



In memoriam: Archbishop Anastasios of Albania

On 25 January Archbishop Anastasios (Yanoulattos), the primate of the Orthodox Church of Albania, passed away. Archbishop Anastasios was the most senior among the heads of the local Orthodox churches and he enjoyed enormous authority in worldwide Orthodoxy. He also had strong ties with several members of our parish.

Anastasios chose a life of service to the Church at an early age. He was active in youth groups and summer camps. He studied theology in Athens and Germany. One of the topics that concerned him was mission: why do Catholics and Protestants actively engage in mission, and the Orthodox Church does not? Doesn't mission fit with Orthodoxy? But then why did Jesus send the apostles out to proclaim the Gospel? Why are there such great missionaries such as Nino of Georgia, Cyril and Methodius, Nicholas of Japan and many others? Through his youth organisations, Anastasios came into contact with a worldwide network of Orthodox youth associations, 'Syndesmos'. He discovered that more people were asking themselves the same question – and also that there were people in Africa who felt attracted to Orthodoxy. In 1959, together with Father John Meyendorff, he founded an Orthodox mission organisation under the Syndesmos banner: 'Porevthendes' ('Go ye', Mt 28,19). He became a deacon in 1960 and a priest in 1964. In 1972, he became bishop and at the same time head of *Apostoliki Diakonia*, the diaconal and missionary department of the Church of Greece.



1st row: Archbishop Anastasios and Fr John Meyendorff at the assembly where the mission centre "Porevthendes" was founded, 1958



Orthodox delegates from Africa, America, the Middle East and Asia

From the 1960s onwards, several times missionary work took Father Anastasios to Africa for longer periods. He once described how at that time he struggled whether to leave everything he held dear behind to go to Africa. Then a thought came up from his heart: 'Is Christ enough for you? If yes; what is holding you back? If no; what are you still doing in the Church?' He made the leap of faith.

1991 saw a new challenge. He was bishop for Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda when he was invited to take on the leadership of the Orthodox Church of Albania. This was tough task indeed, as very little was left of this church. Communist Albania was one of the most brutal communist regimes. All houses of worship of all religions were closed and all clergy put in prison camps. By 1991, only seven Orthodox priests and deacons were still alive. Of the approximately 20% Orthodox of the population, most were not baptised. Churches lay in ruins. The country was experiencing a major economic crisis after pyramid schemes had left almost everyone destitute. Armed gangs had free rein.



1991: arrival to Albania. Among the greeting party are clergy of different religions that had survived the persecutions

The role was also challenging for other reasons. Although some of Albania's Orthodox Christians are ethnically Greek, many ethnic Albanian Orthodox believers viewed a bishop from Greece with distrust. The two countries have a long history of conflicts – including ecclesiastical ones. However, Archbishop Anastasios showed great pastoral and missionary wisdom. He conducted the services in Albanian and had pastoral and catechetical activities translated into Albanian. He invited missionaries from America and Greece, who were always accompanied by interpreters. One of these interpreters was our father Joan Lena, who worked closely with Archbishop Anastasios from 1993. The church responded to the social challenges with numerous diaconal projects, without regard to religion or ethnicity. Thanks to his global contacts, the archbishop was able to find support for his church everywhere, which today has resurrected into a thriving church with an archbishop and six bishops.

A major challenge for the church came in 1999 during the Kosovo crisis. Large numbers of refugees came to Albania, where the Orthodox Church welcomed them with open arms. In addition to offering practical help, Archbishop Anastasios thereby contributed to reconciliation in the region: in a conflict that was sometimes viewed as a battle between Muslims and Orthodox Christians, the Church was there to help those in need.

For several decades the archbishop fulfilled this role as peacemaker and reconciler in a variety of contexts: between countries, between religions, between denominations and within the Orthodox world. He was a consistent advocate for peace and reconciliation in the region. As a board member of Syndesmos, the World Council of Churches, the Council of Churches in Europe and The World Conference on Religion and Peace, among others, he tirelessly travelled the world to advocate rapprochement, without any concessions to his Orthodox faith. As the oldest in ordination among the heads of the local Orthodox churches, he also campaigned for pan-Orthodox unity until his death. Among others, he had known Patriarch Bartholomew and Patriarch Kirill since the 1970s and used this connection to appeal for dialogue. He warned the Ecumenical Patriarchate about the complex ecclesial situation in Ukraine, but also spoke out unequivocally against the Moscow Patriarchate's decision to break communion with the Ecumenical Patriarchate:

It is unthinkable that the Divine Eucharist, the mystery par excellence of the infinite love and the utter humiliation of Christ, could be used as a weapon against another Church. Is it possible that the decision and order of the Hierarchy of the Church of Russia may cancel the energy of the Holy Spirit in the holy Orthodox churches that operate under the jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarchate? Is it possible that the Divine Eucharist performed in the Churches of Asia Minor, Crete, the Holy Mountain, and elsewhere on earth, may now become unsubstantiated for the faithful Russian Orthodox? And if they come forth 'with the fear of God, faith, and love' to partake of the Sacred Gifts (in these churches), is it possible that they commit 'a sin', which they should confess? We proclaim that it is impossible for us to agree to such decisions. It is imperative that the Holy Eucharist, this mystery of unfathomable sacredness and unique importance, remains far removed from all ecclesiastical disagreements.



Metr. Nikodim receives the Syndesmos Board, 1977. Third from the right: bishop (now patriarch) Kirill, fourth: archbishop Anastasios

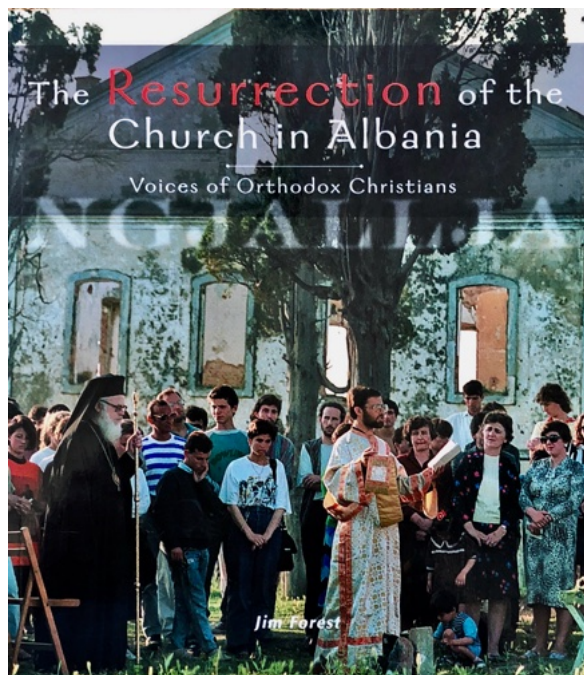
Several of our parishioners knew Archbishop Anastasios well:

- Father Joan worked with him from 1993 as interpreter, catechist, seminarian, Bible translator, teacher and in many other roles. Archbishop Anastasios was instrumental in his choice of priesthood and theology.
- At the invitation of Archbishop Anastasios, Father Hildo (together with Father Joan) organised youth events in Albania in 1996, 1998 and 2003. He also worked with the archbishop at several international conferences.
- Jim Forest had a deep bond with Archbishop Anastasios rooted in their shared commitment to peace. The archbishop was a member of the Advisory Board of the Orthodox Peace Fellowship and the two met several times. In 2001, the World Council of Churches asked Jim to write a book on the resurrection of the Church in Albania. Jim accompanied the Archbishop for weeks as a witness to this process and published 'The Resurrection of the Church in Albania: Voices of Orthodox Christians' in 2002. During this visit, the Archbishop gifted Jim an icon of the Resurrection, which Jim in turn donated to the parish. This has now become the Paschal icon of our church.

With Archbishop Anastasios, a true man of God has passed away, a faithful servant of the Gospel, a witness to God's light in the world. We carry his memory with us in gratitude.



Fr Joan and Fr Hildo at a youth event in Albania, 1998



Jim's book

Quotes of Archbishop Anastasios

From *The Resurrection of the Church in Albania: Voices of Orthodox Christians*, by Jim Forest. Jim traveled to Albania in 2001 at the request of the World Council of Churches to interview Albanian Orthodox Christians and to write a book about it. It was there that he met Archbishop Anastasios and spent many weeks traveling with him and learning about the resurrection of the church under his leadership. These excerpts are taken from his conversations with the Archbishop.

“To get results we need people, holy people, people who don’t change things but change themselves. The church has the power to create people capable of love and sacrifice, people above vendettas, people capable of forgiveness. Reconciliation is not easy. It needs help from the Church. Forgiveness and reconciliation are an essential part of the Christian life, especially during Lent. It gives us the power to forgive the other. More forgiveness, more community!

“The young generation was educated with systematic Communist propaganda. It was a culture of fear. Look at the many bunkers littering the country that were built in the Communist era. Each one is like a large skull. When you see many of them near each other, it is like a cemetery of exposed bones. In the Hoxha period [the years of government-imposed atheism] the creation of enemies was essential to maintaining the discipline of the people. It was a diabolical method, the formation of a culture of fear. Fear, once learned, is hard to unlearn. Many people still are paralyzed by fear.

“Now they are subject to another propaganda: the idea that status in society equals having money. The new system says that the more money you have, the more important you are. But without love and sacrifice, people become wild animals. Today, without religious communities, there is no hope. People cannot understand sacrifice motivated by love, by belief in Christ. It is a pity so many are held captive by the belief that happiness comes from money. Young people must know there is something more behind life. Now when secular people look at those who are living sacrificial lives, they assume the other person is getting some secret material benefit. Often they imagine our helpers from other countries are making more money assisting us here than they would in their home country! Otherwise why would they be here? But finally they begin to see that our collaborators give up a great deal in coming to Albania, that the motive is not at all financial. In some cases this discovery gives young Albanians the motivation to stay here.”

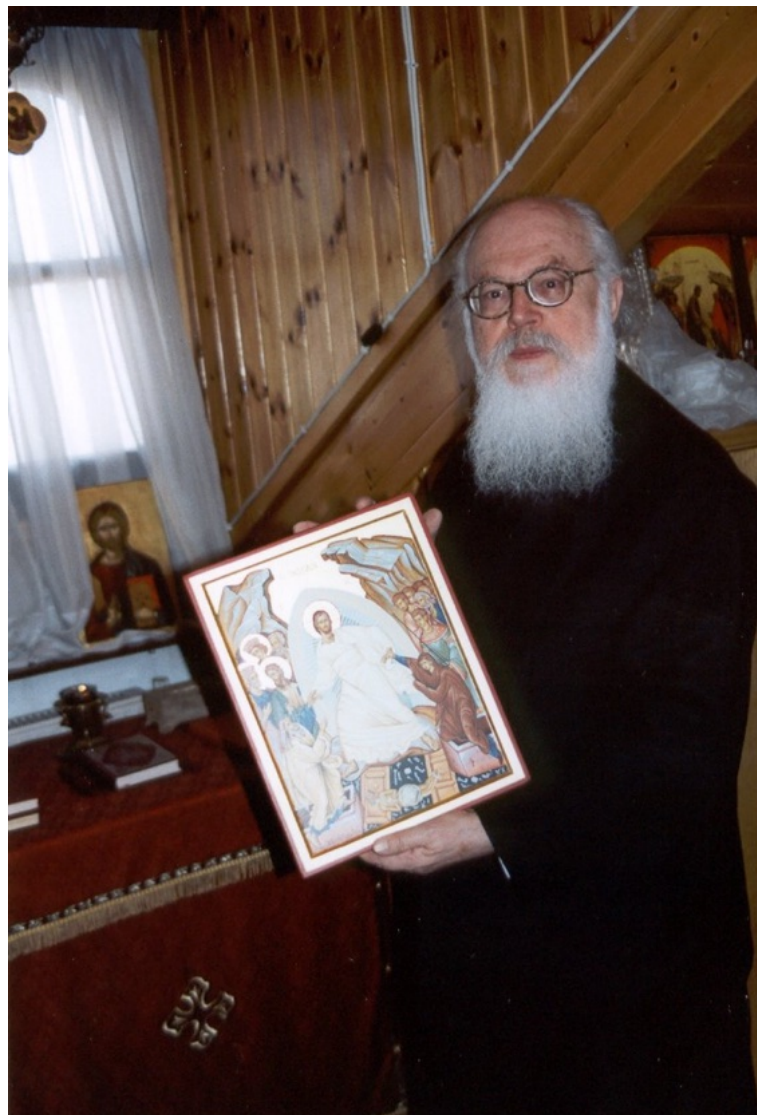
The word most often used to describe the Church in Albania is resurrection – *ngjallja*. Everywhere you turn in the church, the word or one of the icons awaits you. The Church’s seminary is dedicated to the resurrection. The Church newspaper is called *Resurrection*. Many churches have been given the same name.

During my final visit before returning home, Archbishop Anastasios took me to the small chapel – his “hut of prayer” next to his apartment on the top floor of the Metropolia – and gave me a newly painted resurrection icon.

“Let this remind you of Albania. The original model for this version of the icon comes from an ancient church in Istanbul, Chora. You have noticed the emphasis we have on resurrection.

The power of the resurrection is linked to bearing and sharing suffering. The theme is Christ conquering death. You see Christ standing on the destroyed gates of hell while pulling Adam and Eve from their tombs. Adam and Eve represent the entire human race in which each woman is the daughter of Eve, each man a son of Adam, and all are linked to each other in Christ. The icon also mirrors the experience of the church in Albania. It, too, has been pulled out of the tomb. It is also an icon for the biblical text, 'Unless the wheat falls into the ground and dies, it cannot bring forth new life'."

[When Jim returned to the Netherlands he gave this icon to our church. It has become our main Paschal icon.]



Archbishop Anastasios hands the paschal icon to Jim