscow Patriarchate. All others were excluded.[2] They defined us this way: "You are the American faith. Americans are our enemies. Enemies must be destroyed." All very simple. So we should be killed, although we did not do anything bad. We did not show ourselves when they came, but we were defined as enemies by default. The people who killed those four wore patches saying "Russian Orthodox Army." I myself saw these people. I was here in the city, and some of the people running around with assault rifles were wearing those patches.[3]

Back when the bombing began here, gas stations closed, and there was no fuel in town. The stores began to close because there were no deliveries, and the bakery stopped working. Earlier that year God had warned us prophetically

Good News Pentecostal Church, Sloviansk (G. FAGAN)

of a difficult time coming. In my first sermon of 2014, I gave some practical advice about keeping a store of food because it would be needed. I did not want to sow panic. I did not know there would be war, but I received a revelation in the Spirit about the coming turmoil. When the war came, I managed to buy 1,000 loaves of bread—we were always oriented to serve people, and we had an idea of how to help the city. Downstairs in the church foyer around 60 people began preparing this bread. They cut and dried it, and made simple soup and tea. We were sitting up here in the office discussing how and in what neighborhoods we would distribute this food. From where I was sitting I had a good view out of the window, and I suddenly saw two cars approach and stop. Masked men in military uniform jumped out, and snipers took up position. They seized this building and started searching for inflammatory material. Everyone—including children and teenagers—was made to lie face down on the floor. Several of our pastors were hit with rifle butts.

I had no idea what they were looking for because we had no connection with the military. Finally, they left us alone, and we showed them out. Then they seized the church a second time, and a third. Then they said, "You can't gather here," and the arrests started. Our bishop, Aleksei Demidovich, was arrested and put in Girkin's cellar.[4] I do not know what his fate would have been if God had not intervened. He was freed by a miracle.

God warned me that I should leave Sloviansk. The following day, as I was driving out of town, they came to arrest me. They said, "Where is the pastor? We have an order to arrest him." When our caretaker replied that the pastor had left town, one of them said, "If he returns, he will never leave town again." The other Pentecostal church, Transfiguration of the Lord, continued to hold services as if nothing was going on in the city. Their philosophy was, "This is politics. We are not politicians, we are independent." Their pastor is a businessman with a staff of some 700, and he taught people how to work below the bullets. But on 8 June 2014—it was Pentecost [most Protestants in former Soviet states celebrate Easter on the same Sunday as Orthodox]—masked militants approached their building at the end of the service and waited until people started to leave. They said, "You, you, and you." They knew exactly who to seize, and they put these four into their cars and left.

Was it the people in that church who saw those militants were wearing "Russian Orthodox Army" patches?

It was a person from our church, my deacon. I had left town before that. Our church had been seized, and so when Sunday came—the Pentecost holiday—he went to the service there. He saw people with those patches seize these four and drive them away. Everyone thought they had just been taken captive, to a cellar, but in fact they were taken to a neighborhood of Sloviansk called Artema. There is a fire station there, and the militants beat them up—tortured them—in this fire station. Six months later one of those who took part telephoned the brother of one of those who was killed aiming to extort money out of him. He said, "If you give me money, I will tell you who these people were who killed your brother, and where they are now." He was thinking that the brother would want revenge, and he wanted to make money. But the brother said, "We won't take revenge. We are interested in only one question: Why did you do this?" The answer, word for word, was: "We wanted to demoralize the believers in the city." I heard all this directly from Oleksandr Pavenko, the pastor of that church.

So that is one reason why they were killed. But there were others. As I said, they were engaged in business. Someone said they were unloading metal from a truck, someone later said this was probably weaponry coming in—there were all these rumors. Plus, Girkin-Strelkov's senior bodyguard—who organized the whole thing and was later killed in a tank—went through an addiction rehabilitation program that was run by that church. He was quite a scandal-prone guy. He also worked for Oleksandr Pavenko and was fired, so there was a personal grudge there. That is why I say there was a whole complex of reasons. *(continued on page 8)*

Viktor Bradarsky and Volodymyr Velychko
(Source: http://ru.wikipedia.org)

Brothers Albert and Ruvim Pavenko
(Source: http://ru.wikipedia.org)

The one who telephoned also said, "Your lads were brave; when they were beaten, they sang hymns and prayed." And this is how the shootings happened: The four were released at night. Once they got into their car to drive away, they were escorted along a particular route, and in another part of town a mortar was fired at their car and it caught fire. Volodya Velychko was sitting in the front and was killed instantly. Ruvim and Albert tried to get out of the car, but were shot at close range. Viktor Bradarsky was killed by assault rifle fire as he tried to crawl away. This was evident when their bodies were found later on.[5]

What was the response of Good News Church to being in a city under siege?

We looked for ways to help the people of the city, because that is our theology—to respond to people's pain. We evacuated 16,000 people—4,000 from Sloviansk itself and 12,000 from other parts of Donetsk and Luhansk Regions. Every day we evacuated 150-200 people.

It was very dangerous and complicated. People were going hungry. When we visited homes, we found three people who had starved to death. It was a very difficult and frightening time. But our challenge was to save people physically and to help them spiritually and emotionally. At first people came to our church, and there we put them on buses and drove them out. Then, once the church building was seized, we understood that we could not invite people here. We identified two locations in the city—next to the central swimming pool and the Décor Service store—where we hung up notices advertising daily evacuations from those points at 9 am. We evacuated free of charge; church members who were still permitted to enter Sloviansk took people as far as the Ukrainian checkpoint. From there, we transferred people onto buses and took them further. If people had somewhere to go, we took them to the city of Izium, 30 miles away. The infrastructure in Izium was still working, and so people could travel onwards from there. The bedridden and disabled were taken to Kharkiv and transferred to volunteer caregivers. If people had no money or nowhere to go, we took them to Sviatohirsk [Russian: Sviatogorsk], 20 miles away. We had our own base there, a camp where we housed and fed people and generally took care of their needs.

How did the siege end?

The Ukrainian forces did not liberate Sloviansk. It was truly a miracle. Around 40 militants had entered the city on 12 April, but by 4 July there were around 2,000 of them. They had tanks, heavy artillery—it was a huge army, and they controlled the whole of Sloviansk. The city was surrounded by the Ukrainian army. There was shooting from the city at the Ukrainians, and the Ukrainian army shot into the city. Many homes were wrecked. Despite opposition from both the separatists and the Ukrainian military, we were going into the city every day, and we could see that everything was getting worse and worse. Along the roads there were concrete blocks and trenches every few hundred feet, and every street was covered in fallen trees. It was impossible to move about. There was no electricity, gas, or water. Tanks appeared on the streets. We understood that if the Ukrainian army started an attack on the city, it would not go smoothly. A portion of the Ukrainian forces would be killed here, and the Ukrainian authorities would say that the city should therefore simply be rained with shells. Sloviansk would be like the pictures of the city of Aleppo in Syria. That was our future.

Imagine the situation. The city was occupied. We were being oppressed as believers, even held in cellars. As we were evacuating people and entering the town every day, we could see what kind of heavy artillery was standing on the outskirts. We could see that the fate of the city was decided. It would be razed from the face of the earth. So in Sviatohirsk, where we had our camp, we gathered for prayer three times

While in Sloviansk in mid-October 2018, the editor of the East-West Church Report *spoke briefly to Irina Demidovich, daugher of Pentecostal Bishop Aleksei Demidovich. She is a member of Good News Church.*

Bishop Aleksei Demidovich
(Source: A. DEMIDOVICH)

What happened to your father on 16 May 2014?

He was seized and put in a cellar. He was invited as if just for a conversation, so he didn't even suspect anything. They put Scotch tape over his eyes, bound his wrists together behind his back, and sent him down into the cellar of the SBU building [the SBU Ukrainian secret services building was occupied by the pro-Russia separatists who took over Sloviansk]. He was there for seven hours. It seemed as if they were planning to interrogate him, alleging that he had links to Right Sector [a Ukrainian ultranationalist organization]. The separatists had this animal fear of Right Sector. But at that point no one knew what Right Sector was. No one here had ever seen them or knew what they did.

The fact that my father was released was simply a great miracle. Very many people prayed for that, for God to free him. A while after he was taken out of the city, they began to look for him again. They said that they would not let him go a second time, that if he were still in the city they would kill him.

Why do you think your father was targeted?

They were strongly opposed to Evangelical churches. I heard that the pastors of other Evangelical churches were all pursued; that there was some kind of list and they went to their homes. When they heard that my father was taken, as many as were able left town, because their lives were in danger. We had already left as soon as everything began; my husband said we must leave. My sisters and brother and their families left quickly later, when my father was seized.

It was a very scary situation. People who have not experienced it cannot imagine. To this day—four years have passed—my reaction to the sound of helicopters is excessive. I start shaking and try to figure out what situation I am in—is some danger coming? There were unusually many helicopters flying on the day they seized the city. And as soon as I see someone in uniform, I start scrutinizing—does this person pose a threat or not?

Before the conflict there were very many people in the city who supported Russia. But after these events, patriotic feelings towards Ukraine have become more intense. And there is now a very clear division between those who are pro-Russia and pro-Ukraine. Even now, after everything that happened, there are people living here who strongly support Russia; they have already forgotten how things were. Mind you, it could be said that our city got off lightly by comparison with cities like Ilovaisk, which was very heavily damaged. And after four years, people have more or less become used to a quiet life. ♦

a day. One of the conditions of staying in that camp was that everyone had to attend those prayers. It did not interest us whether or not you were active in our church. You might not pray—that is your right—but you had to be present.

Thirty years ago God gave us a prophecy about our city: Sloviansk is a town of refuge. We never fully understood the essence of this, but we understood that God had a particular affair with our city. If you know the story of Israel, there were six cities with the title "city of refuge" [Joshua 20]. And so we prayed: "God, you told us Sloviansk is a city of refuge. A city of refuge means that we should be receiving refugees. But we are fleeing. We are evacuating people. This is all wrong; it shouldn't be this way." We prayed and prayed, and nothing good happened. Everything just got worse and worse. Then a group of people started to pray at night. And on the night of 4 to 5 July 2014, God sent such fear into Girkin and his whole band that they left everything; stores of weapons, medicines, food. They just fled town. The Ukrainian army entered an abandoned city.

Our caretaker, who lives opposite the church, telephoned me at 5 am that night. I was in Sviatohirsk, because by that point I was not allowed to enter the city. He said, "Pastor, there is no one in the church anymore!" Up to that point, there had been around 100 militants living here. The first group of around 15 was Russian secret services—they were easy to distinguish by their behavior. The second group, which came later, was around 40 Don Cossacks, hardcore guys aged around 50 with their own weapons. The third group was local criminals. I asked the caretaker, "What are you doing right now?" He said, "I'm walking around the yard picking up weapons so that local people don't take them away." I said, "It's suspiciously quiet in the city. Why don't I come by the checkpoint and see what's going on?" He said he would call back, got on his bicycle and rode past multiple checkpoints. After 40 minutes, he called me and said, "There's no one here!" He'd seen discarded weapons, half-drunk cups of tea, jackets left behind.

(continued on page 10)

I called the headquarters of the Ukrainian army. At first they had not allowed us to go past their checkpoint into the city. They thought that we were bringing groceries to the separatists, when in fact we were bringing them to starving people. That meant I had had to forge a relationship with their lieutenant-colonel. We would submit the license numbers of our cars every morning, and those vehicles were permitted to enter. So at 6 am I called this lieutenant-colonel and said, "Vitaly, Sloviansk is free. There is no one there." He said, "That can't be true!" That is, there was no operation by the Ukrainians; it was something miraculous from God. I repeat, God drove such fear into the militia that they left everything.[6]

Afterwards, we brought out three truckloads of weaponry from our church basement: boxes of mines, RPGs, and ammunition. It was all discarded when they fled.[7] But that isn't the end of the story. Today, Sloviansk has around 55,000 registered displaced persons. That means our city has truly become a city of refuge.[8]

Defender of Ukraine Day celebrations, Kyiv, 14 October 2018 (G. FAGAN)

In Pastor Dudnik's office, a mini-museum displays military debris found in the vicinity of Good News Church. (G. FAGAN)

How did your church's response to the situation develop after the siege was lifted?

We have been engaged not only in the physical restoration of the city, but in its emotional and psychological restoration. There are different kinds of people in Sloviansk. For instance, if a husband went to fight with the separatists in Donetsk and his wife remained here—and there are many such cases—it is obvious that they support Russia. Pro-Ukrainian support also rose sharply. It was an explosive situation.

God revealed to us some very simple things that should be done. We understood that we needed to reduce the level of hatred. For that, the Word of God is needed. So we put the Word of God on more than 20 billboards in the city. These were texts encouraging people to soften their hatred, such as, "Forgive, and you will be forgiven" [Luke 6:37] and "Do good to one another" [1 Thess. 5:15].

We also brought assistance—such as a roofer or carpenter—into neighborhoods where homes had been wrecked. We would say to people, "We are ready to help you on one condition. We will give you extra construction materials to help your neighbor, an old lady. The condition is that you help to replace her roof first, and then you fix your own. If you agree, we will give you the materials." Of course people agreed, because they never expected to receive anything. But when they did, and went to help the old ladies, their hearts became softer. They began to relate to one another differently. In this way, through the Word of God and good deeds, the level of hatred began to go down.

What is your Frontline Mission and how did it come about?

After 2014 we started helping along the front line, for instance, in the area near Debaltseve, where there were huge battles in early 2015. In Svitlodarsk, [Russian: Svetlodarsk, five miles from Debaltseve and now on the Ukrainian side of the front line]

we found people living in cellars. We brought bread, water, matches, and a generator. However, we could see that while we were helping them, these people still had a dependent way of thinking.

To my mind, one of the reasons for this whole situation is the very low spirit of entrepreneurship here. The east of Ukraine is a highly industrialized region. In Kramatorsk, a city very close to us, there might be 10,000 people working in a single factory. In Mariupol, there is a factory with 100,000 workers. People's thinking is shaped by the fact that someone else directs them, decides for them, and so they do not take responsibility for themselves. If something does not turn out, this thinking pushes people to blame someone else, and also to invite others to solve the problem. And so we have "Putin, come and help!" Or, "the West, come and help!"

We had an idea—"What if our people lived in these towns?" We organized a missionary school, Frontline Mission. People from all over Ukraine study intensively here and also in the city of Pokrovsk [60 miles southwest of Sloviansk] for a month, followed by five months' practical work; the school requires a commitment of six months. This project has been operating for a year, and we already have had 15 such schools, so around 400 missionaries have studied with us. Besides the theological component, there is special training on how to give first aid to the wounded, how to evacuate yourself and others, how to be safe during bombing and near landmines. We currently have 32 missionary teams, usually of five people, working in every major settlement along the whole front line, from Luhansk to Mariupol. That is a very powerful force.

I believe that in the future the separatist-controlled areas will return to Ukraine. But very few people in Ukraine—civilian or military—appreciate what is happening there. In five years of war, a whole generation has grown up—a child of 12 is now 17. Very many people have taken up arms. Some have smelled blood—they have killed—and children have grown up with all this. People are saturated in hatred. There is no army in the world that can deal with this, except for the Church of Jesus Christ. This means that missionaries will have to go there who are able to answer blows with love and to reduce the level of hatred; who are capable of working with this population and bringing them to a state in which they are able to receive the Word of God. These are our challenges ahead. ♦

Notes:

[1] The tanks have "To Kiev" [Ukrainian: Kyiv] and "To Lvov" [Ukrainian: Lviv] painted on the side. The video also features men praying aloud from Orthodox prayer books outside the entrance to Good News Church. "NONA strel'ba iz tserkvi," *YouTube*, 7 July 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=foD-oNFpZyo.

[2] No longer online, the 2014 Constitution of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic declared Orthodoxy to be that territory's "primary and prevailing" faith—using the same terminology as the late Russian Empire—and endorsed opposition to "religious sects."

[3] A video made in support of the "Russian Orthodox Army" may be viewed at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HT9y3Tkk59U. The Army's allegiance to Orthodoxy appears superficial. See Geraldine Fagan, "Ukraine's Rebels Worship the Past, Not God," *Moscow Times*, 13 August 2014, https://themoscowtimes.com/articles/ukraines-rebels-worship-the-past-not-god-38317.

[4] Russian military veteran Igor Girkin (also known as Strelkov) led the rebel operation to seize Sloviansk. Girkin is also one of four men indicted by international prosecutors on 19 June 2019 for the downing of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 over eastern Ukraine on 17 July 2014. See Andrew E. Kramer, "Four to Face Murder Charges in Downing of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17," *New York Times*, 19 June 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/19/world/europe/mh17-ukraine-russia-suspects.html.

[5] According to the Ukrainian government, the four were executed on Girkin's orders and torched in their vehicle to obscure evidence. See [in Russian] "Stali izvestny detali ubiistva pastora i ego detei v Slavianske, *InVictory*, 20 July 2014, www.invictory.com/news/story-52179-Александр-Павенко.html.

In July 2014 *Vice News* reported from Sloviansk on the exhumation of civilian bodies—including the four Pentecostals—from a mass grave. At that stage, members of Transfiguration Church believed the four had been killed for their cars. The dispatch includes graphic footage: "Missing Civilian Bodies Found in Mass Graves: Russian Roulette (Dispatch 63)," *YouTube*, 31 July 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UBsEkF_GY0E.

[6] Contemporary on-the-ground coverage of the Ukrainian recapture of Sloviansk by *Vice News* also notes the absence of a battle. See "Ukraine Recaptures Sloviansk: Russian Roulette (Dispatch 54)," *YouTube*, 8 July 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sMBvMuuTOWU.

[7] Footage of this weaponry may be viewed (from 03.44) in a film made by Good News Church: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cdn82DBsayI.

[8] According to 2017 Ukrainian government statistics, more than 63,000 displaced persons have moved to Sloviansk district. [In Ukrainian] "U Slov'ians'ku prozhivae bil'she 30 tisiach peremishchenikh osib. Stala vidoma statistika po oblasti," *6262.com.ua*, 21 August 2017, https://www.6262.com.ua/news/1768323/u-slovansku-prozivae-bilse-30-tisac-peremisenih-osib-stala-vidoma-statistika-po-oblasti.

Sloviansk Municipal Administration building, October 2018. A Soviet-era statue of Lenin was removed from outside the building after the city returned from separatist to Ukrainian government control in 2014. (G. FAGAN)

"The stress is so great that they can be sick for nothing; they can even die for nothing":

An Interview with Archbishop Claudio Gugerotti

A native of Verona, Italy, Archbishop Claudio Gugerotti has been apostolic nuncio in Ukraine since 2015. Previously he was apostolic nuncio in Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan (2001-11), and then Belarus. His responsibility for Catholics in Ukraine—including those of the Eastern-rite Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church—encompasses those living in the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics. In late 2018 the editor of the East-West Church Report *met with Archbishop Claudio at the nunciature in Kyiv, where he recounted his experience of visiting the separatist-controlled territories.*

Archbishop Claudio Gugerotti, apostolic nuncio in Ukraine (G. FAGAN)

How frequently have you travelled to the areas of Ukraine under separatist control?

Five or six times. Every year I try to go during the Easter and Christmas periods to see people in the cities of Donetsk and Luhansk, and also Stakhanov [Ukrainian: Kadiivka], where we have a small community. We also have small groups of Catholics in other places, but the biggest communities are in the cities. I always visit both the Roman Catholic and the Greek Catholic communities. It has been easier for me to go as a bishop, because diplomats are not advised to go there by the Ukrainian government.

In Donetsk we have four Greek Catholic priests and one Roman Catholic priest, and in Luhansk one Greek Catholic priest and one Roman Catholic priest. I would say that is one third of the clergy who were present before the conflict. I must admire these priests, because in spite of the troubles they stay there.

Are those communities under pressure? The religion law of the self-proclaimed Luhansk People's Republic contains a re-registration deadline of 15 October 2018, and a 1 March 2019 deadline is stipulated by a similar law of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic.

All our communities are trying to re-register there, but it is difficult to imagine how to do that, because we do not have a partner with whom we can discuss re-registration. For obvious reasons, I do not have many meetings with the local authorities. I have the impression that if re-registration is denied, it could be followed by the closure of these churches, and even temporary imprisonment for some religious communities, particularly the Protestants and the Jehovah's Witnesses. It is difficult to understand what the authorities are going to do. One problem is that they are asking for signatures, and many people are afraid of possible retaliation. This collection of signatures is very uncomfortable for them.

Editor's note: The registration procedure for a local religious organization set out in the religion law of the separatist Donetsk People's Republic requires personal data for at least 10 founders. Similar legislation in the separatist Luhansk People's Republic requires personal data for at least 20 or 30 founders. The text of the law mentions both figures.

How are Catholics faring more generally in the separatist-controlled areas?

The Catholic Church has never been very widespread there. Of course, the Greek Catholics were more in number, but their general situation has changed radically; many, many Catholics have left the area. The Roman Catholics were already few; originally, they were Polish communities.

When I visited, the number of worshippers was greatly reduced due to the curfew. When we have a service at night it is difficult for people, because they have to stay five or six hours in the church afterwards waiting for the curfew to be lifted. Because of this, we celebrated the Easter vigil at four o'clock in the afternoon, for example. So I can say that in Donetsk, some 60 Roman Catholics were present in church, and in Luhansk some 40. Greek Catholics were even fewer. Most were elderly or children. Some also returned for the occasion; people do travel from Ukraine or Russia into the Donbass area.

Would the numbers attending worship services have been much higher before the conflict?

Oh yes, absolutely. It is very difficult to get transport—it is costly to travel, and the economic conditions are very

poor. It is particularly difficult for elderly women to leave their homes. And then there is another factor that is sometimes greatly underestimated: their health is very weak. The stress is so great that they can be sick for nothing; they can even die for nothing. They can die from diseases that, in another situation, could be absolutely cured. It is very difficult to find medicines apart from hospitals. Many people are hospitalized for bronchitis or the flu, just so they can get medicines. And in my conversations, which I often had individually to allow people to feel more at ease, people said that the main problem they have is obtaining tranquilizers. These are the main kind of medicines they look for. Four years of this bombing is absolutely terrible, and people are always afraid that something will happen during the night. So it is not only the children who are in a terrible situation of stress, but also the adults. It is difficult for them to sleep, and they just jump when there is the least noise. What they need are the medicines to keep calm. But it is very difficult for them to go beyond the front line to get medicines, because sometimes they have to wait 16 hours at a checkpoint. And if it is minus 20 Celsius [minus 4 Fahrenheit], it means they are more likely to die waiting in line than in their bed without medicines. These are the things that they told me.

And there are only a few checkpoints between the government- and separatist-controlled areas?

From Luhansk you either go by car through Donetsk, which is a long way, or you can cross the only bridge by foot. You have to walk, and then there is a bus on the other side. It takes a lot of time, and you never know exactly when they will close the checkpoint. The Red Cross has built a kind of shelter now, but before that there was no shelter, so you were in the open air for the whole night. Even if people go by car through Donetsk they sometimes have to wait for hours and hours.

Another problem is the landmines. The first time I went, there was no toilet at the line, and so my driver decided to go into the woods. But people came out shouting, "Don't even move a step! You'll die!" So the situation is still very dangerous.

How have people responded to your visits?

In Stakhanov they were not expecting my visit, and there was a lot of weeping. They said, "Nobody wants us. The Ukrainians don't, the Russians don't. We are of no use to anybody."

At the same time, they were consoled at the idea that the Pope had sent his representative to pray with them and to bless them, in spite of the fact that their number is not so huge. That touched me very much. In Donetsk, they gave me some very simple gifts for the Pope. When I brought them to the Pope, I took a picture. They put this picture behind the main altar of the church, and then I reproduced it with the Pope's signature and gave one copy to each of the Catholic families in the area. For us that is something very simple, but for them it is something even miraculous. They are deeply touched by these small signs.

Catholic Church in Donetsk (ANDREW BUTKO)

Is the Catholic Church providing aid to those affected by the conflict?

The "Pope for Ukraine" project [https://popeforukraine.com.ua] collected around 11 million Euros in all the parishes of Europe, and Pope Francis personally added five million, so quite a considerable sum was raised. We spent this money on both sides of the front line, providing people displaced by the fighting with food, medicine, and heating. That is another terrible problem, not just because there is no heating—no fuel and a great shortage of electricity—but because the bombing destroys all the windows. So even in very low temperatures, the best you can do is to replace the windows with wood; if you put in glass, it will be destroyed again the very next day. People have no light, they cannot open the windows, and so there is a very somber atmosphere.

Is this the case even in the cities of Donetsk and Luhansk?

I did not see that in the cities, because I never visited homes there—I was not allowed. But in the villages it was possible to see this on both sides of the front line; the situation is very similar. As a city, Donetsk seems to be more normal. Things work more or less, and you see people walking in the streets, however difficult it is. In Luhansk, many homes are closed up–people are afraid of losing them–and poverty seems more evident.

In Donetsk our church was slightly damaged—one corner was taken away by a bomb—but now it has been more or less repaired. The Greek Catholic cathedral has been seriously damaged—that is still visible—and many of the surrounding buildings are closed or housing displaced people, either because the authorities have put them there, or because the church provides them with shelter.

The situation is so upset and unstable. Even soldiers came to me and asked, "Father, do you know when it's going to finish?" The impression is that it is unending. It lasts and lasts and lasts. ♦

Discipleship on the Margins: Lessons from the Kosovo War

FR. LUKE VERONIS

We live in an impure world where it seems so much easier to focus on the negative, to point out the darkness and evil in others. In fact, our own impure minds and hearts lead us to question and doubt even that which is most pure and beautiful. That is why we see so many people tear down others, concentrating on what they see as negative and evil.

Yet, in the words of Metropolitan Anthony Bloom of blessed memory, "Unless we look at a person and see the beauty there is in this person, we can contribute nothing to him. One does not help a person by discerning what is wrong, what is ugly, what is distorted. Christ looked at everyone he met, at the prostitute or the thief, and saw the beauty hidden there. Perhaps it was distorted, perhaps damaged, but it was beauty none the less, and what he did was to call out this beauty."

How aptly these words apply to the development of discipleship on the margins. For if people truly on the margins are to become disciples of Christ, they must first experience love and respect from people within the Church.

Fr. Luke on Easter night in Albania (Source: L. VERONIS)

Let me share a story from the Kosovo War in 1999. As the United States was bombing Serbia, half a million refugees flooded into neighboring Albania, a country of only 3.5 million people. Ninety-five percent of these Albanian-speaking refugees were Muslim, and they were fleeing from what they perceived as a war with Serbian Orthodox. I was serving as a missionary for the Orthodox Church of Albania at that time, and we were placed in a unique position with the refugees as fellow Albanians, yet also as Orthodox Christians. Archbishop Anastasios of Albania quickly mobilized our church to respond to the tragic needs of these refugees. We set up a refugee camp, and the archbishop asked all the faithful to volunteer and help out wherever they could, particularly seminarians and university students.

We began to plan how we would go about visiting the refugee camps. As Archbishop Anastasios talked with our seminarians, one student asked him: "When we go into the camps, should we wear our crosses so that all can see them?" "No," our archbishop responded. "Keep your crosses under your shirts. Just live the cross by serving and sacrificing for others."

So we did. We went into the camps and talked with the refugees every day, listened to their stories of pain and suffering, offered them aid, and did whatever we could to make their lives more bearable. We went day after day simply offering a loving presence, and the refugees began responding to our students: "Who are you? Why are you coming here every day?" Friendships slowly developed.

Our students were initially uncertain and even afraid to be among these mostly Muslim refugees, but they connected with them through their love and concern. Every day they came back and shared their stories of how they felt a bond with these people and no longer looked upon them as "refugees" or as "Muslims," but more as fellow human beings and fellow children of God.

Ramazan

My students introduced me to one man named Ramazan. I stopped in his tent numerous times to share in conversation over traditional Turkish coffee. Our discussions often revolved around spiritual themes, as Ramazan continually tried to make sense of how this whole tragedy had taken place. He had had many Serbian friends before the war. In fact, it was his Serbian friends who had helped him and his family to escape Kosovo alive. Yet he had also seen his business looted and burned, and he did not know the status of his house. Thankfully, all his family members were still alive, as far as he knew. He stayed in our Orthodox refugee camp for two months. Following the end of the war, he returned home.

A week after Ramazan's return, however, I received a phone call from him. He was back in the Albanian capital, Tirana, trying to buy needed supplies that were difficult to find in Kosovo. He asked to meet with me and came over to my office with a neighbor from Gjakova, a town in southwestern Kosovo. This time I offered them coffee, and Ramazan told me about the situation back home. His house had been thoroughly looted, but the structure was still standing and in good shape. In general, his family was well, except for two nephews whose whereabouts were unknown. Ramazan was hoping that they were in prison in Serbia, but this remained unconfirmed.

His neighbor, however, shared a more gruesome tale. His sister and brother-in-law had been burned alive in their home. He had seen the skeletons himself. As the three of us talked, Ramazan said that he still believed Kosovo could be a multi-ethnic country with Albanians and Serbians living together. His friend vehemently disagreed. He bluntly said that he could never live with a Serb as a neighbor. An awkward moment followed, but—since I had a relationship with Ramazan—I ventured to express my hope for the future. From a human perspective, I surely understood his friend's anger and hatred. I myself cringed and deeply felt his sorrow when he described the skeletal bones of his sister. Yet I gently suggested that such human anger and desire for revenge would only perpetuate other acts of violence in the future. What Kosovo and the entire Balkan region needed more than ever was not human anger and revenge, but Divine mercy, forgiveness, and love. Ramazan's friend looked at me not fully understanding, but he listened as I said that only through the grace and power of God could hatred be transformed into mercy and even love for ones' enemies.

Unexpectedly, Ramazan nodded in agreement. "It will be extremely difficult, seemingly impossible," he reflected, "yet I still have hope." As the pair left my office, Ramazan then handed me a large oil painting. He apologized that it was not the most beautiful painting, but it was all he could find in Gjakova. He was offering it to me as a small token of gratitude for all his new friends in the Orthodox Church who had done so much for him and all the refugees. He said that through such concrete and loving actions of the Church and her people, he still had hope in humanity despite the atrocities he had witnessed. Ramazan ended by saying, "I have seen what true Christianity is all about."

"We cannot have enemies"

Considering the topic "discipleship on the margins" led me to remember this story and to reflect upon it from two perspectives. Trying to mentor our students and to teach them what our faith truly means through reaching out to the stranger, to the refugee, to the Muslim, is one perspective on discipleship. At the same time, is Ramazan's witnessing of Christ-centered love at a critical time in his life not also an awakening point for discipleship?

Archbishop Anastasios would say again and again: "A Christian should never have enemies. Never call someone a 'bad Communist,' 'a bad atheist,' or a 'bad so-and-so.' Every person has the image of God in them, and they are His children! Every day we pray 'for those who hate us and those who love us.' Thus, we cannot have enemies. The message is clear. Our salvation depends upon respect for the other, respect for otherness. This is the deep meaning of the parable of the Good Samaritan. We see not that someone is my neighbor, but how someone becomes my neighbor. It is a process."

This lesson of faith, a process of transforming strangers into neighbors and friends, became a reality as our students visited and befriended Muslim refugees every day. We modeled and practiced our faith as we taught them to be disciples on the margins. Simultaneously, though, we offered a witness and became friends with the Muslim refugee strangers who no longer simply had labels—"a Muslim" or "a refugee"—but who had names with stories, who went from being strangers to friends.

Alba and Drita

A further example of this experience occurred after the war ended. A couple, Sevdi and Vjollca, discovered their home in Kosovo had been destroyed. They therefore chose to stay in Albania, hoping to find a way to emigrate to Canada. As they waited day after day in the sweltering summer heat of Tirana, I suggested that maybe we could take their teenage girls to our summer camp for a short break. I explained to Sevdi and Vjollca that—although this camp was a church camp with quite a bit of worship, Bible study, and religious activity—their girls would experience a lot of fun and fellowship through other activities. They could participate in whatever they felt comfortable with.

Since we had built a bond of trust with their parents, fifteen-year-old Alba and fourteen-year-old Drita

(continued on page 16)

Archbishop Anastasios visiting the Good Shepherd Camp attended by Alba and Drita (Source: L. VERONIS)

Kosovo War Lessons *(continued from page 15)*

were permitted to go. Before they arrived at the camp, my wife Faith and I instructed our camp staff how to treat these Muslim refugee girls—with loving Christian hospitality, but also with the freedom to participate in whatever they wished. Our Kosovar visitors planned to stay for only two or three nights.

On the first day of their visit a somewhat serious incident occurred. After a day of fun activities, the time came for our evening Vespers. All the girls at the camp came to church, including the girls from Kosovo. When Alba saw everyone making the sign of the cross, she immediately left the church. One of the counselors walked out with her and asked her if she was okay. She simply responded, "Where I come from, the cross is associated with violence and death. I can't stay anywhere where people are making the sign of the cross!"

Following the service, I talked with Alba and offered to take her and her sister back to Tirana immediately. Alternatively, she could stay, and I reiterated that she was free to participate in whatever she felt comfortable with. Alba chose to stay, but emphasized that she would not go inside the church again.

New understanding

Our camp staff and the other girls responded with incredible warmth and love. After three days, Alba and Drita asked if they could stay until the end of the camp. Sevdi and Vjollca agreed. By the end of the camp, not only were both Kosovar girls attending every activity—including church services, they were even reading psalms in church! On the final night of the camp, Alba stood up in front of all the campers and said, "I have never experienced such love in my life as I did at this camp. I will never forget this experience! It has given me an entirely new understanding of Christianity."

Before I took Alba and Drita back to their parents, they asked our camp leader for the same packet which all the other campers received. This packet included a Bible, stories of the saints, icons, and other religious material. Both girls even put crosses around their necks. When I saw them wearing crosses and carrying these packets of materials, I requested that they be very careful when they returned home. I told them not to wear the crosses, but to show all the things they had received to their parents, and to ask their permission before keeping any of the materials. I did not want Sevdi and Vjollca to think that we had brainwashed their children. Finally, though, I explained to them: "You have experienced a taste of God's Kingdom at this camp. Cherish this memory in your hearts. Seek out God, try to learn more about His teachings, and cultivate His Spirit within your hearts."

In these two stories, I cannot say whether these people on the margins became faithful disciples of Jesus Christ, but I can say that they were treated with love, respect, and dignity, and thus experienced a taste of what it is like to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. Perhaps seeds of faith were planted within these people. Perhaps one day, as they reflect upon their journey through life, they will remember how they felt God's presence through the authentic witness of Christianity. ♦

Fr. Luke Veronis *has served as an Orthodox missionary in Albania, parts of Africa, and Mexico. He is currently parish priest of SS Constantine and Helen Greek Orthodox Church in Webster, MA, and is the director of the Missions Institute of Orthodox Christianity at Hellenic College Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology in nearby Boston.*

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