

EVERYTHING IN LOVE: THE MAKING OF A MISSIONARY

For over a decade, Fr. Luke and Presbytera Faith Veronis served as Orthodox missionaries in Albania under the spiritual leadership of Archbishop Anastasios (Yannoulatos), with Fr. Luke directing the Holy Resurrection Theological Seminary in Durres. The Veronis family has now returned to the U.S., where Fr. Luke pastors Sts. Constantine and Helen Greek Orthodox Church in Webster, Massachusetts, and is Adjunct Professor of Missiology at Holy Cross Greek Orthodox Theological School and St. Vladimir's Seminary. Below, Fr. Luke offers an invigorating account of life in the mission field and what it takes to be a long-term missionary.

RTE: Father Luke, what makes a good missionary?

FR. LUKE: Something obvious but central, and that is love. I once spoke with an old Greek monk, Fr. Antonios, from St. John the Forerunner Monastery in Kareas, near Athens. The Kareas Monastery has sent out missionary-nuns for over twenty years and when he came to Albania, I asked him, "Give me some advice on being a good missionary. What should I remember from you?" He said, "If you remember this you will do well. Do everything in love, for love, and by love. If you do this, you will be a great missionary." This sounds simplistic but it is absolutely central to what a true missionary wants to be. Everything that you do when you are trying to adapt to a culture, struggling to learn a language, or understand a people, you do out of love for them.

One of the first things a missionary must do is to learn the language, no matter how hard it is. This is a sign of love for the people, a sign that you respect the dignity of their culture, and this respect must be communicated before you ever proclaim the gospel. His Beatitude, Archbishop Anastasios of Albania says that when you go into a country, you keep whatever is good



Photo courtesy Nathan Hoppe

in the culture, even if it is different from the way you do things. Anything that is completely incompatible with the gospel you have to reject, but there are many things that can be baptized and given new meaning.

Also, you need to enter the mission field with extreme humility. You are not going to “save” these people, and you are not going simply to teach. First and foremost, you are going as an ambassador of God’s love, to offer a witness of His love in concrete ways. Your emphasis should be, “I’m on a journey – let me show you where I am going, and if you are interested, join me on this journey.” I may be leading the journey for part of the way but there are going to be times when the indigenous Christians will lead me; I will be learning from them, even about spiritual life. We are taking each

other’s hands and walking towards the Kingdom of God. This is extremely important because too often I see western missionaries come with extreme arrogance, ignorant of the culture they are entering and uninterested in learning about it. They are arrogant in thinking that they are bringing the gospel for the first time, as if they are the saviour. They forget that Jesus Christ is the Saviour; we are simply His ambassadors. We must



Fr. Luke and Presbytera Faith Veronis with their four children.

always remember that we are still working out our own salvation, but along the way we can invite others to join us on this journey, to travel together.

Archbishop Anastasios gives a great example when he says about himself, “I am simply a candle that is lit in front of an icon. I shine so that people can see the icon. One day my candle will be snuffed out. When my candle goes out, someone else will have to come and let their light shine before the icon. The important thing is the icon, not the candlelight.”

My suggestion for new missionaries is to spend the first year just learning the language, the culture, the ways of the people, and not focus too much on preaching the gospel. Of course, you preach first and foremost with your life. Francis of Assisi once said, “Preach the gospel at all times, and if necessary, use words.” By focusing on the language, culture and individuals, you show that you are interested in them as people, not solely in making them converts.

RTE: In your book, *Missionaries, Monks, and Martyrs*¹, you included St. Macarius (Gloukharev) of Altai, who is a fascinating example of preaching with one’s life. He went to a remote part of Siberia, where he taught in village after village, with no success. After years of fruitless labor, he left and returned later to go at it differently, through active service with homeopathic medicines and simple offers of help. Only then, was his gospel message received.

FR. LUKE: The example of St. Macarius raises an important question all missionaries must ask: “What is success?” Particularly in the West, where we are so number conscious, we want to show masses of people coming into the Church. In some cases, that happens. In Tirana, the capital of Albania, 20,000 – 30,000 people gather in the main boulevard for the Resurrection Service on Pascha night to hear the archbishop offer his homily, and sing “Christ is Risen.” This may seem like a great “success,” but we shouldn’t be fooled by numbers. There are other missionaries who struggle like St. Macarius did, who work in Muslim lands and other difficult societies. They are never going to show great numbers; they may only have handfuls of people who come to Christ. Are they unsuccessful? Surely not. Are they unfruitful? No. They are being faithful to God, and faithfulness to God is the determining factor of success, not numbers. Our job is to be as faithful as we can in offering a pure, authentic witness of His love.

Another aspect that is extremely important for missionaries in the field is to identify as best they can with the people, to live at the level of the indigenous people. Now, this isn’t always possible. We from the West may give up a lot of our comforts and live at a level far lower than in our home country, but still live far above their means. We have to struggle with this, and like many things in our faith, we have to live in the tension between the goal and what we can actually do. Constant effort and growth are the keys.

I remember asking Archbishop Anastasios what he considered his greatest contribution to the mission field – and we know that he has made many significant contributions as a churchman, a hierarch, a professor at the University of Athens, a missiologist, and as a missionary. Reflecting on his achievements, he said, “I feel that the greatest contribution I’ve made in Africa and in Albania is that I’ve lived among the people and tried to identify with them.” In Africa, he traveled to the most remote, poverty-stricken communities, visiting and encouraging people. In Albania, he flies by

¹ Veronis, Fr. Luke, *Missionaries, Monks, and Martyrs: Making Disciples of All Nations*, Light and Life Publishing, PO Box 26421, Minneapolis, MN, 55426-0421, 1994.

helicopter to inaccessible villages far up in the mountains. He wants to be close to his flock, and he always feels at ease with everyone. More importantly, the people are at ease with him, and see him as someone who loves and identifies with them.

When Albania fell into anarchy in 1997, the army storage facilities were broken into and the anarchists stole machine guns and hand arms. You could buy a Kalashnikov on the street for five dollars, and little kids were shooting Kalashnikovs into the air outside my apartment and all over the city. Total anarchy reigned throughout the country, and the embassies began evacuating their citizens. Almost every foreigner left. Although the archbishop is Greek, and could have been evacuated with the Greek Embassy, the thought never crossed his mind. He was the archbishop, and he had to stay with his people. I also stayed, along with a handful of other missionaries. We wondered how we would protect the archbishop if armed bandits broke into the archdiocese – and we were pretty sure this would happen. We watched one day, as ten armed and masked men broke into and looted an electronics store across the street. We expected the same thing to happen to us.



Holy Resurrection Theological Seminary, Durres, Albania.

People often ask us if we considered leaving with those who were evacuated. To be honest, we didn't. We understood what a terrible message this would give. People would think, "Look at these missionaries. At the first sign of danger, they abandon us." We had to show them that we would stay with them in times of danger, in the midst of anarchy and chaos. We were one with them, and the love of God knows no bounds! We may never be able to identify completely with the indigenous people, but we must show them, as much as possible, "We are with you!"

I remember another story of the archbishop's that exemplifies this missionary outlook. When Archbishop Anastasios was archbishop of east Africa, he often served in simple village churches with mud walls, tin roofs,

and paper icons on the mud iconostasis. In the early 1980's he was invited to attend a conference in Leningrad, and for the Sunday liturgy, he served in one of the beautiful Russian cathedrals, perhaps St. Isaac's. He celebrated liturgy surrounded by magnificence, and he began to wonder, "Where is God? In the midst of this opulence, or in the little mud chapel in Africa?" So when it came time to preach the sermon he raised this question: "Is God in the mud churches of Africa with their paper icons, or is He in these magnificent cathedrals in Russia?" When he asked this, the translator was a little embarrassed to repeat the question, but Fr. Anastasy continued, "As I travel throughout the world and worship in many different types of church structures, I understand that God is wherever the Eucharist is. He is in both the mud churches of Africa and the beautiful cathedrals of Russia."

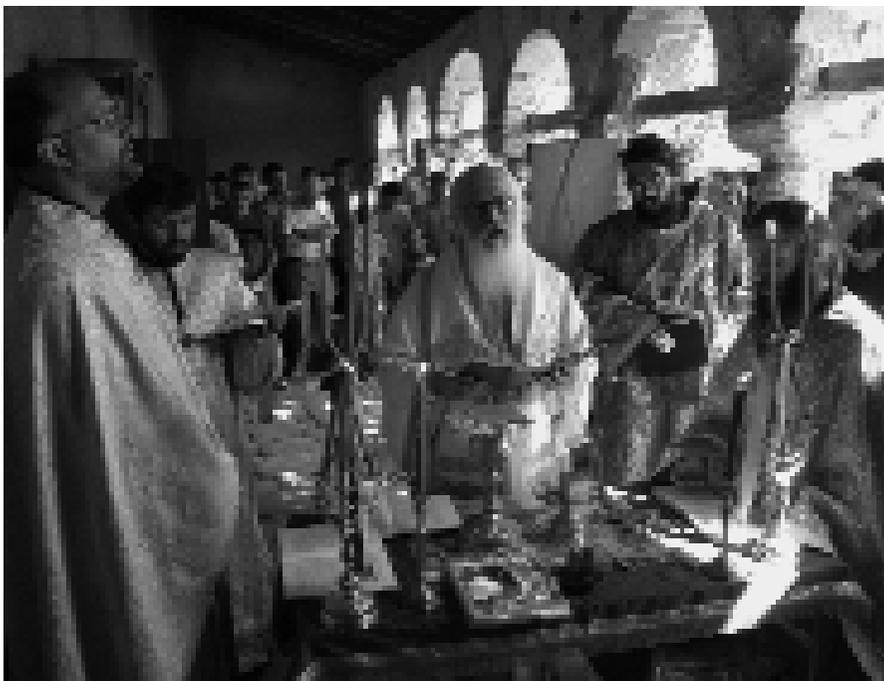
RTE: Also, these cathedrals were built with sacrifice and love by thousands of people, rich and poor, who wanted to give the best they had to beautify God's house.

FR. LUKE: Right, and the point is that we have to feel comfortable everywhere, and realize that Christ works everywhere. It is not our role to judge, but to offer a witness for Christ.

Adapting to a New Culture

FR. LUKE: Different people have different ideas of what mission is about. Some think that it is a romantic adventure, and it's true that there is excitement and adventure to mission, especially in the initial stages. Once one enters the mission field and begins to live the daily life, trying to proclaim the gospel among people who aren't always open or interested, the romanticism quickly disappears. This is a stage of frustration that many missionaries experience. The missionary has to work through this, but once he does, he is ready to begin serious missionary work. He understands that an authentic mission requires a commitment that is greater than any frustration or obstacle, a commitment that demands time, effort, and sacrifice.

During our first years in Albania, the Church faced a major crisis. The government was trying to kick the archbishop out of the country and we were afraid that the foundation he had built for the Church's work might be destroyed. When I voiced my worries, the archbishop said, "Fr. Luke, you have to remember something. Albania, under the worst form of communism



Fr. Luke serving with Archbishop Anastasios of Albania.

and as the only totally atheistic state in the world, was a stronghold of Satan for almost fifty years. Now that democracy has come, don't think that Satan is simply going to lie down and let the gospel be proclaimed. We are not fighting against flesh and blood, but against the principalities and powers of darkness, and this means that it's going to be hard, that there is going to be suffering, that there are going to be casualties. We have to be ready for this."

If you want to follow the Christian life, it's the same thing. Missionary life is a life of the Cross, a life of sacrifice, of humble service, and of not always being appreciated. The archbishop told me that the missionary must be ready to be crucified by the very people he is trying to help. We can't be devastated when this happens.

RTE: I imagine that the initial period of missionary enthusiasm is very similar to what new Christians go through. I remember once wishing aloud that a warmly enthusiastic new convert would come down to earth, but a Russian friend said, "Oh no. This is his spiritual childhood. Don't deprive him of it. He will never be so innocently happy in his Christian life again. He will discover the difficulties and troubles of our earthly Church soon enough,

but for now God has given him this heavenly joy. It will come to a natural end at the right time, and then he will struggle." I think she was right. But once the struggle begins, how do you help new missionaries adapt?

FR. LUKE: There is a typical pattern that missionaries go through. As I said, in the initial excitement of entering a new culture, seeing new people and new ways of doing things, there is warm enthusiasm, "Ah, these people are wonderful..."

For example, on my own first short-term trip to Africa, I lived in a village for a month. I saw Kenyans walking an hour to church, and then sitting in church for four hours with no desire to leave quickly. To an outsider they seem so joyful and faithful that you generalize and say, "These people are just wonderful." After you've been in the culture a little longer, however, you start to see the other side: "OK, some of these people are faithful, pious Christians ... but there are also people hanging around to get something material from the church, who aren't so honest or sincere."

Usually by the fifth or sixth month in the mission field the pendulum starts to swing back and the missionary begins to see things with a negative eye. This is the most dangerous time. I've seen missionaries so disillusioned that they leave the mission field – or perhaps they don't leave, but they allow their disillusionment to darken their entire experience. They view everything and everyone from a negative perspective. If this happens, it's a tragedy, and it's better for the missionary to leave than to offer such a distorted view of the gospel.

It is important to prepare missionaries for these two stages, and there is still another phase which any good missionary will eventually reach. In this third stage, the missionary sees both good and bad within the culture. In any culture, including our own, we realize that there are faithful, pious people, as well as con-artists and those who are insincere. There are also good people who are weak, and who may fall into temptation. This is the reality.

RTE: Of life on earth.

FR. LUKE: Exactly, of everywhere. We can't go on mission expecting to find people open and ready to embrace the gospel. It is important to challenge the cross-cultural worker to adapt as soon as possible, but not to go native, not to give up his old culture in trying to blindly embrace the new. This is dangerous. When you become a missionary you become a person without a

home. Although you have left your own culture, you will never fully adapt to the new. The indigenous people will never truly see you as one of themselves, no matter how hard you try. You become a third culture person.

Another common mistake in the history of western Christians has been for the missionary to create a western compound, a small western society in the midst of a new culture. When you leave that compound in the morning you enter the local culture, but when you come back at night, everything is like it is at home. This should not be the goal. We must strive to live among the people, close to the people.

RTE: St. Macarius of Altai found that if he left the new Altai Christians in their villages, they would inevitably be drawn back into unchristian practices. The pull of society was just too great. So he created new Christian villages within the society, and asked the Christians he baptized to live there. The Spanish missionaries in California did the same thing. What do you think of this?

FR. LUKE: There are pros and cons to these different methods. There is validity to pulling people out of their culture and trying to create a village of new believers, and something positive in trying to avoid temptations which may be too strong for a neophyte Christian. A danger in pulling indigenous people out of their cultural setting is that they may also lose their connection with the people they left behind.

RTE: Also, I imagine that they would become dependent on the missionary who is the inspiration for the village.

FR. LUKE: Yes, and to some degree they may be tempted to adopt the missionary's cultural baggage, whether western or whatever, and then it is hard for them to be salt for their own society. Along the same line of thought, another danger that missionary agencies have realized for centuries is that if you take the indigenous Christian out of his home setting and send him to the missionary country for training or for seminary, after he has lived in another culture for four or five years, he adapts to that culture and can't really fit into his own again. His own people will see him as a foreigner if he goes back – and many don't return at all.

RTE: We are speaking of missionaries going into a new culture, but there are other types of missionaries as well – like the Greek St. Cosmas of Aitolia, who didn't settle in any one place but traveled throughout Greece and

modern-day Albania, preaching to both Christians and Moslems. Another is St. Symeon the Stylite, who didn't go anywhere. People came to him on his pillar from as far south as the Arabian peninsula – not only for spiritual help but for prayers for failed crops, for drastic weather. Arab tribes came to have him adjudicate their differences, and westerners came also, from Paris, Rome, and Britain.

FR. LUKE: In our Orthodox tradition we have the outward-reaching evangelical missionary efforts of St. Paul, Sts. Cyril and Methodius, and St. Innocent of Alaska, but then we also have the example of monastics who settled in an area to cultivate their spiritual life, reached a high level of sanctity, and eventually shone forth and attracted people with a centrifugal force.



Presbytera Faith Veronis teaching catechism class.

RTE: Like the candle in front of the icon – so bright that everyone came to see what it was.

FR. LUKE: Yes. And both are necessary. One of the great dangers in our Church is that I sometimes hear people say, “This ideal of a holy man settling in an area and attracting people to

himself – this is true Orthodoxy. This is our only form of mission.” This is totally inaccurate. Yes, one can certainly see this silent witness through the centuries, but simultaneously, we had missionaries consciously reaching out, crossing cultures, going to other places. From the fourth century on, we have numerous examples of monks not only going into the desert to retreat from society, but also settling close to pagan villages and purposefully joining other monastics in organized bands to proclaim the gospel.

Long and Short-Term Missions

RTE: Can you tell us what it takes to be a long-term missionary? You've spoken of the beginning stages, how about later?

FR. LUKE: Archbishop Anastasios has good advice for people thinking of going into the mission field: "It's always better to say you are going for one year and stay for ten, than to say, 'I am going for ten years,' and after the initial enthusiasm fades away, you realize you can't handle it." There is wisdom in this: go step-by-step, and God will give you grace and strength.

In my early 20's, when I attended Pennsylvania State University, I contemplated entering the Peace Corps. When I learned more about it though, I was afraid, because I wasn't sure I could handle the two-year commitment to leave my country and live in an impoverished third-world village. I turned down the opportunity, but God in His own way took me step-by-step. He didn't reveal to me, "In the future you will spend ten years in Albania." No. First, I went on a short-term mission team for one month to Kenya. The following year I returned for a six-month commitment, and these six months turned into a year of service. After returning to Africa three times over the next four years, I began looking at Albania as a place where I could serve as a long-term missionary. I suggested to my wife, "Let's make a three year commitment, and then see." God took us through those three years and gave us the strength we needed. Those three years turned into five years, seven years, a decade. We might have been frightened, had we known at the beginning that we would serve in Albania for ten years, but God took us by the hand and led us.

Don't frighten yourself by thinking, "How can I become a missionary and live in another culture for so many years?" Just go, make the sign of the cross, and start working. Be open and willing to stay for longer, but tell yourself, "I am going for one year or for two years, and see how it works." But keep praying, "Lord, if You give me the grace, I will stay as long as You want me here."

RTE: You mentioned the short-term mission teams of two or three weeks. I imagine that it's helpful for people in a foreign country to feel that others appreciate them enough to come, but what are the real benefits of this short-term experience?



Fr. Luke speaking at an outdoor youth camp.

FR. LUKE: One has to be very clear about the purpose of missions. The goal of missions is to establish an authentic Eucharistic worshipping community in the people's own language and culture. If one is going to serve in a place that isn't yet Christian, this will take many years and involve great effort, sacrifice, and struggle. To achieve anything, the missionary must commit himself to living among the people long-term and learning the language and culture.

With the ease of travel and technology, a new phenomenon has arisen in the past thirty years in the mission field – "short-term mission teams" – which send people for a week or two, or a month, to a certain area. They often have a specific project: to build a church, run a catechetical program, etc. There is value in these short-term projects, and the first and greatest value is for those who are going. It exposes them to a different culture, a different people. For westerners it is often the first time they've seen a third-world country up close, with all its poverty and hardship. It's an eye-opening experience.

For many, this initial experience is an exciting adventure, and although these short-termers go with the intention of offering something, they receive much more than they can offer, and usually return to their home country full

of enthusiasm. They often become ambassadors for the missionary movement; they speak in churches and their enthusiasm is contagious. It's great for them and for the church that sent them. But what did they really offer for the week, or month, or two months they were in the mission field? They offered something. Perhaps they built a building – but I'm sure the indigenous people could have built the building themselves if they'd had the money. Perhaps they created some nice friendships, and that's important to encourage people, but they have to realize that what they offered was very limited. It is not going to transform, convert, and change people's lives. At best it is going to complement the work that's already being done by the long-term missionaries and the local Christians who live there.

Some churches are now sending many short-term teams; you can get the people, they're enthusiastic, it motivates people back home. But people are still afraid to go into long-term mission and this "short-term" trend can create a great danger for the future.



Short-term teams are not the goal of missions, but they can support the overall effort, and short-termers need to be challenged as to where they are going to take this experience when they return home. In any group of twenty short-term missionaries who go somewhere for a month, my goal would be that at least one or two of them seriously consider long-term mission work.

For others, hopefully, this incredible experience will help to transform them into more serious Christians. Lord willing, they will use this experience as a stepping stone in their own spiritual journey. Perhaps they won't become long-term missionaries, but they will be more dedicated Christians in whatever they do. Hopefully, the majority of people who go will at least understand missions in a new way, and even if they never become long-term missionaries, they will become supporters and partners of those in long-term missions.

There are two results we don't want from short-term missions. First, we don't want these participants to think that they are missionaries who have fulfilled their responsibility in missions. They are not missionaries, but members of a missions team. They now have a responsibility to use the experience they've received for the glory of God and to spread the spirit of missions in the Church. The second danger is that we don't want short-term participants to return home and, after an initial month of excitement, put the experience away as a great adventure and go on with their life as they lived it before. We would consider both of these results as a failure in our short-term strategy.

I have participated on five short-term mission teams, four times as a leader. I have also received five short-term teams while being a long-term missionary. So I've been exposed to this concept of missions from a variety of angles. These short-term experiences radically changed the direction of my life, so I'm very grateful for the experience. They exposed me to the reality of missions work and led me to longer stays in Africa. Such trips filled me with enthusiasm and zeal for missions, and led me to eventually study theology at Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology, as well as to study missiology at Fuller Seminary's School of World Missions.

When I was a long-term missionary receiving missions teams, I did all the prep work for the teams, and it took a month out of my schedule each time to accommodate them. In certain cases it was worth it. Some teams did great and really complemented the ministries we were already doing. But to be honest, other teams were very demanding and in the end, the benefit that they offered was minimal. In those instances, it became a very time-consuming project that didn't have a lot of value for our overall mission. Short-termers need to be aware of this, and when they go, to be humble about it.

RTE: I imagine they are more like pilgrims than missionaries, guests of Orthodox missions who may be able to help out in a small way.

FR. LUKE: Yes, I always tell the short-termers that they shouldn't call themselves missionaries. They aren't missionaries. They should think of themselves as visitors to a mission field. Some don't like to hear this. They would like to think, "I'm following the path of the great missionaries; I'm a missionary now." That's quite naive.



Fr. Luke teaching at Holy Resurrection Theological Seminary.

Families on Mission

RTE: How has it been having your family in the mission field?

FR. LUKE: When my wife and I first went to Albania, many people thought that it was going to be very dangerous and that our children would suffer: “You are going to deprive your children of all the benefits of life in America.” Contrary to that expectation, we feel that our three children who were raised in the mission field were immensely blessed by the experience of learning another culture and language. They always appreciated what they had in America when they went back, but they also appreciated their mission home in Albania, which they thought of as their “real” home.

They’ve grown up with a very different world-view. They appreciate things that they would never think twice about if they had grown up in America. During our first years in Albania, we didn’t have running water every day. So, the kids learned to appreciate it. When we had water, we’d say, “Thank God for water. It’s great to have it.” During different periods,

for months at a time, the electricity is off about five hours a day; in winter, maybe seven or eight hours. So they got excited when the electricity came on. Or, if we did have electricity, the tension was often so low that we couldn’t do something as simple as watch a video. I remember on one of our visits to the U.S., they wanted to watch a video, and came to my wife saying, “Mommy, if there’s enough tension can we watch television?” They still flip the switch to see if the electricity is working.

Next to our house in Albania we had a very tiny shop, nine by fifteen feet, with all different types of food – this was where we did most of our shopping. Once, when we were about to go back to America, my son Paul asked his mother, “In America, will they have shops as big as Uncle Soorie’s?” We laughed. It was beautiful to see how they were exposed to a different way of life.

We lived in Tirana, the capital of Albania, and we were constantly exposed to beggars, poor people who came to our house every day asking for help. It was wonderful for our children to see this, day in and day out. They got used to getting things for the beggars, answering the door and coming and saying, “Oh, so-and-so is here.” We got to know these people by name, we visited their homes. When you live in suburban America you aren’t even exposed to them unless you go downtown. Many of these beggars truly became friends, and our kids loved them. They loved playing with them and saw them as human beings, not as beggars.

Another blessing of raising children in the mission field is community, both the indigenous Albanian community, the wonderful local people that were part of our life, and our co-missionaries who themselves had numerous children. At one time we had fifteen missionary children in the field, and they created such bonds of love and friendship. They weren’t exposed to the busyness, to the constant activities that American children are involved in. Their lives were very simple, and very fulfilled.

Neither my wife nor I have any sense of their being deprived, and one of our greatest regrets in leaving Albania after ten and a half years is that we have left at a time when our children are still young, and we are not sure how much they will remember. We often talk about going back into missions when they are a little older so that they not only remember, but can participate more fully. Even though they were young, we tried to get the idea across that they themselves were missionaries, that they needed to be witnesses. To whatever degree they could participate in our different activities, they did.

RTE: Growing up with cultural diversity must not only teach what is universal in human nature, but how to deal with differences early on.

FR. LUKE: Right. We Americans, unfortunately, are quite isolated from the rest of the world. The universal business language is English, so we think we can get anywhere speaking English. Having only Canada to the north and Mexico in the south, we aren't exposed to many different cultures and languages and this is a great loss for us. It's so enriching to be around the diversity found in a mission field, and to learn to see beauty in such diversity. One thing I tried to get across to the Kenyans, and later to the Albanians, was, "Sure, in America we have things that are nicer than in Kenya or Albania, but you have many aspects of your culture and life that we Americans can envy. Family connectedness, the support you have for one another, hospitality – how beautiful these things are! Don't ever lose these aspects of your culture and think, 'We want to become western, or American, because America is better in everything.' There are certain things you can adopt from America that are beautiful, but don't lose the beauty and richness that you have in your own tradition."

Hospitality was something that always left the greatest imprint on me. I could travel to the poorest village in Africa and they would put on a feast. It was their responsibility to show love and hospitality to guests. It is the same in Albania. I don't know who is more hospitable, the Albanians or the Kenyans, but they would put anyone in the West to total shame. Having almost nothing, they share whatever they have with whoever comes.

RTE: An American seminarian at Holy Cross Seminary told me about a depressed acquaintance who called one night, feeling suicidal. The seminarian invited him to come to the seminary for a few days for a change of scene and to be in a calm atmosphere. He agreed and the seminarian made the arrangements and cleaned an empty dorm room so that he could have his own space. The day his friend moved in, one of the Greek-born seminarians found out what was happening and insisted that the man take his own room, which contained his books and belongings, icons that were prayed in front of, and was a real home. The Greek seminarian slept in the hall on a couch outside the door so he could check on him through the night. The American seminarian said, "You know, I was so pleased that I'd found him his own space where he could have some privacy, where he could put

his own things up – but actually what he needed was to be taken into someone else's home and taken care of. I didn't get it until I saw it."

FR. LUKE: Yes, this virtue of hospitality is something missing in our American way of life. As missionaries, my wife and I saw hospitality as one of the greatest ways to express God's love to the people. We wanted



Pascha in Tirana.

our home to always be open to people. We married right at the beginning of our time in Albania and it is interesting to think that my wife and I slept in our house alone perhaps three months out of the first five years of our marriage. We always had people coming, numerous people staying for months at a time. Our open home was a hallmark of our ministry. Even after the children started coming and we didn't have as many overnight guests, we always had an open-door policy. There were people at our house every day.

One of the difficult counter-cultural adjustments in coming back to America on sabbatical was that although we lived on campus at a seminary, no one came to visit. We lived there for four months and maybe a handful of people came to our house. And even when people came, they'd say, "I'm just here for a minute, I've got to run..." They'd stay briefly and then go on with their day.

Single Missionaries

RTE: We've been speaking here of missionary families. What opportunities are there for unmarried men and women? And in view of cultural differences, are single women limited as missionaries? What part do they play on a mission team?

FR. LUKE: The mission in Albania offers a good response to this question. During the years I served there, of the 20-25 missionaries we had at any one time, we had a nice mix – usually about eight monastics, eight married missionaries, and six or seven single missionaries. Of the two

dozen missionaries, about half were men and half were women. Also, about eight were clergy, and the rest laity.

The unmarried missionaries played an important role in the overall outreach of the Church. In Albania, we had single missionaries who headed up our medical clinic, our elementary school, our post-secondary professional institute, as well as our development and emergency relief office. We also had single missionaries who taught at our seminary, who taught English in a variety of contexts, taught catechism, worked in administration, and who participated in our university ministry, among other things.

The Body of Christ has a need for everyone – men or women, married or unmarried. It is the same for the mission field. In fact, when a missionary team has a variety of members, it makes the overall witness that much more effective. Some people will relate well to a monastic. Others feel more comfortable with a married priest. Some prefer to approach a mother, or a married woman. Still others will listen to a single man or woman. All are part of one body, offering a unified witness. So there are surely opportunities for the monastics, the married, and the unmarried!

In some countries, it isn't appropriate for men to approach women and talk with them in public. Such societies need women missionaries, and this means both married and single women.

In the Protestant world of missions, single women really weren't encouraged, or even allowed, in the mission field until the 1800's. By the 1900's, women outnumbered men as missionaries. Today, women far outnumber men, and this includes many single women. Women had to overcome many obstacles and prejudices before being allowed to serve in a variety of capacities, and this may be the same for the modern Orthodox missionary movement.

RTE: Do you have any specific counsel for unmarried missionaries?

FR. LUKE: My advice for single men or women is that they must be ready for some additional challenges. The loneliness of a new culture, the challenges of entering a new country, the frustrations of learning a language, and the normal difficulties and disappointments of the mission field can be overwhelming. As a married missionary, you have your spouse to support and comfort you; the monastics may be living in community and have another type of support; but the single missionary can feel the loneliness and frustration in a magnified manner. A single person has to be ready for



Passing the Paschal light in Tirana, Albania.

these added challenges. He or she needs to be a strong person, and also be able to find support in time of need. Their co-missionaries need to be sensitive to this extra burden, and try to reach out to them.

One way to help overcome these additional struggles would be for single missionaries to live in community, either with other missionaries of the same sex, one of the missionary families, or even with an indigenous family. Living with a family of the country can be one of the fastest ways to learn the language, culture, and ways of the host country. Of course, other challenges may arise as cultures clash and one's privacy may be lost.

Co-Workers and Community

RTE: I imagine that another challenge is not only learning to live with the indigenous people, but with your co-workers and with the bishops and higher clergy over you. I've heard of very good missionary situations that deteriorated quickly with a change of administration, and, conversely, mediocre situations that were enlivened and made fruitful by good incoming leaders.

FR. LUKE: That's related to another aspect of missions. Do you know the number one reason why missionaries leave the field? It is quite interesting. The most frequent reason is because of conflicts with other missionaries. It is not because of difficulties they face in the culture, learning the language, or preaching the gospel to unresponsive people. No. Missionaries most often leave because of strong-willed co-workers with whom they can't get along. This is a challenge that one needs to be ready for.

A missionary unprepared to face this may find himself in a bind. He will feel unable to ask for support from the indigenous Christians, since he feels he must be a strong leader, teacher, and example. At the same time, he doesn't want to open himself up to his fellow-missionaries because that will show that he's weak, and he wants them to think he's strong. So, he doesn't turn to anyone and as a result he struggles and suffers. This is why it is so important for missionaries to find support where they can be open and honest, where they can show their weaknesses ... ultimately it would be good to have a spiritual father to go to, but the reality is that in the mission field you don't always have this. If you are going to a place where there isn't an established church, you aren't going to have a spiritual father in the field with you.

In Albania one of our great blessings was that we had a wonderful missionary team that supported one another. Two of our co-missionaries, Nathan and Lynette Hoppe, who both grew up as children of missionaries, would say to us: "We can never take for granted the wonderful relations that we have with one another. We remember our parents as missionaries and how many conflicts they had with their fellow missionaries." It must be said, though, that this positive and supportive atmosphere among the missionaries in Albania was something we worked to cultivate. For example, we came together once a week for a Vespers service in English and a Bible study, so that we were constantly communicating, nourishing and encouraging each other; trying to push one another to grow spiritually. We shared the problems, frustrations, and struggles we had faced the previous week. This was extremely important for us.

RTE: In Albania, of course, you've had very apparent success, with large numbers of people being baptized, and churches, clinics, and orphanages established. In more remote places like Africa or Asia, I imagine it would be rare to have so many dedicated missionaries in one place.

FR. LUKE: Ultimately, you have to use what God gives you. In Albania God has given the archbishop many opportunities because of his renowned personality. In other places, you aren't going to be able to do as much, but again, that is related to our idea of success. Success isn't how many churches, hospitals, schools, one builds, but it is offering an authentic witness wherever you are, using whatever means you have. If you are in a village in a poor country and you don't have much support, you work on building up one local community as an authentic Eucharistic indigenous community. This is your success, and God blesses.

I know missionaries, the parents of Nathan Hoppe, who have been serving in the jungles of Colombia for more than 35 years. They went to live among a tribal group in order to translate the Bible into the indigenous language. They told us how it took them more than seven years to begin learning the language. Bob and Dottie Hoppe lived with that tribe for nineteen years before they saw the first person become a Christian. Nineteen years!!! And even after 35 years, only a few dozen people have become Christians. So, although this rate of success is numerically lower than in other places, this doesn't mean that they are less faithful. They not only offer the gospel in that country, but when they go around speaking in American churches, their perseverance and love for these people, despite their resistance, is a powerful witness.

Sharing the Field

RTE: How do you relate to missionaries of other Christian denominations, particularly those who are difficult for us Orthodox, such as Mormons or Jehovah's Witnesses?

FR. LUKE: If you are in a democracy that allows religious freedom, you are going to have missionaries representing many different religions. If they are using coercion or improper means to bring about conversions, or are creating division, we can speak against this, but we do need to respect their right to proclaim their message, just as we have a right to proclaim our own. My attitude has always been, "If we are doing our job well, we don't have to worry about what other people do." We know that our faith is a treasure of unsurpassed beauty, and I will compare that to anything that any other missionary has brought. But unfortunately, many times we aren't doing our job and we criticize others for doing a better one.

In our relations with other Christian missionaries we always tried to have open communications, to respect one another. Although we don't agree theologically, it is important to meet them so that you know them as people, rather than caricaturing them as monsters. In Albania, I became good friends with some missionaries of other churches, both Catholic and evangelical, while I also met missionaries who were very fundamental and closed-minded. This second group didn't consider Orthodox to be Christians, and they weren't interested in dialogue. But we always tried to meet them because I felt that if they could get to know us, we could show them a Christian witness. After meeting me, my students, my co-workers, it would be hard for them to say, "These people aren't Christian." They would see a real fervor and love for Christ, a commitment.

In Albania I tried to have exchanges between the Orthodox seminarians and the Protestant Bible college, the Catholic seminary, and I even took the students to a Moslem madrasa, so that they would be exposed to these places and people. Often, these experiences were a great blessing for everyone involved. People's eyes were opened. We could disagree about theology, but we saw each other as human beings.

RTE: I imagine one of the hardest mission fields would be a place like Saudi Arabia where outward signs of Christianity aren't allowed, even wearing a cross on the street. Are missionaries there just trying to live quietly among the Muslims?

FR. LUKE: I don't know of any Orthodox missionaries, but I do know of other Christian missionaries in such closed countries. Obviously such people have to be very careful, and their measure of success is radically different because they are there simply as a witness, to give people a chance to know Christ. But places like this are also a challenge to our overall thinking. What does it mean to preach the gospel in a place where it is completely forbidden? You have to be very creative to come up with ways of even expressing the gospel.

Unconditional Love

RTE: Something I've noticed in Russia is that a parish priest doesn't have to be a pillar of first-rate sanctity, he doesn't have to be particularly talented, a good organizer, or able to run projects, but if he truly prays, is available, and genuinely loves people, the parish works.

FR. LUKE: I think that is also a good point for a missionary. A missionary doesn't have to be a living saint who makes no mistakes. On the contrary, going into a new culture you're going to make plenty of mistakes. What is really important is that the missionary be humble enough to acknowledge his mistakes, to show people, "You know what? I'm human, I make mistakes. Please forgive me for my sins and mistakes. This is how you change and repent." Our witness is not simply showing them what perfection is, but showing them what failure is and what you do after you fall. You have to repent. To be honest, I've seen many foreigners who aren't so good at that. In the end, what makes a good missionary is what makes a good Christian: love, humility, respect, serving others...

RTE: So what happens when you've done your best to give the gospel to someone who seems to have been interested, open, and receptive for months or years, and then they decide not to become Christian? The disappointment must sometimes be acute.

FR. LUKE: Archbishop Anastasios says that two key elements of the missionary life are love and freedom. We have to love unconditionally: receive the love of God and share that love with others, and we also have to respect the freedom that everyone has to accept or reject what we want to give them. We must realize that our role as Christian missionaries is to offer a witness, to shine forth a light, but in the end we have to respect the freedom of the other person.

We don't want to impose something on them or coerce them, although unfortunately, many missionaries do that. We want to present the treasure that we have and give them an opportunity to accept it. If they reject it, we still love them and realize that for many people it takes time. It's not about only offering them one chance. If they aren't interested now, another opportunity may arise later.

The key for us as Christians is to continue to love people regardless of how they respond. This isn't always easy. We can be disappointed and say, "I spent a lot of time – what happened?" But you don't know what you are cultivating, what you have planted in that soul. In the end we have to realize that a sense of failure, of disappointment, is really a sign of our own pride. If we are humble we understand that we only offer a witness, that their conversion is between them and God. Only God knows what is happening in their life; maybe they just aren't yet at a point to accept it.

RTE: How do you deal with the tension of the Lord saying, “No one comes to the Father, but by Me,” and the implication for many Orthodox that if people aren’t baptized they won’t be saved? Obviously, things are far more complex than this because God has allowed souls to be born into countries where He knew that missionaries and opportunities for baptism wouldn’t be present for centuries.

FR. LUKE: I think that in the end we have to realize that God’s ways are far beyond our own. Bishop Gerasimos of Abydou, a holy man who died several years ago, once said, “Life is not a problem to be solved, but a mystery to be lived.” Life is a mystery and it is not our role to determine who is going to heaven or hell, who is right, who is wrong. We can say that we know the path of salvation is through the Church, through what Holy Scripture teaches us, through our Orthodox Christian faith. We know that if one follows this sincerely he will be saved, but we don’t know what else God is going to do. Never limit God by saying, “God will only act in this certain way.”

If someone is not baptized, if he belongs to the 1.6 billion people in the world, the 26% of the world’s population who have never even had the opportunity to hear the name of Jesus Christ, can we say that he is condemned? God knows what is in his heart, He knows what opportunities he has had, and how he has responded. We can leave it in God’s hands, rather than trying to play God ourselves.

In regards to those people who’ve never had an opportunity to hear the gospel, I think that the greater judgement is going to fall on the Christian world. Why haven’t they heard? Why have 2000 years passed since the coming of Christ, and the Christian Church still not offered a witness to these people? Isn’t that our responsibility?

In the end, what is the motivating factor of mission? The motivating factor is the love of God. We’ve found the love of God. God has revealed His love to us. We didn’t deserve it, we aren’t worthy to have it, but for some reason He has allowed us to experience it. In utter gratitude for this greatest of treasures, this pearl of great price, we need to be ready to sell everything we have to possess it. And if our joy is authentic, if it is a godly joy, then that will make us want to share it with other people. If you have good news, you don’t keep it to yourself, you share it with those you love. Too often we Christians keep the greatest news ever to ourselves.

The motivating factor of missions is not to save those people who are otherwise condemned to hell. God is the only one who knows who is going to paradise and who isn’t. Our motivation is simply out of love: I have a great treasure that I want to share. I want the whole world to know about it.

RTE: And then you appreciate the people who come for themselves, rather than viewing them as potential converts.

FR. LUKE: That’s right. We view all people through the lens of ‘freedom and love.’ True love can only come out of freedom, the kind of love out of which God created the world. He created Adam and Eve and He respected their freedom to rebel. He didn’t despise them for it; He didn’t remove His love from them. He continued to love them even though they misused their freedom. We need to imitate that divine love in our lives. ✦

INTERESTED IN ORTHODOX MISSIONS?

Contact the Orthodox Christian Mission Center, PO Box 4319, St. Augustine, FL, 32085. The OCMC website at www.ocmc.org shows the Center’s different opportunities to serve as a long- or short-term missionary. Those interested can write directly to the missionary director, Maria Gallos, at the address above, or e-mail: missionaries@ocmc.org.

Fr. Luke is also available to talk with anyone interested in pursuing missions: FrLukeVeronis@mail.goarch.org.