

An American in Albania

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In the spring of 2009, freshly graduated from college, I found myself on a combined pilgrimage and backpacking trip in Albania. I always had an intense intellectual curiosity about modern Albania and its special place in European history, its confluence of competing cultures and religions, its unique language, its ancient Christian history, the bizarre stories relayed from its oppressive twentieth-century regime, and most importantly, the impact of Albanian-American Orthodox clergy and leaders on my own spiritual formation as a young adult. This is the place and people that simultaneously birthed Mother Teresa, the Catholic saint, Metropolitan Theophan Noli, the Orthodox missionary priest, bishop, and (for a brief time) prime minister of Albania,

and Enver Hoxha, the most brutal communist dictator in Europe.

A cocky cradle child of the Orthodox Church in America, I thought I knew a great deal about many things. Yet what I thought would be an opportunity to educate the Albanian Church turned into a focused and compelling lesson about the nature of the Church in the modern age.

I kept a journal for my short stay in Albania, recording the brief impressions of an idealistic, naïve, yet open-minded twenty-one-year-old American. In what follows, I am sharing some excerpts, with little filter, editing, or self-reflection, in hopes that others might share my experience of finding

The Church of Saint Procopius in Tirana, previously used by the communist government as a restaurant. Photo by author.



in Albania neither nostalgia for the “old world” nor an intellectual or ethnographic curiosity, but the true work of the Church as it should be, amidst a challenging, complex, and beautiful place and people. This is an invitation to walk with me through my memories and impressions.

Albania has had a Christian presence since Saint Paul’s original apostolic mission. Subsequent occupations and colonial ambitions by the Ottomans, Croats, Italians, and Greeks at different points in its history have left it a blended nation of Muslim, Roman Catholic, and Orthodox populations. Following World War I, Albania briefly emerged as a nation-state, only to be conquered by the Nazis and then liberated by the Soviets. The fall of the Iron Curtain found Albania a satellite of Soviet Russia and communist China, but unique in its authoritarian cruelty. All forms of worship were completely suppressed, with the Albanian government boasting that it had outdone China and the Soviet Union in this respect. After the fall of communism, the Orthodox Church was faced with a unique opportunity,

a tabula rasa of sorts, where few had heard the Gospel.

Archbishop Anastasios, an experienced priest, missionary, and academic, was tasked with rebuilding the Church in a land with a cultural memory of Christianity, scattered underground “cells” of active believers and clergy, and the collective trauma of decades of brutal communist repression. Certainly, many others know this man better than I, and can give a clearer account of him and his life and ministry. I was merely able to see the fruit of his leadership.

I arrived in Tirana, Albania’s capital, on the single daily flight from Athens that descended over the green mountains and landed at Mother Teresa Airport. The airport was small, clean, and modern—if you didn’t count the abandoned Soviet-era aircraft at the far end of the tarmac. My constant companion during my trip, Ioan, a well-educated polyglot linguist who works for the Albanian Orthodox Church, met me at the airport.



The Orthodox student center near the University in Tirana. Photo by author.



Our first destination was the Shen Vlash complex. A small van dropped us off within an hour at a large complex on a hill between the capital city, Tirana, and the ancient port city of Durrës. It houses a large church, a small monastery, the Resurrection of Christ Theological School, and an orphanage, all under the patronage of Saint Vlash (better known to us as either Vlassios or Blaise).

Upon arrival, we were greeted by Father Haralambi, a ferocious-looking Albanian man, easily over six feet tall, and with the countenance of a Rottweiler. As I attempted to kiss his hand in a gesture of respect, he withdrew it and gave me a high five instead. He led me to my room and let me settle in. The accommodations were quite comfortable, much nicer than at any of the four theological schools I have visited in America. The bells rang for Vespers and I joined the students and staff in the school's chapel. Father Haralambi led the service, with two choirs responding antiphonally. After Vespers, I was received by Bishop Nikolla, who was in charge of the complex. He was a small man who looked exactly like the icon of Shen Vlash on the wall of the chapel. He was obviously a new bishop, and visibly uncomfortable in the trappings of his role in a rather endearing way. He greeted me warmly in broken English. He had just returned from an intensive English language course sponsored by the World Council of Churches and was eager to practice. He also let me know that having an American visitor was not necessarily a reason to "turn on" the hot water, but something might have been lost in translation there.



Ioan, Bishop Nikolla, and I walked from his office down to the dining hall to dine with the students. I was obliged to sit at his right hand, not the most comfortable position, as the dining hall full of Albanian students had their eyes

fixed on me. The bishop rang a bell and we proceeded to eat hastily, much in the style of Mount Athos. As I finished my simple but delicious soup, Bishop Nikolla rang the bell again, we all prayed, and the meal was over. He stood up and offered words in Albanian introducing me to the students. It is a very odd sensation to know that someone is talking about you in a language you can't understand, and a sensation I would frequently have during my stay. The Bishop tried very hard, but ultimately in vain, to pronounce "Connecticut," my home.

After dinner, Ioan and I toured the grounds of Shen Vlash. In the twilight, rosemary, fig, and lilac bushes were illumined with so many fireflies that they appeared to be decorated with Christmas lights. The grounds were peaceful and beautiful. Our quiet talk was interrupted by the joyful sounds of the orphans from the "Home of Hope" playing volleyball. The kids were all exceedingly cute and friendly, and spoke much better English than most of the adults. As Ioan and I watched them play, some of the students joined the game, still in their long black cassocks, notecards from class spilling out of their pockets. After the kids were called back to the orphanage, I retired to my room to get some much-needed sleep.

Next morning I awoke to the sound of overly loud bells at about 6:45 AM. I dragged myself out of bed, changed clothes, and stumbled through the halls of the theological school, trying to find the chapel. When I arrived, Matins had already begun. The school has about thirty male students and about fifteen female ones. The general practice here is that if you graduate from a theological school, the Church will do everything in its power to em-

ploy you. Matins having concluded with a powerful singing of "Christ is Risen" in Greek, Albanian, and English, we made our way down to the dining hall for a simple breakfast.

At breakfast, I was seated next to a female Orthodox missionary from Cleveland, Ohio, who was teaching English at the seminary. Since there are so few theological books in Albanian, the students are compelled to learn English and Greek in their first year in order to have access to modern theological publications. Her son and daughter and their families also served as missionaries here.

After breakfast, Ioan and I found a van to take us back to Tirana. We began the morning with a leisurely stroll through downtown Tirana to the construction site of the new Orthodox cathedral. The Albanian Church had embarked upon the construction of the cathedral only after building many clinics and schools. It was a struggle to obtain land, as the site of the original cathedral is now occupied by a hotel, and the government was unwilling to turn it over to the Church.

After viewing the construction site, we walked to Tirana's central park. It was quiet, and felt miles away from the noisy streets of the city. Inside the park are the Church of Saint Procopius and a church-run elementary school. During the communist period, the church had been torn apart and made into a restaurant. After the collapse of communism, Orthodox university students had protested in front of the restaurant until it was returned to the Church. The school felt remarkably normal. I could have been in my elementary school back home. I met the kids and many of the teachers and staff. One of the teachers was an American missionary from Indiana.

Opposite page from top to bottom:

On the road from Tirana to Korçë. Photo by author.

Lake Ohrid from the Albanian Side. Photo by author.

Monastery in Boboshticë. Photo by author.



Cathedral of the Resurrection in Korçë.
Photo by author.

Leaving the school, we headed back through the hustle and bustle of Tirana to the student center of the Albanian Orthodox Church. The center is located in an old home in the middle of the student district of Tirana. It includes a library, computer lab, kitchen, and a garage turned into a chapel, with icons painted by the university students.

In the evening, students gathered for their weekly meeting. The similarities to the Orthodox Christian Fellowship, our student ministry in the US, were striking. Father Justini, a priest from Mt. Athos, led the group in a discussion about relations between the Orthodox and the Roman Catholics, who are also traditionally present in Albania and in the Balkans. After the meeting, Ioan and I made the long trek back to Shen Vlash, arriving just in time for late-night Matins to celebrate the feast of Saint John the Theologian.

Most of the seminary students had gone home for the weekend and we had a nice lunch with Bishop Nikolla and a couple of students. It was much more relaxed than previous meals in the dining hall. We all told jokes and the

Bishop refilled people's water glasses. After lunch, Bishop Nikolla, Ioan, and I went over to the "Home of Hope." As kids returned home from school, Bishop Nikolla greeted them all with warm hugs, asking how their day went. The kids were very excited and performed a dance they have been practicing for us. Many of the kids spoke flawless English, and one fourteen-year-old could have passed for an American. She wanted to be a doctor and her favorite subject was math.

In the late afternoon, Ioan and I headed back into Tirana again to attend a Byzantine music class the Church was sponsoring for the young people. The class was taught by Father Justini, who had single-handedly translated scores of Byzantine chants into Albanian. The class was small but the chanters were quite good.

After the music class, we headed to the adjacent youth center for their Friday night program. High school and college students from all over Tirana gathered with Father Justini to celebrate the *Paraklesis* service. The students' singing

filled the small house we had gathered in. After the service, we ate and socialized with the students.



Around 6:00 on Saturday morning, I woke up and prepared for a very busy day. I had been invited to accompany the young adult Byzantine choir on an excursion to the City of Korçe and surrounding villages. The singers were being rewarded by the Church for their hard work during Holy Week and Easter. A church van picked me up around 6:30 AM, and we were on our way. Father Justini led us all in morning prayers as the van climbed out of Tirana.

I have been on some interesting roads before, in Greece and back in the US, but nothing to compare with the drive out of Tirana to Korçe. Our van swayed back and forth as we careened up a bumpy Albanian road up an equally bumpy Albanian mountain. My anxiety was heightened by the fact that guardrails were few and far between, and their placement seemed in no way related to how dangerous various parts of the road were. Many of the guardrails were in fact old stone structures that, while aesthetically pleasing, would be useless if our van lost control. At times we found ourselves with sheer cliffs on either side and no guardrails at all. I'm sure the views were spectacular. I didn't open my eyes.

Near the industrial city of Elbasan, we stopped in an olive grove for breakfast. The Church had set us up with huge boxes of food to last us through the entire day. After having some bread with intensely pungent feta cheese, we continued on our way. In the late morning, we reached the famous Lake Ohrid. This lake serves as part of the border between Albania and North Macedonia. The area is rich in Orthodox history.

We stopped at a hotel and restaurant on the lake called Shen Naumi (after Saint Naum, Enlightener of Bulgaria). Father Justini treated us all to coffee as we sat by the water watching the fish. The view was stunning, and I sighed in gratitude, drinking in the view that inspired Saint Nikolaj Velimirović's *Prayers by the Lake*.

We stopped at the Monastery of the Dormition of the Mother of God in the small town of Boboshticë. The monastery church was from the fourteenth century and had been used as a barn during communist times. The monastery building itself was brand new, and afforded a view of the entire valley along with all of the surrounding mountains.

As befits an Orthodox monastery, we were immediately greeted with large shot glasses full of monk-made moonshine. Nothing says "hospitality" quite like a noxious alcohol made from plums. When we had all recovered, we unpacked our lunch and shared it with some of the people at the monastery. After a too-plentiful lunch, we adjourned to the chapel, where the choir sang the Paraklesis service.

We packed up again and headed towards Korçe. Arriving in the middle of town, we were greeted by the imposing visage of Korçe's Cathedral of the Resurrection. It is one of the most beautiful churches I have ever seen. I was particularly taken with the wooden chandeliers. The basement of the cathedral houses Korçe's Orthodox Youth Center. We also toured many church social institutions in Korçe, including a homeless shelter, a clinic, and a soup kitchen (which they wonderfully describe and operate simply as a "free restaurant").

As evening fell, we piled back into the van for the ride back to Tirana. Being that it was a Saturday night, the choir



I was treated to the sound of a large and wonderful Byzantine choir. In the middle of the service, people started to congregate near the back of the cathedral. I joined them to see what was going on.

His Beatitude, Archbishop Anastasios, radiated holiness as he walked into the cathedral. People swarmed around him. He approached the candle desk and bought heaps of candles. Candle sales are a very important source of income for local parishes here, and the Albanian Church helps support the local parishes in candle production. As he walked through the vestibule and entered the cathedral proper, he handed out unlit candles to anyone who wanted one so that each person could make a private prayer offering. He walked to his throne and promptly started to sing the Paschal canon in Greek from memory, with the choir picking up each ode in Albanian. During the singing of the antiphons, all the young people in the cathedral mobbed the Archbishop's throne to receive his blessing, to the point that when it came time for him to enter the altar area during the Little Entrance, it was actually quite difficult for him to get through the crowd.



Top: Archbishop Anastasios at Divine Liturgy. Photo by author.

Bottom: Students pray in a converted garage adjacent to the university. Photo by author.

and Father Justini decided we were going to have Vespers on the road. Father had brought all of the music with him. It was fun to sing the services as we bounded through the Albanian countryside.



In the morning, I awoke around 6:00 to get ready for church. Here, as in Greece, Sunday morning services start with Matins at the unholy hour of 7:00 AM. After getting ready, Ioan and I walked for half an hour to Annunciation Cathedral. Matins started, and

Besides this dramatic entrance, I was amazed at how similar the church-going experience in Tirana was to things back home. A woman runs out of the church, embarrassed, to answer her cell phone. Parents make futile efforts to chase after their children. Old women make quiet comments about a handsome young deacon. This is part of why I love being Orthodox. There is universality in the Church; my experience in a church in Albania is almost identical to services in any other Orthodox church, with only a few minor cultural differences, differences that mark both the "sameness" we all share and the beauty of our diversity.

The following day, I attended the weekly meeting of the Department of Children's and Student ministry. It was led by Nathan Hoppe, who had been a missionary here for several years. One of the things discussed was their yearly summer camps in Kosovo. The Church runs secular camps for about 1,200 Kosovar children. This was particularly amazing to me. Because of ethno-religious tensions, most Orthodox are rather anti-Kosovo. The region of Kosovo represents the historic center of Orthodoxy in much of the Balkans, but is now an independent country populated mostly by Muslims. It is roughly as if New England had slowly become majority-Muslim and then declared itself independent from the United States. Serbia's cultural, religious, and ethnic identity is tied to the region. Understandably, there have long been tensions between the Serbs and the Kosovars, culminating in the brutal civil war in 1999. In this environment, the nascent Albanian Church reaches out so that children in Kosovo can have an enjoyable summer. It's a wonderful testament to the caliber of Christians in this country. Mostly due to the efforts of the Church, Albania itself has emerged as a stabilizing force in the Balkans and is probably the only country where large populations of Christians and Muslims coexist peacefully.

The feeling that I experienced time and time again in Albania was shame. I was

deeply ashamed for my own American Church. The Church in Albania really is "all things to all people." It has an education system that goes from preschool through to theological and professional schools (they are working on a university). It runs medical clinics, the best diagnostic center in the Balkans, and a dentist's office in a van that drives to the villages. It runs camps and weekly activities for children and young adults. It runs waste management programs, trains farmers, and offers microfinancing to small businesses. It has health and hygiene education programs, soup kitchens, homeless shelters, and orphanages. All of this is open to everyone, regardless of religion. For every church he builds, Archbishop Anastasios tries to make some measurable improvement in a non-Orthodox neighborhood. The Church even delivers clean water for free to some villages that wouldn't otherwise have it. It does everything a normal government would do and does it better in many cases. The Albanian Orthodox Church is one of the largest construction companies in the country, one of the largest employers, and one of the largest conduits for foreign direct investment. American Orthodoxy is content to be a Sunday morning social club, with little to no desire to reach out, take risks, and be the Church, to live the apostolic faith that we so often flap our mouths about. I went to Albania as a typical young American, expecting for some reason that I would have some expertise or knowledge to offer. Instead I left convicted, knowing that they should be teaching us, if we have the ears to hear. *

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