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INTERNATIONAL ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN CHARITIES

# NEWS & NEEDS

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## Cease-fire in the Daily Battle for Survival

Based on reports from  
Aleksandar Acimovic

**Serbia (IOCC)** - "It reminds me of that algebra equation with two independent variables which is so hard to solve. How does one stretch four 100 Dinar bills (about \$10) into eight 100 Dinar bills—a minimum for survival in Serbia?" asks Aleksandar Acimovic, IOCC Project Monitor in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, of the challenges faced by a growing number of pensioners, families, refugees—and working people—trying to make ends meet in what has become Europe's poorest country. More than 70% of Serbia's people now must struggle to find an answer to the nearly impossible equation each day.

Petar, a librarian at the Belgrade University Library, is all too familiar with this perplexing equation. His monthly salary, including benefits, does not exceed \$13 for his family of ten. He lives in a small one-bedroom apartment in the vicinity of the University, enabling him to walk to work and saving him a lot of trouble and money. After work he goes home



Photo: Aleksandar Acimovic/IOCC Belgrade

Petar and his family gather for a photo during a recent visit from IOCC project monitor Aleksandar Acimovic who brought food and hygiene parcels as part of an IOCC program to assist the most vulnerable families in Serbia.

to his still joyful and radiant wife. She does not work. Had there been a job for her, she would use her degree in nutrition. Since there are no prospects of a job, she has decided to dedicate herself to their eight children.

So how do Petar and the thousands of families like his in Serbia resolve the equation?

Petar tells a sad but amazing story about what he describes as his "patchwork life." Forced into constant debt on his checking account at the Postal bank, he just shrugs his shoulders when the postmen arrives, blushes, calculates, and when an opportunity presents itself, unloads coal and takes other odd jobs to pay the debt. Born in Belgrade, Petar is the son of a

Russian refugee who came to Serbia. Eighty-three years after his family emigrated in search of a better life, the university-educated Petar recently began accepting humanitarian assistance distributed by IOCC to the most vulnerable employees of the University Library.

*"It is like a  
cease-fire in  
my daily battle  
for survival."*

*~Petar*

*continued on page 4*

## From the Executive Director



IOCC File Photo

Whether visiting with people in need of help or offering assistance in translating, Kosara Gavrilovic has worked with IOCC in its offices in Belgrade, Serbia and Baltimore, Maryland.

International Orthodox Christian Charities, Inc. (IOCC) was established in 1992 by the Standing Conference of Canonical Orthodox Bishops in the Americas (SCOBA) as the official humanitarian aid agency of Orthodox Christians to work in cooperation with the Orthodox Churches worldwide.

*The mission of IOCC is to respond to the call of our Lord Jesus Christ, to minister to those who are suffering and are in need throughout the world, sharing with them God's gifts of food, shelter, economic self-sufficiency and hope.*

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News & Needs is edited by Mark Hodde.**

Through visits to refugee shelters, hospitals, orphanages and other social care institutions, IOCC staff regularly seek out the most vulnerable people in need of assistance. Working in countries where people have suffered from war, been cut-off from support networks due to social unrest or seen their savings and all available resources dry up under international economic sanctions, it is no easy task to identify the "most" vulnerable. The need is so great.

No matter where IOCC provides help, however, the elderly and the children are universally most affected and are therefore frequently the beneficiaries of IOCC assistance.

Recently, IOCC secured funding from the European Union to provide much-needed food, hygiene and medical assistance specifically for the elderly in Belgrade, Serbia. In Russia, IOCC is helping young and old alike through a program that provides supplemental food to people struggling to survive on meager pensions or children who have been abandoned. (*See story, page 5.*)

The very young and the very old are not distinguished from other groups only by their extraordinary needs. They differ by the variety of gifts they have. The elderly have a wealth of experience, while the young an innocence and enthusiasm to learn and inspire their teachers.

It is not surprising then that the IOCC staff ranges in age from mid-twenties to late seventies. Whether standing watch over IOCC field offices and warehouses to ensure that aid is distributed during times of unrest, or leading negotiations with community leaders, the pairing of different gifts is an important part of IOCC's work.

Whether you are a young volunteer singing carols, or one of our most seasoned employees like Mile Madic, Luka Melic or Kosara Gavrilovic, as fellow participants in the work of IOCC each of us has gifts that make it possible to serve the most vulnerable people in need of our help. Thank you for sharing those gifts through IOCC to bring caring assistance to a world in need.

Yours in Christ,

Constantine M. Triantafilou

# All Good Things Come From God

Reflections from Lee Papouras, an IOCC Intern in Jerusalem/West Bank



Photo: Lee Papouras / IOCC Jerusalem

An elderly woman in the West Bank city of Ramallah receives food brought to her by a social worker.

**BALTIMORE (IOCC)** -Setting out from the soup kitchen with baked potatoes, chicken patties, yogurt and fruit-we were fully armed in our battle against poverty in the West Bank. Four of us were preparing to visit the homes of a score of elderly Palestinians in order to bring them food and companionship in implementing the Meals on Wheels Project run by Aid to the Aged (ATTA), a community organization led by Palestinian Orthodox Christians in Jerusalem.

During the next few hours, it was very difficult for me to discern who was treating whom as we visited the houses. We accepted the Palestinian hospitality that came with persistent offers of kahweh saada, a bitter Arabic

coffee scented with a hint of cardamom, from the elderly who received our food.

The elderly people we visited were mostly women, and were evenly split between Islam and Christianity. But neither gender nor religion was a factor in their universal need and the warmth they displayed as we made our way from home to home.

On the whole, the living conditions of these people were appalling. Plumbing was often nonexistent, heating usually came from a small grill top which would also serve as a stove, if there were any

food to cook. One lady who didn't have any heating, improvised and built a small bonfire in the middle of her single room-she greeted me with an outstretched hand which was blackened with soot, coughing because there was no ventilation. Another woman had made her home in an abandoned storefront. She greeted us hunched over, as if she had piled all her sorrows on her back and now, in the twilight of her life, they had finally proved too much to bear.

It amazed me to see people living in such poverty yet were able to smile. They accepted our company with delight and graciousness and received the meals with God's name on their tongues. "All good things come from God" and "God willing" were phrases that were said time and again.

*continued on page 4*



Photo: Lee Papouras / IOCC Jerusalem

Elderly from the West Bank city of Ramallah enjoy a meal catered by Adel Boulos, a member of the Orthodox Church and restaurateur par excellence, who prepared the luncheon for disadvantaged elderly.

## Cease-fire *(continued from page 1)*

According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs in Belgrade, over 300,000 people are now described as living below the poverty level and in need of assistance. This number does not include the working poor like Petar and his family—an indication that the number of those in need is much higher.

“This is the first time that someone has helped us. We are relieved, at least for some time,” says Petar. “It is like a cease-fire in my daily battle for survival.” Petar and his family of ten receive three family food parcels and the equivalent number of family hygiene packets. In financial

terms, this assistance equals two and a half times the average salary in Serbia—5 months of earnings for Petar. Struggling to accept the much-needed aid, he admits that, given other options, he would never apply for assistance. The children around him dressed in hand-me-downs, including eight children ranging in age from 5 to 21 years of age, are used to coping with what they have. The school-aged children borrow textbooks to study. But Petar insists that only love matters.

For growing numbers of Serbs the answer to Acimovic’s problematic equation is the assistance which is found through organizations like IOCC.



Photo: IOCC, Jerusalem

*A librarian at the Belgrade University, Petar’s monthly salary for his full-time position is just \$13 a month.*

## All Good Things *(continued from page 3)*

The following day, a larger group of social workers went to pick up more than forty elderly men and women. Adel Boulos, a member of the Orthodox Church and a restaurateur par excellence, had offered to hold a luncheon for the impoverished elderly of Ramallah. His establishment, Al-Bardouni, is the most chic dining one can find in the city and the people ate a meal worthy of a caliph.

Upon finishing, Jaleela, who is always smiling, began to thank us in a song: “The fields turned green and God shined a light

upon us, when he sent all of you to come to our houses...” And so it went until she finished and immediately there was a resounding chorus of affirmation from the other women.

Jaleela then came over to me and gave me a present—she had handcrafted for me an embroidered wall decoration, which read in Arabic “Peace to this house” so that I would never forget them. As if I could! I will never forget them or their kindness, gentleness, hospitality and most importantly I will never forget their faith in God.

**Editor’s Note:** Lee Papouras, an intern in Jerusalem, works with IOCC Country Representative Nora Kort on projects to assist the elderly, disabled and needy Palestinians in Jerusalem and the West Bank. The IOCC Honors Internship Program, made possible through a grant by the Farah Foundation, provides opportunities for young professionals interested in a career in international relief and development assistance to be placed in overseas assignments.



# A Credo To Live By

By Tatiana Vinogradova



Photo: IOCC

Katya (center) together with IOCC Regional Director George Antoun and Maria Gaidukova, the Principal of the Tula Social Center for Children's Rehabilitation.

**Tula, Russia (IOCC)** "Love these children as none has ever loved them" is the credo by which the staff of the Tula Social Center for Children's Rehabilitation approach their work each day.

It's not an easy creed to live by—even for the dedicated staff whose loving care is an exceptional experience for the children whose care is entrusted to them.

Katya, a nine-year-old picked up from the street, had not washed herself for several months by the time she was delivered to the Center by the authorities. When nurses started washing her, the young girl had an allergic reaction. Even with the best of intentions, the staff, who represented the next set of parents in her life, had brought pain to a life that had already seen its share of suffering.

The Center, which opened in May 1999, is home to 76 children

ranging in age from 7 to 15. Unlike Katya, who was abandoned by her family, most of the children end up at the Center as the result of interventions by the State after determining that their parents were unable or unfit to care for them.

While it cannot replace the loss of family for the children, the Center provides the stability and nurturing most of the children have never experienced. Visiting the Center to distribute food as part of a \$17 million program now being implemented by IOCC in Russia, the IOCC staff learned that, for most of the children, life with their birth parents was extremely chaotic and stressful and that most do not want to return to their families.

Quite an extraordinary sentiment for young children.

But to hear Katya's story is to learn of the many problems facing Russia and a system unable to cope with little lives that have fallen through the cracks.

Katya escaped from her alcoholic mother. She never knew her father. Before running away from her mother Katya was always hungry as her mother forgot to feed her. There were initially a lot of problems as she adjusted to the Center, but the tolerance of the teachers and their kind attitude helped to overcome most of them. The creed at work.

Her well-kept hair, clean clothes and above all her smile, are a testament to the dedication of the Tula Social Center staff and their fulfillment of the credo.

Upon leaving the Center, one couldn't help but be left with a sense of bittersweet hope. Despite their painful pasts, these children are the lucky ones. And for each one of them, there are thousands more children like Katya who could benefit from the staff's credo.



*"Love these children as none has ever loved them."*

*~The Credo for the  
Tula Social Center  
for Children's  
Rehabilitation*

# Alone, But Not Forgotten

Based on reports by Nenad Prelevic



Photo: Nenad Prelevic / IOCC Podgorica

“We were her family,” said Nenad Prelevic of Rumica Vlahovic (pictured) who was forced to flee alone from Kosovo last August.

## Podgorica, Montenegro (IOCC)

“Hers is one of the very sad stories,” an emotional Nenad Prelevic said describing his visits with Rumica Vlahovic who, he had just learned, had died of complications related to a heart condition.

“We were her family,” explained Prelevic, whose voice reflected the feeling of loss.

Just two weeks earlier, while making his rounds at the Djurdjevi Stupovi Monastery in Berane, Montenegro, Prelevic delivered food to the woman who was forced to flee Kosovo last summer. With no family to rely upon for support, Vlahovic was dependent on the aid

she received from the Serbian Orthodox Church and IOCC.

Pressured to leave her home in Kosovo by the ethnic hostilities that have plagued the people of the province, there was a tragic irony in the fact that she had found a home through the cooperation of Orthodox and Catholic organizations working in Montenegro. Initially finding temporary housing in the hostel at the Djurdjevi Stupovi Monastery, Vlahovic was finally given a prefabricated house built by the Catholic organization Caritas. The shelter was a donation to the Circle of Serbian Sisters, an organization of Serbian Orthodox

Women, in Berane who were given use of property owned by the monastery to assist the displaced persons from Kosovo.

Before leaving Kosovo, Vlahovic had found safe haven at the Serbian Orthodox Monastery in Decani, where the monks of the Brotherhood of the Decani Monastery have given refuge—without regard to ethnicity—to Albanian and Serbian victims of the Kosovo conflict. It was there that she began receiving assistance delivered by IOCC to the Monastery.

Prelevic recalled his last visit with Vlahovic, “It was hard for me to talk to her. I didn’t know what to say and I was afraid to react with tears, which would remind her of the events that had brought her to Berane.” The picture he took before leaving captured the silence and the isolation which filled the woman’s new home. The realization that she had no future, was ailing, and had no way to go back to Kosovo overwhelmed any feeling of appreciation she had for the assistance given her.

Vlahovic was totally dependent on humanitarian assistance, including the food and hygiene parcels she received each month from IOCC. “She had no family, no hope of returning to Kosovo. She was utterly alone.”

Rumica Vlahovic was buried by the “family” she had known last at the Djurdjevi Stupovi Monastery in Berane. Memory Eternal!



# Responding to the Call

## Volunteers Share the Spirit with Those in Need

**Baltimore, Maryland (IOCC)** - "I want to do that because Jesus wants us to do that and love homeless people," began a letter from a grade-schooler explaining why she and her fellow Sunday School mates had spent their free time doing chores to earn extra money, saved their allowances and gave up some of their holiday gifts to help purchase much needed food and clothing for refugee children and others served through IOCC. The activity was organized with the help of the Sunday School teachers by Penny Rey, a member of the Greek Orthodox Cathedral of the Annunciation in Baltimore.

The Sunday School children may be some of the youngest volunteers who have given their time, talents and money in partnership with IOCC. Many others who regularly volunteer for IOCC join them in their efforts.

"Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of working, but it is the same God who inspires them all in every one. *To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good* (1 Corinthians 12: 4-7)."

With the support of a generous grant from the Archbishop Iakovos Leadership 100 Endowment Fund, last September IOCC launched an effort to encourage volunteerism by "working together at home for the good of all." The effort encourages Orthodox Christians to work together in social outreach to those in need both in their local communities and around the world—each according to their gifts. The effort is catching on.

In New York, Eugenia Karydas together with friends Sophia Galatoulas and Despina Mantikas, went caroling with their children during the holidays. Visiting dozens of homes over two days, the children collected \$425 in support of IOCC's work. "The kids sang their hearts out," wrote Karydas, "and the moment these wonderful friends and relatives heard we were collecting money for IOCC they were very excited to help out."

In Connecticut, Presvytera Penelope Dassouras, together with the Children's Christmas Festival Committee of St. George Greek Orthodox Church, organized a Children's



Photo: IOCC / Baltimore

Eugenia Karydas (back row left) together with the children whose singing brought joy not only to the homes they visited, but also to the poor served through IOCC.

Christmas Party with the theme "Children Helping Children." And help they did. One thousand dollars was raised by the more than 100 children who attended the event.

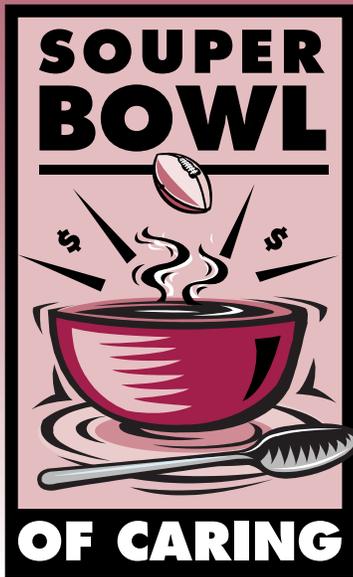
Volunteers also regularly assist in the work of IOCC at its headquarters in Baltimore, Maryland. Through the dedicated service and coordination of Diane Boia, volunteers have logged hundreds of hours preparing mailings, participating in phone-a-thons and raising awareness among fellow parishioners in their respective parishes.

Explaining her motivation for getting the Sunday School children involved, Rey maintains that "All people need to help others." Adding, "We have a responsibility to do that and these children need to learn to help others."

Whether working with children or by volunteering with the IOCC Metropolitan Committees which have formed in cities around the United States, the efforts of Orthodox volunteers are making a difference.

For more information on Metropolitan Committees or volunteer activities like those described above, please visit the IOCC website at [www.iocc.org](http://www.iocc.org) or call Michael Tsakalos, IOCC's Volunteer Services Coordinator, toll-free at (877) 803 IOCC (4622).





## Souper Bowl Excitement

**Baltimore (IOCC)** -From Alabama to Indiana, Texas to Virginia, New Jersey to California, Orthodox Christians across the United States teamed up for the "Souper Bowl of Caring" on January 30.

Parishes participating in the youth-sponsored event told stories of most valuable players' that emerged from the day's excitement.

Sunday School Director Jill Argyrople of Annunciation Greek Orthodox Church in Newburyport, Massachusetts described one eight-year-old who donated part of her birthday money to the "Souper Bowl of Caring." She also enlisted the support of adults who attended

her birthday celebration.

In Buffalo, New York, a local teen who has been in a coma following a car accident was the beneficiary of the proceeds from the Greek Orthodox Youth Association's collection at the Hellenic Orthodox Church of the Annunciation.

Demetria Doukas, the daughter of Father and Presvytera Doukas, led the youth as they collected a dollar and canned goods in a large barrel placed in the Narthex.

Orthodox parishes joined more than 11,000 churches throughout the country who raised more than \$2.8 million dollars in this year's "Sunday of Caring."



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