

well as setting up agricultural cooperatives are all extraordinarily important, yet it remains that embrace, that handshake, that look of gratitude from deep, piercing eyes, which speaks to the heart and inspires the human spirit.

Whatever type of material assistance IOCC provides, it pales in comparison to the hope it creates for families with so little, for villages, and for entire municipalities.

For one to understand, fully comprehend, and appreciate the depth of IOCC's life-saving work — and it cannot be seen as anything less than the ability to save lives — a person must participate in an IOCC Study Trip. To be on the ground with passionate IOCC staff, with young children and elderly grandparents whose faces still bear the visual scars of war, conveys hope and love that can only be felt. As we know, love is the most powerful force in the universe. A study trip enables a person to experience the power of this transforming love.

We have all become kinder and better disposed to love because of this experience, this encounter with God, revealed to us so personally by those who, in part, owe their post-war existence to IOCC.

Fr. Marc Vranes is pastor of Holy Trinity Orthodox Church (OCA) in Bristol, CT.

Fr. Anastasios Bourantas



As our foreign exchange student of two years, Igor, was graduating from Concord High School in Wilmington, Delaware, and preparing to return to his home in Montenegro, I received a phone call from IOCC asking me if I would be interested in participating in a study trip sponsored by IOCC to Serbia-Montenegro and Bosnia-Herzegovina. My response was an immediate "yes!" Having learned more about the situation in the former Yugoslavia from Igor, I was excited about the work of IOCC and knew that after the trip, I would become a representative and an

advocate of their Christ-centered work.

I had often reflected on the mission statement of IOCC: "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;" and I was anxious to see how this statement took flesh in the field.

The first response came from my faithful flock of St. George who "responded to the call" by providing the funds for my trip. So often, a very simple request to a worthy cause is all our faithful need. As clergy, we must provide our flock with opportunities to exhibit their love to the people of the world. Almsgiving, along with prayer and fasting, is the instruction of our Lord. Not all are able to travel or to personally provide assistance to the needy, but all can support such efforts.

Of the programs and people we visited on the study trip, particularly impressive were the micro-credit loan projects and beneficiaries. An initial IOCC loan of \$800-\$1,500 can help people start and sustain their own businesses. Whether it was an IOCC micro-credit loan officer, or other local IOCC staff, I was also impressed with their knowledge and professionalism. They know what is needed and how to go about helping people.

The IOCC study trip to Serbia-Montenegro and Bosnia-Herzegovina was a blessing. Every day I would return to my hotel room on a "high" after visiting that day's projects. The whole week was a beautiful vision of what IOCC does. On a daily basis we saw a response to God's call, without discrimination — a sincere and genuine outreach to people.

I am grateful for those who tirelessly work to fulfill IOCC's mission. I pray that all of us may have the opportunity to experience one of IOCC's projects, whether it is a hands-on experience like mine or through the offering of our treasure. May God bless the people of the world that are in need, and may He grant strength to all those who are called to respond.

Fr. Anastasios is the pastor of St. George Greek Orthodox Church in Media, PA.

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PRIEST to PRIEST

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The winter issue of Priest to Priest is dedicated to the 2nd annual IOCC Study Trip which traveled to Serbia-Montenegro and Bosnia-Herzegovina. Highlights of the trip included the presentation of the Order of St. Sava, First Degree by His Holiness Patriarch Pavle to IOCC for its 13 years of service in the former Yugoslavia, and the presence of NBA Basketball star and IOCC supporter Vlade Divac who joined the group for one day. Three Orthodox priests from the United States were part of the group that traveled to experience, firsthand, the life-changing work of IOCC. Their reflections are recorded below.

Fr. David G. Barr



As parish priests, we get a tremendous amount of mail across our desks on a daily basis. If you are like me, many of these mailings are put aside to read when time allows — which, for me, it rarely does.

After recently participating in the study trip to Serbia-Montenegro and Bosnia-Herzegovina, however, I now have a new set of priorities when it comes to sorting my mail. IOCC material is no longer placed in the "read when time allows" stack. Having seen first hand and up close what IOCC has done and continues to do in the Balkans makes me want to be more aware of what it is doing in Ethiopia, Georgia, the Middle East, Romania, and so many other places around the world. In truth, more than just wanting to be aware, it has made me want to increase my participation in the work of IOCC.

One of the things that struck me during the trip was how the people of Serbia and Bosnia viewed us. There, we were not Greek Orthodox, Antiochian Orthodox, Serbian Orthodox, or OCA. We were simply Orthodox from America. To those who have been assisted by IOCC in the Balkans, the aid came from "Orthodox Christians in North America." IOCC brought all of us together for a common goal and cause. It is Orthodox unity in practice.

My reaction to the work of IOCC is not isolated — it is shared by the countless people who have received aid from IOCC over the past 13 years. At a collective center near Belgrade where refugees from Kosovo live, people thanked us for visiting and said, "From your presence here we know we are not alone." Schoolchildren and teachers in Serbia thanked us for the computers that IOCC provided for their schools, offering internet access and computer training to children who otherwise would be left out of the information age. They told us, "IOCC has brought the world closer to us." A family who received a micro-credit loan for their small farm said, "IOCC gave us our lives back." At a family shoe store in Novi Grad, Bosnia, another micro-credit loan recipient told us, "Because of IOCC, we can provide for ourselves." At a cooperative of 230 farmers in Bosnia, we heard, "IOCC has helped a whole community to be self-sufficient." At St. Sava Youth Club in Banja Luka, Bosnia, the children said, "Because of IOCC's help, we are learning our faith."

IOCC has changed many people's lives throughout the world. And now, after participating in this study trip to Serbia-Montenegro and Bosnia-Herzegovina, I can add my name to the list of those whose lives have been changed by the work of IOCC. No, my life wasn't changed by a micro-credit loan, farm equipment or other type of humanitarian aid offered by IOCC. My life was changed by meeting people in a collective outside of Belgrade and in a farming community outside of Banja Luka whose lives have been changed by the work of IOCC.

Fr. David is pastor of St. Elias Antiochian Orthodox Church in Austin, TX

Fr. Marc Vranes



Gratitude lies at the heart of Biblical faith. The entire gospel message is rooted in God's love and grace towards mankind. The Psalter and St Paul's epistles speak continuously of giving thanks. It seems nothing can reveal the totality of our Christian faith more so than by giving thanks. Yet gratitude has always been the most

difficult of all the human emotions to express. No one word can aptly convey the appreciation a person feels. Until we reside in the Kingdom of God, where feelings can be more adequately expressed, "Thank You," offered with a warm and lasting embrace, or a firm handshake, will have to do.

The second IOCC Study Trip allowed us the opportunity to see how deep appreciation is expressed by actions which words will never, ever, be able to express. "As our heart is," St. Theophan the Recluse said, "so are our words; as our heart is, so are our actions."

In speaking with us, in the solitude of a cinder block garage he and his son built, Drago, an IOCC beneficiary, asked quietly, "How many people here owe their post-war existence to what IOCC has done for them?" Responding to his own question, he replied, "Far too many to know."

Ten years after fighting in the former Yugoslavia ended, the people of this rugged, mountainous, and very beautiful land endure. For these survivors, there is only today, then tomorrow, and then the next day. Wars can do that. Establishing civil society programs and NGO's (non-governmental organizations) as

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A QUARTERLY PUBLICATION FOR ORTHODOX CLERGY

from the Church Relations Committee of the IOCC Board of Directors: Very Rev. Leonid Kishkovsky, Chairman, Very Rev. Michael Ellias, Very Rev. Robert S. Kondratick, Rev. Nicholas C. Triantafilou

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STUDY VISITORS VIEW IOCC PROJECTS IN SERBIA AND BOSNIA

From Aug. 29 - Sept. 7, IOCC Executive Director Constantine Triantafilou led a group of 11 committed supporters, including three clergy, on a study tour of Serbia-Montenegro and Bosnia-Herzegovina. Participants visited IOCC projects in both countries and saw, firsthand, how IOCC's efforts are continuing to make positive impacts in the lives of those served.

Since 1992, IOCC has delivered over \$70 million in humanitarian assistance to people of all ethnic backgrounds in the former Yugoslavia. That year, IOCC began operations in the former Yugoslavia, including Serbia-Montenegro and Bosnia-Herzegovina, to respond to the emergency needs of thousands of returnees, refugees and displaced persons. Since then, IOCC's operations have evolved into development projects for returnees and others.

Below are some of the highlights of the itinerary:

- **Aug. 30** — Audience with His Holiness Patriarch Pavle of the Serbian Orthodox Church and reception of the Order of St. Sava, First Degree, (highest ecclesiastical award of the Serbian Orthodox Church) for IOCC's 13 years of work in the area; visit to an IOCC-supported collective center in Grocka that houses displaced people from Kosovo.
- **Sept. 1** — Visit, on the first day of classes, to two schools participating in IOCC's "Connecting Kids" Project. The group was accompanied by NBA Los Angeles Lakers Center Vlade Divac whose Group 7 Children's Foundation was the funder for the "Connecting Kids" Project; lunch with His Grace Bishop Jovan of Sumadija, and the students and faculty of St. John Chrysostom Orthodox Seminary in Kragujevac.
- **Sept. 2** — Visit with micro-credit loan recipients in Sabac en route to Banja Luka, Bosnia-Herzegovina. Currently, IOCC has 36 active micro-credit beneficiaries in Sabac, and a total of 250 since the mid-90's.
- **Sept. 3** — Visit in the Bosanski Petrovac Municipality with the first supported returnees to the area, and the first beneficiaries of IOCC's Rehabilitation and Return Program; tour of the Vrtoce Agricultural Poultry Farm Co-Op; Lunch at Kmanj Monastery; visit to the Resource Center in Drvar (formerly a Tito and WWII museum).
- **Sept. 4** — Divine Liturgy in Banja Luka's Holy Trinity Cathedral with guest US priests con-celebrating with the Cathedral Dean and Deacons.
- **Sept. 5** — Meeting with youths involved with Lighthouse community center in Prijedor; tour of micro-credit client shops in Novi Grad; visit to Agro-Japra agricultural cooperative in Donji Agaci.
- **Sept. 6** — Tour of the Circle of Serbian Sisters (KSS) projects in Banja Luka; visit to St. Sava Orthodox Youth Center in Banja Luka; farewell luncheon.

"I encourage you to participate in one of the future study trips, whether it be to Serbia and Bosnia or some other place where IOCC is working... And when you go, be prepared to come home changed, invigorated and committed."

— Fr. David G. Barr,
Pastor of St. Elias Antiochian
Orthodox Church in Austin, TX

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— Fr. Anastasios Bourantas,
Pastor of St. George Greek Orthodox
Church in Media, PA.

"This study trip opened my eyes to the magnitude of work that Orthodox Christians in North America are doing across the world through IOCC."

— Fr. David G. Barr,
Pastor of St. Elias Antiochian
Orthodox Church in Austin, TX

