‘Time for the Exchange of Gifts’:
Sharing with the Poor in Developing Countries

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This article shares observations of two particular Orthodox missions, conducted by me, my husband, Dana, and my son Jonathan, as well as some reflections on our own personal philosophy, based upon years of domestic and international travel as Orthodox Christians in the music ministry. We have been inspired by the open attitude to the Orthodox concept of mission to the poor, as demonstrated in the leadership of Archbishop Anastasios (Yannoulatos) in Albania, and by some of the modern followers of the V. Rev. Fr. Alexander Men, in Russia. Their love for Orthodox Christianity has been so open-hearted that it has caused some less bold hearts to express concern about the fact that both of these prominent Orthodox evangelists were willing to evaluate and use (when they deemed it appropriate) experiences and wisdom from non-Orthodox sources in their own missionary efforts to bring to bear in their mission useful things, which benefited the poor. Archbishop Anastasios once expressed this principle as follows:

Offering spontaneous, brotherly love to all our ‘neighbors,’ for no other reason than the simple fact that they are human beings, is acknowledged as Christianity’s quintessential message. How do we respond, therefore, to the question, ‘Should we cooperate with individuals from other religious and ideological backgrounds?’ When the purpose is to serve the entire human family by promoting justice, equality, freedom, respect for the human personality, peace, and the welfare of one’s people and nation, our answer must clearly be ‘yes.’ ¹

¹ Yannoulatos, *Facing the World*, 44
The openness to non-Orthodox missionary experience as manifested by these leaders seemed to me to highlight the truth that prophetic Orthodox Christianity can often see that in all of life, and in other human beings in particular, the image of God is like a fire still burning; all that is good is of God, and lessons are to be learned even through the triumphs and tragedies of Christians outside the visible fold of the Orthodox Church. Does the Orthodox Church in general believe that each culture has some value, hiding or revealing within its best traditions the irresistible image of God? Archbishop Anastasios (Yannoulatos) gives a persuasive answer to this question:

The cornerstone of Christian anthropology remains the belief that God made Adam ‘in the image of God’ (Gen 5:1). Every subsequent biblical view of humanity is built upon this foundation…God is revealed as a personal God: an existence whose essence is unity; a sharing between persons; a unity in three and a trinity in one; a perfect koinonia agapes (community of love). ‘Likeness’ to God is offered to human beings as a possibility, not as an accomplished fact. It is ultimately achieved through the action of the Holy Spirit. 2

The Orthodox approach to a generously wide understanding of mission, which won my heart over thirty years ago, was one of such openness and respect for other Christians—indeed, of other human beings—and the willingness of certain Orthodox Christians in the Russian tradition to build upon common ground, rather than tear down my faith to supplant it with that which was wholly other.

That which was winsome in the Orthodox Tradition I first encountered, is difficult now to put into words. In my coming over into Orthodoxy, I certainly did not capitulate first and foremost to philosophical argument. Perhaps it was a spirit of syndesmos, of coming together in faith, rather than of the presentation of incontrovertible evidence that Orthodoxy was “the one true church” that I found so full of irresistible charm.

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2 Idem, 58.
Why do I feel that this approach, understood as it is by many Christians, is so very Orthodox? I think it is because of the Orthodox teaching on original sin: the understanding that the human person, however humble, is made in the image and likeness of God; an iconic rootedness in God that cannot be broken even by the historical weight of sin and moral failure; something that makes each one a brother or sister of the Son of Man of infinite worth. This approach sets Orthodoxy apart in a fundamental way from many other traditions that stress the more damaging effects of ‘original sin.’ Even so, this more ancient understanding is also shared by other Christians. This approach certainly does not approach humankind first of all as “totally depraved” but as totally precious and with infinite, still discoverable, possibilities. That all human beings sin is not a matter of speculation; but even so, the irrepressible belief in the imperishable image of God within the human person causes Orthodox believers to look at life with a unique, if sober, optimism.

Respect for the image of God in every human person also accords with the spirit of Orthodox mission as I have observed it; indeed in a special way with the teachings of saints, such as Herman of Alaska. That respect is what fueled the missions of Fr. Alexander Men and Archbishop Anastasios, and what touched the hearts of their followers. Love is the key:

With this love, which could be called a sixth sense, the faithful Christian uncovers the deeper reality in things and sees each and every human being as he or she really is: a creation of God, an image of God, a child of God, our sister or our brother. The freedom found in Christian love is a tremendously powerful force. It is not restricted by what other people believe, nor can any obstacle inhibit its initiative.  

Such respect is both contagious and courageous. Is it unique to Orthodoxy? Perhaps not, but belief that the human person, however seemingly insignificant, is made in the image of God, provides the

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1 Idem, 62.
Orthodox Christian in particular with a special imperative to share both material and spiritual consolation with our brothers and sisters. The image of God, according to Orthodox theology, is distorted but not destroyed through sin, and is worth uncovering and rediscovering in every person, each of whom is a unique treasure. Belief in the infinite worth of each human person as bearing the image of God was conspicuous in the mission and ministry to the poor, which my husband and I observed at first hand, in our visits in Russia and Albania. Orthodox Christianity teaches us in a particular way (and it is a completely biblical understanding) that the poor in this world’s sight are rich in the sight of God. Not only are the poor to be ministered to but they are in a position to minister to us; that all may be shared so that together we may come to understand all the fullness of God. Mission is the ‘time to share gifts’:

And the time will come when all the different fruits (or gifts) will come together into one stream, in which will be preserved all the best in the spiritual culture of humanity and of each person who is made in the image and likeness of God.\footnote{Alexander Men, \textit{Christianity for the Twenty-First Century}, 163.}

\textbf{An Account of Our Mission Work}

We have met several wonderful and illuminated people on our missionary travels, our Orthodox journey. Others know these great souls more intimately, but I wish only to point to them briefly and hope that each of you may make their better acquaintance. Nevertheless I hope this introduction will provoke further study and participation in the shared ministry to the poor that has been inspired, in recent times, by these two exemplars.

Orthodox service to the poor is not an option. It is part of the domirical command that we “love one another, even as I have loved you”. Even as we are endowed with the capability to believe, we are endowed, as members of the Body of Christ, to care for one another with Christ’s own love:
[I]n each of us Christ can and must be ‘formed’ (Gal. 4:19). Christ is the Head, all believers are His members, and His life is actualized in them. All are called and every one is capable of believing, and of being quickened by faith and baptism to live in Him.5

That is the meaning of this entire conference: to live in Him. His shared life is, by definition, a life of sacrifice. Yet it is not only a matter of giving to the poor but also receiving their rich gifts in return with openness. If we live in Christ, we long to share His life with others, and in so doing, we find that there are those who are pressed so strongly by the very necessities of living that they almost do not have the luxury of thinking beyond their own survival. Yet there is miraculous faith among the poor that enriches us all, and, for our own salvation, must enrich us. We give to Christ in the poor from our abundance; in return we receive spiritual life, spiritual food.

Christ came bearing gifts and asked, in return, for our faith, our love, our hospitality. His was not a detached form of giving, which would be impossible of God who is mighty and yet cares intimately for each of us. Of the woman at the well, He asked a drink of water; of Zacchaeus, He asked hospitality; of the rich young ruler, He asked everything. When we go to the poor, we must expect much. The children of God long to serve one another, the poor as much as the comparably rich, sometimes much more so. Blessed are the poor: blessed before all others named in the Beatitudes. If the example of Christ is not only to bless the poor but to receive from those to whom he so freely gave, we ought also to bless the poor and allow them to bless us in return.

Early in life, a woman who had left everything to follow Christ enriched my life. A piano teacher, who had been ordained a “secret nun” in Russia, Galina Michniuk came to America as an assistant to saintly Archbishop John (Shahovskoy). Archbishop John had left Russia with his mother at the time of the Revolution and had ended his

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life as Archbishop of the Orthodox Church in America for the Western United States. Michniuk sat upon boxes and boards and charged us practically nothing for piano and art lessons; Archbishop John lived humbly and simply until the day he died, having shared the riches of Orthodoxy with thousands of people, including those in prison-camps in Germany. His vision embraced Christians outside the visible Church and his demeanor was such that one would see in him not an exclusive but an inclusive Orthodoxy. I am thankful to have been introduced, through the gift of music, to Archbishop John, this great man of vision and generosity, and to the Church that he loved and served so well. We were able to share Archbishop John’s songs in Russia, particularly one about the death of soldiers, in which he speaks of two soldiers of disparate backgrounds meeting, after death, at the feet of Christ, and finding that they were, after all, brothers in Him. In the beautiful adventure that our Orthodox life has been, our family of three has been able to witness marvelous examples of shared service to the poor and modestly to participate in the efforts they inspired.

The Church under Communism was systematically ravaged and robbed. In Russia, Romania, and other countries, the persecution has been well documented and the evidence archived in films of falling churches, crucified, imprisoned, or exiled clergymen, and many faithful laypeople who shared their fate.

Our musical pilgrimages to Russia and Albania came about because of our profound respect for those who passed Orthodox Christianity on to us and to so many others in the Western hemisphere. We cannot afford to forget the heroism of those who, under circumstances beyond our imagination, kept the faith alive. We cannot fail to acknowledge the sense of unity these great Orthodox believers felt with Christians of other traditions as they clung to one another for their very survival.

Ours is an era in which definitions can and must be made of our distinctive Orthodox heritage; nevertheless, the understanding and love, which prevailed among Christians of many denominations in dire straits, must serve as an example for us and in some way shape
the future of shared mission. Firmness of conviction need not exclude openness of heart. St. Herman of Alaska received wisdom from his “pagan” converts, which strengthened his own Orthodox spiritual understanding, and because of his willingness to share their “story,” he was a mightily effective Orthodox missionary.

Serving the Eastern European Orthodox Church has been a shared ministry, inspired by those who made themselves poor for the sake of the Gospel. We were fortunate to be associated with a church whose spiritual children were those of the late Archbishop John, Christ the Savior Church, here in New York City. The Very Rev. Fr. Michael Meerson, its current Rector, has served immigrant populations for the more than the thirty years, which Dana and I have known him. Within the church were the late Catherine Lvoff and Elizabeth Gargarin, Russian princesses by birth but humble Christian women by choice, who in their turn inspired their friends to send religious books to Russia. Thus both through the Church and through our music, we had a link with the former Soviet countries. When, quite unexpectedly, Russia opened its doors, Fr. Meerson helped us form a small, non-profit organization that, through our concert ministry, allowed us to travel to Russia and, later, to Albania. Father Michael is the spiritual son of the V. Rev. Fr. Alexander Men, about whom much has been said and written, and who, before his martyrdom in 1990, was a harbinger of religious freedom in Russia. Fr. Alexander was never afraid to share ministry with others in his parish, and he inspired similar beliefs in those who honor his memory. His was a particularly gifted ministry to intellectual Russians, and left a rich legacy of writings and thinking to guide the Orthodox Church into the twenty-first century.

After Fr. Men’s death, many of his spiritual children contributed to the rebuilding of the Church of Sts. Cosmas and Damian in Moscow, which had been turned into a printing-shop for atheistic propaganda during Soviet times. Fr. Michael Meerson, Fr. Daniel Hubiak, the Chaplain of St. Catherine’s mission to Moscow (Orthodox Church in America), Fr. Leonid Kishkovsky, and others, acquainted us with Sts. Cosmas and Damian to share concerts with the very musical and
intellectual congregation whom God had called through Fr. Alexander Men. We did so several times, sharing the concert stage with talented professional Russian musicians, such as the jazz trumpeter, Oleg Stepurko, and sometimes with the Rev. Fr. Michael Roshak.

At first, with the permission of the Board of the Orthodox Church in America, Dana and I were allowed to go to the public schools with a Protestant ministry and help distribute thousands of New Testament Scriptures, where we would also sing and play classical and Russian folk music. We also took both Russians and Americans associated with the Protestant mission along to local Orthodox churches. Many of the Protestants with us had never been inside an Orthodox church before, and there were several Russians who recommitted their lives to Christ in Orthodoxy when they saw the life of the Lord so actively present at Sts. Cosmas and Damian. It took vision and courage on the part of our understanding Orthodox pastors to allow us a shared Orthodox-Protestant music-mission in times when some Russian Protestant missionary activity in particular was quite controversial. Nevertheless, the overall benefit far outweighed the risks, as the kind people in non-Orthodox Christian churches, who gave of their abundance in America, knowing that we were going to visit Orthodox Christians and that we would be sharing Christ, themselves learned more about Orthodoxy by direct experience than they could have in any other way, and were blessed in return for their generosity.

With the permission of Fr. Alexander Borisov, we purchased, at cost, almost nine thousand crosses at Sts. Cosmas and Damian and then resold them to various congregations here in America to elicit donations. That opportunity helped Sts. Cosmas and Damian in its rebuilding project, its soup kitchen, and in its sister charities, as through this shared giving, Americans and Russians together were able to raise $187,000 over the course of five years.

Fr. Michael Meerson, as well as Bishop Seraphim (Sigrist), who came on subsequent visits, spoke to the children at the Moscow Children’s Hospital, which was supported by the congregation and
clergy of Sts. Cosmas and Damian and their associates. There, we met children whose illnesses would have meant certain death had it not been for the inspired ministry of the doctors and caregivers at that institution. As a small example, to illustrate the poverty endured even by the physicians, the gloves which are usually thrown away at American hospitals after one use were taken home by the doctors, washed, and used again and again. At the same time, the hospital, by the mid-1990s, had a cure rate even higher that of other American and European hospitals.

Not all the children at the hospital, where Fr. Men had often gone to bless and bring the Sacraments, survived. Anya Gnovenskaya, a gentle and understanding artist, shared her ministry with many children, from the age of six on up, who did not survive their dread diseases. The children, in turn, found great joy in representing the story of Christ by painting pictures, and many of these were printed in a booklet published through the generosity of American Christians and with the assistance of Fr. Alexander Borisoff, Rector of Sts. Cosmas and Damian Church, and the Rev. George Tschistiakov who was the hospital chaplain. Writing about the paintings in the magazine of the Orthodox Peace Fellowship, In Communion, Felix Vetrov stated, “We find these children, in what seems to us a cruel and pitiless world, expressing in line and color a vision of a beautiful and God-centered universe.”

There is much more to tell in the continuing story of Sts. Cosmas and Damian Church and much more of Fr. Alexander Men’s legacy, which continues in his spiritual children and is highlighted at a conference here in the States biennially, organized by Bishop Seraphim (Sigrist), who also takes part in the annual commemoration of Fr. Alexander in Moscow and has poured his love into the Moscow community founded by Fr. Alexander. It is Bishop Seraphim whose characteristic remark, “It is time for the exchange of our gifts,” inspired the title of this article.

In 2005, Dana shared the story of our Albanian experience with the participants in Moscow, who were eager to go and assist their brothers and sisters of Albanian heritage. As artists, Dana and I participated in
the 2009 conference here, speaking of Fr. Alexander’s encouragement of the arts as evidence of the creative spirit shared with us by Christ, and sharing a song written by the head of the Conservatory at Wheaton College, Tony Paine. (The conference enjoyed the sponsorship of Nyack College, an Evangelical college in which we teach.) Fr. Alexander blessed his former parishioners to share their gifts in unique ways—gifts that are priestly gifts, in the sense that we are, as believers, priests for the world. However, I must take you to Albania at this time so that we might touch upon the kind invitation given by Archbishop Anastasios to that country, its implementation by Fr. Luke Veronis and Presbytera Faith Veronis and the other wonderful Orthodox workers, who opened the doors for us to share our musical gifts, and the gifts we collected through concerts in this country, with God’s people in Albania.

The first public appearance of our Lord commenced with good news for the poor. “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,” declared Jesus, quoting the Prophet, “because He has anointed me to bring good news to the poor” (Isaiah 61:1). Good news to the poor, first of all, implies the Good News of the Gospel, and by God’s grace, the concept of the poor includes all of us. Good news also implies the alleviation of miserable living conditions, the opportunity for the able-bodied poor to make a living, and care given to those who are unable to work.

Jesus Christ was able to win the hearts of the poor and suffering because He voluntarily shared their poverty and suffering. The Archbishop of Albania, Anastasios, is a servant of Christ whose identification with the poor has opened the hearts of his people. The Archbishop came to Albania from a ministry in Africa, deliberately seeking a difficult and impoverished society with which to share his gifts of leadership and ministry. Albania had been ravaged by the paranoid leadership of Enver Hoxha, who had raised over 700,000 machine-gun bunkers over Albanian soil rather than help the people build homes. Upon his death, opposing political forces fought to gain power and control over the lives of those already oppressed. The chaos that prevailed immediately after Hoxha’s death subsided momentarily,
only to resurface a few years later when, unable to cope with capitalism, the formerly communist country all but collapsed into civil war. Bullets flew; buildings were destroyed. Hunger, succeeded by greed, once again threatened to completely destroy the lives of the Albanians.

But even as the situation of the country became desperate, the courage and stability of the Orthodox Church in Albania grew. As the poor became even more impoverished, as the nation was flooded with immigrants from the embattled Kosovo area, the Archbishop and the Diocese of Albania reached out to the immigrants (most of whom were Muslim) and invited them into their homes and churches, sharing their very lives and opening their resources to their needs. The Archbishop, as always, included many Orthodox laypeople in the distribution of gifts, the ministry of hospitals, the building of collapsed churches, schools, and hospitals, and in and through all, in the sharing of love.

In Christ, everyone who wants to help the poor can give something of himself or herself. The return of our modest gift is “good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over” (Luke 6:28). There is no room for pride or self-seeking in such an offering:

Out of a most untalented person God can produce a gifted one. One need only desire this, have a will aimed in this direction, and that’s all. From the most useless persons it is possible to cultivate very capable ones. In order for people not to think that it’s all their own doing, the Apostle Paul says, ‘Look, are many of you called wise or intelligent?’

Giving concerts in the name of Christ, listening to the remarkable music of the very talented and hard-working musicians in the schools and conservatories of Albania, staying in Albanian homes, and receiving the sacraments of the Albanian Orthodox Church, we had the opportunity to share material gifts from Americans with brothers and sisters in Albania. Gifts ranged from modest financial aid to needed

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items, such as a new collection of recorded music for the University of Tirana, sent by the truckload from Methodist Christians in California who had heard about the need through our concerts in their church. Noticing that much of their classical music had been preserved in handwritten copy, we had the privilege of presenting to them printed sheet music as well, including the fine "Liturgy of Peace" by the Orthodox composer, Christopher Kypros. Some of the piano music, such as the first Sonata of the Argentinian composer, Ginastera, was eagerly received because music from any country having diplomatic relations with the United States had been forbidden under Hoxha. We heard the beautiful music of Bach in the conservatory, and found that the story of Bach, and his Christian faith, was completely unknown there. So, by the foresight of our gracious hosts, we were able to bring not only material blessings from other Christians but also the particular gifts God had given us to share.

The most remarkable gift we received, other than the outstanding hospitality of every family that had us in their homes, however poor, was the example of those Orthodox Christians who surrounded the Archbishop and with whom he shared his vision and ministry. Here were people who "having nothing, possessed all things" (2 Cor 6:10).

We can, and will, celebrate the fact that God permits us to share our material gifts and intellectual and artistic talents with the poor, and theirs with us. But there is one quality that characterized both the mission of the Greek Orthodox Church and its associates to Albania and the life and work of Archbishop Anastasios. Without triumphalism, without bitterness, and without rancor toward many who oppose him and oppose the Church, the Archbishop has truly represented the mercy, love, and forgiveness of Christ to those who have been privileged to witness his own tireless service. The destruction of Albania included terrible suffering for its people, and the complete waste of their beautiful land and economic resources. The rebuilding of Albania depends upon a very diverse religious and ethnic population, including Albanians, Greeks, Slavophones, Vlachophones, and others within the Orthodox Church, whose cooperation with one another was very reluctant at first. There
are also many Muslims and a few of Roman Catholics. Mother Teresa of Calcutta was born in Albania, and her Roman Catholic followers
contribute to the building of the church in Albania in the meaningful
ways that distinguished her ministry among the poorest of the poor.
With the assistance of Archbishop Anastasios, Albania has become an
example, to many nations with similar diversity, of cooperation among
what might otherwise be warring religious and ethnic populations.

Archbishop Anastasios came to the country of Albania when
it had nothing and largely because it had nothing. Many outside its
well-fortified walls believed the Christian faith to have been all but
extinguished under Hoxha, who had not only thrown thousands of
priests, both Orthodox and Roman Catholic, in prison, but who tore the
Koran out of his own father’s hands and threw it on a bonfire, before
putting his father to death. The life of the believers who persevered
for more than forty “godless” years echoes the miraculous, suffering
lives of the early Christian saints. One priest, who was put to hard
labor during the day, served Holy Communion by night to the faithful,
under the table in various homes and using the tablecloth to hide the
service, which was held in whispers. Three holy lay sisters in the faith,
whom we met and interviewed, helped bring about the opening of their
country by their ministry of prayer during Lent and Advent, when they
would hold continuous prayer, day and night, in one of their homes
with one sister watching the door, one sister sleeping, and other taking
her eight-hour shift to implore God’s mercy upon Albania. Their hope
and prayer continued not only for forty days but for forty years.

When the blessed time came for the liberation of Albania—a time
later complicated by unbelievable civil strife—the three sisters, now
in their eighties, set out on foot and by donkey to share the Gospel.
And how did they share it? They would stand on street corners and
sing. I asked them what they sang, which attracted so many people,
and what had drawn crowds of curious children was simply the sung
prayer, “Our Father, which art in heaven, hallowed be Your name,
Your kingdom come…” After the children had gathered, the sisters
would tell them about Christ. And here is the miraculous part: Like the
Albanian youth who had received New Testaments from courageous young people from “Youth with a Mission,” who had braved five miles of mined border to sneak bibles into Albania, the children who heard the women sing wanted to know Christ through baptism. The three sisters asked them to bring their parents, and then brought priests to baptize the excited new converts—thousands of them.

The church grew. The opposition grew, but faith and love have overcome much of the fear that is behind prejudice and hatred. “Perfect love casts out fear.” When Archbishop Anastasios heard that one of the Protestant pastors in the area was discouraged from coming to one of our concerts, he immediately made certain that the pastor was included and honored. We heard later that the chancellor of the Orthodox Diocese, Papa Gjani Trebicka, had received death threats from a group of religious extremists, if the Good Friday outdoor procession was allowed to leave his Orthodox church. Hearing of the danger, the local Protestant pastor brought all of his flock to join with the procession that day so that all might see their unity and to protect the Chancellor personally. Although bullets were later fired into the priest’s home, he was unhurt. Rather than harming the cause of Christ, the extremists permitted another demonstration of the mystical interconnection of all who name the Name of Christ and honor Him as Lord.

One final personal episode will bring my memories of shared ministry to a close. We had the honor of presenting a concert in Durres, attended by members of the city council. Many of these were not Orthodox; some were Muslim, perhaps a few were Roman Catholic; some had not yet received a gift of faith. Dana and I had arranged the song, “Agios o Theos,” from Christopher Kypros’ Liturgy of Peace, for accompanied solo voice. How well we remember the emotion when Dana sang the song in Greek. “Sing it again!” cried one of the ladies in the audience. He did so, and then another voice, “Sing it in Albanian!” After a brief conference with Fr. Luke, Dana sang the song in Albania. All in the audience rose and sang it with him, hands joined. Fr. Luke Veronis came and brought his rich gift of preaching to the event.
We came home from Russia and Albania laden with handmade gifts from the people, and the remembrance of hospitality that cost them a great deal. We brought what we could, but we came home with much more. An example of the material gifts is a simple cross made by Papa Gjani Tribecka during times of severe oppression. All he could do to keep the faith alive in the hearts of his people was to secretly mold little crosses in the metal factory where he worked and slip the crosses under the door of the faithful. Making these crosses could have cost him his life.

“Tell everyone to come!” Archbishop Anastasios invited, as he said goodbye to us. He knew the value of personal involvement in mission, and applauded the idea of short-term missionary visits to Albania. The joyful surprise of giving of ourselves to the poor is the joy of sharing the reflected image of Christ within them, and receiving their incomparable gifts to us. This is Philanthropy in action, and central to the spiritual life of Orthodoxy. Mission had proved indeed an inestimable ‘time to share our gifts.’