

The Free Man of God

By His Eminence Metropolitan Saba (Isper)

Anastasios Yannoulatos, Archbishop of Tirana and All Albania, stands as a unique and extraordinary contemporary witness of the Orthodox faith. His approach to life was always grounded in the principles of faith, which shaped his every decision. A man of knowledge and action, prayer and evangelism, tradition and openness, he exemplified a rare combination of humility and courage. He preserved the treasure of faith while loving God's creation.

Despite facing immense challenges, he remained steadfast in bearing and transmitting the Christian witness until his last breath. He preserved this witness with a joyful demeanor and genuine smile radiating from the peace of his soul which was indwelled by the Holy Spirit.

I was fortunate to accompany him for five days during his visit to the Patriarchate of Antioch in 2000. Though I did not know him previously, his humility, joy, and profound connection with people left a lasting impression. My admiration for him grew as I learned more about his remarkable service, including stories shared by his bishop, John, who accompanied him on that visit.

Archbishop Anastasios believed that Christ is the Head of the Church and regarded himself as merely the servant of the Lord and His Church. This profound humility allowed him to utilize the abundant gifts God had granted him to achieve extraordinary miracles. In Albania, he literally resurrected a church from near extinction, building it from the ground up and transforming it into a vibrant and organized church.

During his earlier missionary work in Africa, he ordained 62 readers and catechists from eight African tribes, translated the Divine Liturgy into four local languages, organized 150 Orthodox parishes and missions, and built several churches, school, and health centers.

In Albania, where the government had issued a decree declaring Albania a religion-free state as of 1967, Archbishop Anastasios revived a church that had virtually ceased to exist. There were no churches, no monasteries, no heritage, and not even bishops. Only eighteen elderly priests had remained. Over the 33 years of his service as Archbishop, from 1992 to 2025, he built 150 new churches, reconstructed

160 others, restored 60 monasteries and churches, and established 70 ecclesiastical facilities, including schools, youth and medical centers, guesthouses, workshops, dormitories, soup kitchens, a theological academy, a seminary, a school for ecclesiastical music, and more. He also educated and ordained 168 priests. May his remarkable footsteps touch and inspire our blessed Archdiocese. This is a call from me to all capable and faithful members of our Archdiocese.

Through his extensive initiatives, Archbishop Anastasios brought the Albanian Church to financial self-sufficiency after starting with nothing. The Orthodox faithful of North America were blessed to contribute to many of his ecclesiastical and social projects through organizations such as IOCC and OCMC.

His efforts extended beyond ecclesiastical matters, as he worked to establish the Church's presence in society and the state. He contributed to the development of Albania's infrastructure, including three hydroelectric power projects, the construction of roads and bridges, and the renovation of public schools, among other initiatives that are too numerous to list in a single article.

He launched publications in Albania, including Resurrection for adults, Joy for children, and Bells for youth, in addition to a radio station. He established projects that included a publishing house, a candle factory, carpentry and iconography workshops, and restoration facilities. He also fought tirelessly for the restitution of Church properties.

Archbishop Anastasios combined theological knowledge and research in the history of religions with missionary and pastoral service, all while remaining acutely aware of social needs. He authored 24 books and delivered hundreds of lectures. His work presented a radiant and courageous face to non-Orthodox Christians, as he contributed to modern Christian witness, inter-Christian understanding, interfaith dialogue, and peaceful coexistence among peoples and religions. His presence at the World Council of Churches was as influential as that of great Orthodox leaders of the past, such as St. Nikolai Velimirovich and Fr. Georges Florovsky.

He departed this life on the morning of the feast of St. Gregory the Theologian, a saint who similarly labored to strengthen and revive the faith. When St. Gregory became Patriarch of Constantinople, nearly all the city's churches were in Arian hands, except for one small chapel. After a few years of his leadership, nearly all the churches had returned to Orthodoxy. Known for his love of hesychasm and poetic

spirit, St. Gregory eventually retired to a hermitage after completing his mission. In contrast, righteous Archbishop Anastasios continued his labors, enduring all kinds of hardships until the Lord called him home.

In his later years, Archbishop Anastasios was deeply grieved by the lack of unity in the Orthodox world. He was profoundly pained by the divisions that affected the Church and issued a prophetic call reminiscent of the Old Testament prophets. In his message, he emphasized the need for Orthodox consensus and warned against unilateral decisions, earning him the well-deserved title of "The Wise Man of Contemporary Orthodoxy." For him, Christ was always the priority—above all things, no matter how great—in service to Christ, not the other way around. He left us bearing the sorrow of a fractured Orthodox reality, but he also left behind a pure theology and a vision of the Church untainted by worldly passions.

His uniqueness was based on living his theology and embodying it both in his personal life and in his diverse ministry. He was a blessed man, freed by Christ from the various bonds of this world, soaring ever toward the divine realm and making the earth a reflection of that heavenly reality. He sought to fulfill the Lord's Prayer: "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." He was not a mere theorist or sophist but a living example of his faith and teachings. He was a light on this earth, living the Resurrection and naming all his new projects after it, including the magnificent Cathedral of the Resurrection in Tirana. His faith in and experience of the Resurrection fill us with hope as we bid him farewell, confident that he will intercede from above for the Church and the world he loved so fervently. May God hear his voice in eternity and have mercy on us through his prayers.