

# “Christianity in Eastern Europe”

## Special Presentation

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**Almir:** So today we won't be having any videos or photos because we're not that tech savvy as I thought we were, right? We're just theologians; what do we know, you know? *(Laughter)* We're all books and Greek and Hebrew. Come on; we have enough of that. *(Laughter)*

First of all I'd like to say a special blessing for all of you and all of your families who are celebrating; today is Veteran's Day. You know, it was today that I used my Google, and I saw that it is Veteran's Day. So I would like to give you a short prayer. I'd like to pray for you in my Croatian language. So if that is something that you would like to join me in, that would be great.. Let us pray.

**Transcriber's Note:** Almir prays.

**Almir:** Amen.

**Brave Men:** Amen.

**Almir:** Okay. That was the Croatian language. If you've never heard the Croatian language, this is my prayer in Croatian. So I'm a pastor, I'm a teacher, I'm a professor. I hold a doctorate degree in theology. I'm an academic dean and so I do a lot of speaking. But you know, it's kind of hard without props; it is. *(Laughter)*

But if we want to talk about Christianity in Eastern Europe, then we need to define what Christianity actually is, right? What is Christianity? Christianity is a relationship with Christ, okay? What is Christianity besides that? Christianity is a religion, right? It is. Some people say, “I'm not religious; I'm spiritual.” Well, demons are too. *(Laughter)* They're very spiritual; trust me—more spiritual than you are. *(Laughter)*

So yeah, but it's more than that. In Europe, especially in Eastern Europe, Christianity is part of the culture; it's part of the everyday life. And so Christianity is not just something that's happening on Sunday morning; Christianity is our identity.

So if you want to talk about Europe, we need to talk about Christianity in Europe in general. And if I ask you, “What do you know about Europe? What is Europe?” Europe is the Old World, right? Europe is the place that you all came from, okay? You probably carry some of the Slavic roots, or maybe some of you are Germans. I went to a German club last night; amazing beer! *(Laughter)* Well done, Americans; good beer! *(Laughter)* Good import, yeah.

When we talk about Eastern Europe, everybody knows about Europe—about Germany, about Spain, about the U.K., right?—about Italy because it looks a lot like a boot, right? And it's cold.

But what about Eastern Europe, you know? When you hear about Eastern Europe what do you think? What is your first image of Eastern Europe? How would you describe to me European and Eastern Europe? Do you have any idea what that would be? Do you know any country in Eastern Europe? Well now we have this huge war, right?

**Brave Man:** Ukraine.

**Almir:** Okay, Ukraine. Okay. We have—

**Brave Man:** Poland?

**Almir:** Poland, yeah.

**Brave Man:** Rumania.

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**Almir:** Rumania, yes.

**Brave Man:** Albania.

**Brave Man:** Hungary.

**Almir:** Sure: Albania, Hungary, Chechnya, Slovakia, even Russia, though it is a Euro-Asian country, right? But Russia is also here, too. Estonia is here, Latvia is here, and other countries. So if you talk about Eastern Europe, we cannot say, “I’ve been there.” I love Americans. They say, “Oh, I’ve been to Europe.” Like okay, where? *(Laughter)*

“Oh, you know,--Paris.”

“Oh, that’s not Europe; that’s just the tail. You haven’t been to Europe until you’ve been to Albania or Bulgaria.” *(Laughter)* “Then you’ve been to Europe. That’s the real Europe.” But we are talking about Europe and the culture, and Europe as a Christian continent.

Then we usually say that okay, we have Western Europe and we have Eastern Europe. We know a lot about Western Europe of course with the cars, the football,--penny-shaped, right?—I’m sorry; soccer. *(Laughter)* Fine, fine! *(Laughter)*

And then when we talk about Eastern Europe it looks like we actually have nothing to say about Eastern Europe, right? We could go back into the past and say yeah, there was a Cold War; that is what we know. There was the U.S.S.R.; we know about that. We know that “Rocky” movie, right? Okay, that’s what we know.

But if we talk about Christianity in Eastern Europe, what about Christianity in Eastern Europe? Then we actually know less than that. Christianity in Eastern Europe is actually really interesting. And you might say that I am in Eastern Europe, even though some of my Croatian buddies will not agree with that. They would say that is central Europe, but people talk about it.

But when we talk about Eastern Europe we usually talk about Orthodox Christianity, about Byzantine Christianity. And when we talk about western Europe we usually talk about the Catholic Church and the Protestant Church, right?—the Anglican Church, the Protestant Church of Germany, the Church of Sweden, the Lutheran Church again, right?

Okay, and this is interesting now. If we want to make a split between Western and Eastern Europe, it’s not just geographical. The problem especially with Americans, and people who like to travel, they think that there is a clean, clear line between West and East. But it doesn’t look like that.

Eastern Europe is more like an idea than a fact. Eastern Europe had its borders during the Cold War, but these borders moved. So today, in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century, for example, my country, Croatia, was part of the Communist world. We didn’t have freedom to worship God. We didn’t have freedom to go to church. We didn’t have freedom to say, “I’m a Protestant.” You can’t evangelize on the street, you know, or share tracts, or something. They didn’t have that kind of freedom.

But today Croatia is part of the European Union. And you know what the European Union is. You know what NATO is. These are Western alliances. The European Union is something similar to the United States of America. They’re not one country, but it’s more like a confederation, something similar to that. It’s a band of countries, but they’re working together as Europe to bring goods and joy to everyone around us.

**Brave Man:** It doesn’t work.

**Almir:** It doesn’t work. That’s what we’re trying to do, okay? *(Laughter)* What I wanted to say is that Croatia was always Eastern Europe. They were Communists; they

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were Socialists—a dictatorship, right? And in the ‘70s and the ‘80s you might say that Croatia is Eastern Europe. And you would be right.

But what about now? You’re part of the EU; you’re part of NATO. In these united states, in Afghanistan, in Iraq, in Iran, are we Eastern Europe? Well now it’s hard to answer that, right? Because Eastern Europe is just some image that we have. It’s an idea; it’s not an exact fact. Not one can say this is east and this is west.

But I will tell you how to recognize Eastern Europe and Western Europe: it’s a religion; it’s Christianity. Eastern Europe is what? It’s usually Orthodox. Western Europe is Catholic and Protestant.

Croatia borders the country called Serbia and they are Eastern Orthodox, part of the Orthodox Church. And south of Croatia, in Serbia, there is a little heart. And that heart is called Bosnia and Herzegovina. Bosnia/Herzegovina is a Muslim country. So here we have a Muslim country in the heart of the Balkans.

All right. And now, if you imagine all this, you can see that it gets convoluted; it gets weird. If we look back to the Roman period, to Roman times, we would say that the Roman Catholic Church belonged to the Holy Roman Empire. So the line should be drawn there, on the border of Croatia and Serbia. Serbia belongs to the Byzantine Church, to the Greek Church, right? It belongs to Istanbul. And that is especially the case if you know the history of the Turkish invaders that actually brought Islam from Turkey and other lands to Europe. So Serbia was under the Turkish Empire, the Ottoman Empire. Croatia was in the Roman Empire. So if you want to draw the line between Eastern Europe and Western Europe you can also go there.

This area is called the Balkans; you’ve heard of the Balkans. What countries do you know from the Balkans? Croatia, Bosnia/Serbia, Rumania.

**Denny Baker:** Slovenia.

**Almir:** Slovenia, Bulgaria. You’ve heard things about them; you probably don’t know where they are, and no one would blame you, because no one really cares about these countries, okay? (*Laughter*) I’m Croatian so I can say that, okay? No one cares about us really.

You’ve heard about the Balkan wars, right?—the war in Bosnia. There were terrible things happening there. And this all happened in Yugoslavia. It was actually a war with itself; it was basically a civil war.

So as Catholics, Croats fought Serbs. Serbs attacked Croats. So it wasn’t just nation against nation inside Yugoslavia, but a religion against a religion. So Serbs and the Orthodox attacked Catholics, okay? Serbs and Croats together attacked Bosnians. And they had a terrible fight; a lot of blood was shed there. And priests—Catholic priests and Orthodox priests—were blessing the weapons. And they had their own ideas of what their country actually is.

So for example the Serbians would usually say, “All Serbs are the heavenly people; they came from above, from God Himself.” And they actually believed that. It wasn’t a metaphor or an allegory. No, it’s a fact; they believe that’s a fact.

Croats have this huge ego—and I’m a Croat; I can say that. You know, we usually say, “Only God and Croats.” They are the only thing that He hangs out with. God hangs out with Croatian people, and Croatian people are all into God. And there is only one God, and that God is the Catholic God, right? There is only one Christ, and that is the Catholic Christ.

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Serbs are going to say the same thing, right? There is only the Orthodox Jesus. And there is only the Orthodox God the Father and Holy Spirit.

And you will recognize the Serb on the street; you will recognize the Catholic on the street. Why? How? Do you know how? It’s when they pass the church or see the cross, for example—like a crucifix, okay? What will they do? They will make the Sign of—

**Brave Man:** The Cross.

**Almir:** The Cross, okay? They will make the Sign of the Cross, right? So how do they do it? Catholics do it with their palm, and they do it like this.

**Transcriber’s Note:** Almir makes the Catholic Sign of the Cross.

**Almir:** So they have the five fingers, which means the five wounds of Jesus Christ on the cross, right? In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Then they go to the left shoulder, then on the right. That’s good.

How can I recognize a Serbian who I hate? Okay, so I’m watching the Serbians there. So I’m watching where he walks, and they’re walking. And they’re like ah, it’s the cross. So they do it like this.

**Transcriber’s Note:** Almir makes the Orthodox Sign of the Cross.

**Almir:** These three fingers are for what?

**Don Maurer:** The Trinity?

**Almir:** For the Trinity, yes! And these two fingers that are here on my palm? They are for the two natures of Jesus Christ—fully human and fully God, right? 100% and 100%.

Okay. So this is the early church’s theology. Remember, orthodoxy means right faith. It’s the culture; it’s the early church; it’s the Patristics. It’s the Trinity and the two natures of Jesus Christ. How do they do it? Like this.

**Transcriber’s Note:** Almir makes the Orthodox Sign of the Cross.

**Almir:** Some people kneel because they are bowing to the cross. And they say, “In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” Aha! The right shoulder goes first and then I know. Aha, you’re a Serb! (*Laughter*) That is how we know each other, to hate each other a little bit more. (*Laughter*)

This is Christianity in Eastern Europe, guys. Christianity in Eastern Europe is not about Jesus. It’s not about Christ; it’s not about prayer. It’s about who fought against me in the days of the Yugoslavian War or some other war that happened here in Eastern Europe. You know, it’s not about going to church on Sunday. It’s not about taking your kids to Sunday school; it’s not that. It’s about are you on their side? He could shoot at me and my family. He could use that sniper in one village to rape my daughter and to take our room and board. It’s much more personal; it’s much deeper. And it’s much more painful. Religion in Eastern Europe is very painful because it’s very personal. It’s very violent, and it’s not about Jesus. Unfortunately, it’s not about Christ.

When I was young my family were Communists. I didn’t go to church. But I had this neighbor and she liked going to church. She was like an anarchist, you know? She would probably be an atheist now because I’m a Christian. So she would probably be an atheist. But she wanted to go to church just to spite Tito and the dictators, right? So she went to church. And I went with her as a kid, as my country was falling apart.

And you know then that the war started to be over and I was at the church for the first time, in the Catholic Church. And the experience that I had there was something that I never had before. I felt calm. I felt like I belonged to something bigger than just my family. I saw that this place could bring me a lot of joy.

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My personal relationship with Christ started when I saw Him crucified on that wall of the Catholic church. I didn't know who that Guy was. So I started asking questions. That's how I started learning more; I started learning more about Jesus, about Christ, about church.

Back then there were no Protestant churches in Croatia, at least not huge ones. Historically Protestantism was in Croatia. Protestantism was in my home town of Karlovac. My home town was built in 1579. Yes, we have a date; we know when it was built: the 13<sup>th</sup> of July, 1579. And it was built so Europe could be defended from the Ottoman Empire that we talked about earlier. And who built that city? The guy called Carlstadt—the German guy, the Protestant guy, to defend Europe from the Turks. And the Protestant church was there; Lutherans and Calvinists were there.

And the Catholic Church was present too. But Catholic chaplains were not on the battlefield. Do you know why? Only Protestants were on the battlefield, because Protestants believed mostly—especially Lutherans and Calvinists—believed in something that was called predestination. *(Laughter)* So if someone could motivate the truth it was the Calvinists, right? If God wants him to die, he'll die. If He wants him to live, he'll live. So you're in God's hands now. And that is how Protestants actually brought victory to Europe because of the Protestant preachers, and the military who were Protestant who heard the gospel clearly preached. Catholics of course gave the sacraments, the last rites and everything, but the gospel was heard from the Protestants.

When the Ottomans were defeated, when the Turks were defeated, the Protestants were no longer needed. *(Laughter)* In 1658 there was this huge, huge order called the Franciscan Order. They came to Karlovac, to my home town. And they burned down our church, our cemetery and our school. So from the 17<sup>th</sup> century there is no memory of a Protestant church.

And then I started studying theology as an undergrad. And then I graduated, and now I am a doctor of theology. I learned that that is something I need to bring back—not just as a pastor or a priest or a theologian, but as one who lives in Karlovac. People need to know the history of this Eastern European city. And now I live there, I work there, I preach there, I evangelize there. And people are coming to hear—some for the first time—the real gospel, one that those military men on the front lines in the 16<sup>th</sup> century caused to be honored. We are on the real front lines now. This world needs the gospel.

**Mike Davis:** Amen.

**Almir:** So that is what we're doing in Croatia and in Eastern Europe, in my home town of Karlovac. And of course brother Don was there. He played in my church. Brother Denny was also there; he was actually teaching. And brother Don was pretty cool; he played something that I really wanted to hear live, and that's "Light My Fire" by the Doors. *(Laughter)* I'm a huge Doors fan.

Guys, I won't talk too much about stuff. I want you to ask me some questions. But first I have a question for you. Where did the Reformation start: in Western Europe or Eastern Europe? That's a trick question; you know it's a trick question, right? *(Laughter)*

**Brave Man:** Western?

**Almir:** Of course; Germany, right?—in 1517, Martin Luther. Or if you want to go even earlier there is Wycliffe. But he didn't start the Reformation; he just translated the Bible into the English language; it wasn't the Reformation. Martin Luther started it, and that was that, right? It was German.

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But there was a guy before him in Bohemia, the Czech Republic. What was his name?

**Don Maurer:** John Huss.

**Almir:** Yes! So the Reformation actually did not really start with Martin Luther in Western Europe, but in Eastern Europe with John Huss. What do you call that group? Hussites? All right!

So now when we started we said, okay. Eastern Europe is Orthodox and Western Europe is what? Catholic and Protestant. But not really, because Protestantism and the Reformation actually started with John Huss in Chechnya, in Eastern Europe. So you see, if you want to try to make some kind of a definition of Eastern Europe and what it is, because these borders are always moving; there is always some kind of work. The Ukraine now wants to join the EU; it wants to join NATO. And that’s why Russia invaded it. What will it mean? It may belong to the West—to the EU, to NATO, to the Western world. Russia does not allow that, and that’s why they are attacked.

Russians are Orthodox; Ukrainians are not Orthodox; they don’t care about religion. They don’t care about Christ. I tell you this because I’m from there; I know. I met Jesus. I know who He is; I studied about Him; I’m teaching the gospel at the seminary. And I’m loving every single second of that. And I’m so happy that I can be here today sharing my mission with you guys. Now if you have any questions, please ask me. I’m willing to answer everything. Go ahead. Yes?

**David Miller:** When I was in Russia, a Russian Orthodox priest told me that I could not read the Bible.

**Almir:** That you cannot read it or that you’re not allowed to read it?

**David:** I’m not allowed to read the Bible because I have to be spoon fed by the Russian Orthodox Church. That’s the only way that I can know the truth.

**Almir:** Well that’s the issue, right? Only the Orthodox Church actually has the authority to teach the Bible because they are the only ones who are right in their theology, okay? So especially because you’re an American, they don’t trust you. It’s not just because you’re Protestant or Catholic but because you’re Americans, therefore you are the enemy. And the Russian Orthodox Church is seen by all of those people as the one church that is guarding Orthodoxy in the world. And if you read the Bible for yourself you will need to understand it, and so you are not allowed; you can’t do it. *(Unclear)* Okay, go ahead.

**David:** Do you know the patriarch Kirill? He’s saying that any Russian who dies on the battlefield automatically has his sins forgiven. Is that believed in Russia?

**Almir:** Well, people are believing that because the Russian government is closely tied to the Russian church. So whatever Kirill says is actually approved by Putin and all of his puppets. So yes, the Russian people do believe in that. And I don’t think that even Americans or English people believe in stuff like that if they die on the battlefield, you know. But that is something that is closely tied to the culture. So the Russian church is really important here. Okay, do you have some more questions? Yes?

**Ron Baling:** In the beginning you said that your country’s religion is a way of life as well.

**Almir:** Yes.

**Ron:** And so my question is how did that survive the Communist years? And exactly what is it?

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**Almir:** That’s interesting. Well, it’s about nationalism. It’s not about Jesus; it’s not about Christ; it’s not about God; it’s about nationalism. That means that if you are Catholic you are Croatian. And if you are Serbian you are Orthodox. It survived based on nationality and not doctrine or dogma.

Okay, so that’s it. So if you’re from Bosnia you have to be Muslim. And I will tell you something; this is really, really interesting. You know, in Yugoslavia there was Communism—no talking about God, no talking about Catholicism, Orthodoxy or Protestantism, about the Muslim faith or Islam. But one country did not have the name for its people, and that was Bosnia. In Yugoslavia there were no Bosnians, because everyone said that Bosnia is not a real state. One part of it belongs to Croatia, the other one to Serbia. And what they did, what people did,—the dictator, right?—he said, “They’re not Bosnians; they’re Muslims.” So the guy who follows Karl Marx, who believes in no religion or that there shouldn’t be any religion, says that for one entire nation there are Muslims, because he really doesn’t like them and he doesn’t want them to have their own land. So you know, it’s not very fair. Dictators are not very fair in that kind of thing. So do you have something more to ask me? Yes?

**John Gratner:** What’s the state of the Protestant church in Croatia and how does it compare to the Catholic Church and how they think about each other?

**Almir:** Well that’s a really good question. We started talking about the 16<sup>th</sup> century and how Protestantism actually started with the building of my hometown city, right?—to defend Europe from the Turks, from Islam. And of course they did that. And then the Counter-Reformation started, which means that there can’t be any Protestants in Croatian lands because they are against our Catholic faith.

So today there are a couple of Protestant groups. My group, the Protestant Reformed Church, is the oldest Protestant church in Croatia. We have the oldest church, the building also, the oldest congregations and everything. But the relationship with the Catholics is almost nonexistent. They are trying not to show us too much respect or too much attention at all.

So when you see the media they do not talk a lot about Protestants in Croatia. They’re not really that important; it’s a very small number. They don’t care about us. But you know, we Protestants in Croatia, we are actually fighters; we fight. We really do fight. We were actually even doing some legal battles against Croatia so we could get some rights, so we can get our marriages recognized, so if I marry someone in my church, then it’s recognized, so my kids can have Sunday school, you know? So I can go to the hospital and pray for my parishioners—church members who are sick or in the hospital. We have to sue the human rights courts in Salzburg. So the Catholic Church does not help us at all to do that.

Yes, we are fighters, and now we are still fighting. But we’re still sharing the gospel. We still share our seminary because our people—the lecturers and the teachers—are teaching there. I’m an academic dean there. I know all of them; I work with them. And there is something else. We actually started a couple of years ago putting huge, huge pressure on Croatian national television. We’re not sure what that would be in the USA: probably PBS or something like that. It’s the main TV, the state TV, right? So—

**Brave Man:** ABC, NBC—

**Almir:** ABC, NBC, right. *(Laughter)* The national press, right?

**Rich:** The closest thing to yours would be PBS.

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**Almir:** Oh, PBS—the Public Broadcasting Service, yes. And so what we’ve done is that we’re on Croatian national television. So now once a year we have live coverage on national TV from our oldest church. So Croatia can now hear the gospel from the oldest Protestant church in Croatia. And you can see that on YouTube, on Facebook and everywhere. So we are very proud of what we have achieved.

**John:** Once a year?

**Almir:** It’s once a year, but we’re very happy with that. Trust me, we’re very happy; it’s a huge win for us! Please?

**Mike:** What percentage of actual Christians do you believe are there in Croatia?

**Almir:** Well, based on the averages that we have—the demographics, and so on,—there would be 99.6% of Christians in Croatia. Not Protestants, right? If you’re Catholic you would have to be Christian. If you are Serbian, well you’d better be Orthodox. So they are 99.6% of the Christians. Evangelical Protestants are only 0.4%.

When we are working on the mission field we are at war. If you’re here, you’re a minority. We have that in Europe. So it’s 0.4%; Croatia has four million people, so it’s a pretty small country. And we are trying to grow; we are growing. We have missionaries that are coming to us and sharing their expertise in everything we need to share the gospel. It’s 0.4%. Yes?

**David Miller:** I’m just wondering how the evangelical church considers the Orthodox. Do they consider the Orthodox to be lost and going to hell?

**Almir:** Yes. Most of the Protestants believe that Orthodoxy is not the real thing. But it’s not because of the Orthodox Church; it’s because of the people, because their greatest understanding of the Bible and theology and God is which shoulder goes first—left or right? Their knowledge of the Bible, of theology, of the Christian life is not because they’re Orthodox; it’s because they don’t know Jesus; that’s why we are saying that. I mean, I have a lot of friends who are Catholics and Orthodox who are amazing; they have Ph.D.’s. They pray; they know the Lord. We are working together in some cases. We know each other; we are praying together, so they are of course saved people. But 99.6% of Croatia, no, they don’t care about Jesus. It’s just that they are Croatian and they’re Catholic, or they are Serbian and they’re Orthodox, and that’s it. Yes?

**John:** What are your biggest challenges in reaching the population with the message of Christ—you know, Protestant versus Catholic?

**Almir:** Well I will tell you one thing. When Christianity spread to Europe it came to Croatia in the seventh century. And they usually said, well, that was the baptism of Croats. That was the first sacrament; they were baptized and are part of the Roman church. We are part of the body of Christ.

Okay. And that’s actually where the problem started, because for Rome, for the Catholic Church, it was just a crusade: to carry this faith to the nations and to their own country with their own control. Croats and some other groups in Europe were never evangelized. They were baptized, but they never received the gospel. And now we will see that in a Catholic church or an Orthodox church. Babies are going to be baptized, but they will never learn one thing about Christ. And that is what we are fighting against.

So what we are saying is that baptism is really important—the baptism of family members yes,—but they need to know something. They need teachers, yes. There has to be some kind of evangelistic effort on your part. And of course the Catholic Church



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doesn't care about that because they care about numbers. The Orthodox Church cares about numbers.

And whenever I talk to these people about the Protestant Church, about Jesus, about the gospel, whenever I start talking about Christ they say, “Oh, you're that Protestant guy.”

“Yes. Why? Your priests don't talk about Christ!” (*Laughter*) Okay, that is something that I do not understand. I mean, I do understand; it's more about the politics again. But it's certain that in Croatia it's not about Christ.

So that's our problem, because if you're speaking about Christ then you're a Protestant. Immediately they can smell it on you because you're talking about Jesus, and not how great our government is, and so on. Yes?

**David Wessel:** A good friend of mine belongs to the Russian Orthodox Church.

**Almir:** Yes.

**David:** And in talking to him he calls it “the faith.” The faith to them is a noun, not a verb. But when I try to talk to Orthodox theologians, their theology seems to be closer to ours than Roman Catholics. But—

**Almir:** Which theology?

**David:** Of the Orthodox Church. They're saved by grace, etc. But I find the people, like my friend, he believes in “the faith,” but he doesn't say that it's in Jesus Christ.

**Almir:** Of course not; it's not important.

**David:** Correct; that's the whole point.

**Almir:** That's a Protestant thing.

**David:** It really gets down to their theology. I mean, you're going to know this better than I do. It seems that their theology isn't so bad; it's not.

**Almir:** Okay.

**David:** Their theology is beautiful.

**Almir:** Especially if you're a poet, if you're an artist. The theology makes sense because it is called a narrative theology. Do you know what a narrative theology is? It means that we cannot know God's nature in its fullness. We can try to get closer to Him and feel His love. So even though they are great theologians, they just stop and say, “But it's a mystery; we cannot know.” And I'm talking about the real theologians. Brothers, this is what they teach. But this is not what God surely is; He is much larger than my theology, than my sense, than what I can grasp. (*Unclear*) So yes, real theologians know that. We know that we are faintly grasping this together. Yes, thank you. Do you have some other questions? Yes?

**Brave Man:** How has the Russian-Ukrainian war impacted Croatia?

**Almir:** Well, you are probably watching it on the news—on ABC, CNN, Fox News, whatever you guys love—I'm sure it's not CNN; I'm sure of that. (*Laughter*)

**Brave Man:** Where are you from? (*Laughter*)

**Ron:** You know more about American culture than you realize.

**Almir:** First of all there's gas, right? We do not have access to gas anymore in Croatia as the rest of Europe, as we had before because we oppose Russia with the sanctions. So why did we do that? So that Russia could not gain more funding for its war. We want this war in Europe to stop. We want Europe to be free; we want Europe to be independent of Russia, right? We want to be normal people like we were before. So the price of gas is

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going up. The price of electricity is going up. The rent for apartments and so on, everything is going up.

And now I’m having problems because my salary is \$6000 a year. And that’s like nothing because I can barely pay my own rent and electricity. And this is the problem that we are facing as Croatian people, and as a Protestant pastor and theologian, right? So that’s also why I’m here: to raise support for my church and mission, so we can pay our daily stuff that we have to pay. So thank you for the question; I forgot to talk about that. Did I answer your question, or is there something else?

**Brave Man:** I think so; yes.

**Almir:** So we have financial problems—also refugee problems because we are also working with Ukrainian refugees in Croatia in the city of Split. If you’ve ever heard of Split it’s a beautiful Dalmatian city. So we have a church there, and there is a person there who is also helping these people—the refugees from Ukraine.

**Denny:** Wouldn’t you say that the Ukrainians that are coming in are folks that have a better standard of living?

**Almir:** Well that’s interesting; yes. Well yeah, I know where you’re going with that. So the young people from both Ukraine and Russia are fleeing this country because they don’t want to fight. They’re saying, “Well, it’s not our war.” And really, these people are the experts, the stem guys—you know, the paramedics and the engineers, and so on. These guys have a lot of money because they work for American companies, and so on. So even though they live in Eastern Europe, even though we don’t know where the border actually is, if they’re living in Eastern Europe they have a lot higher of a standard of living. So if they come to Croatia—five thousand of them or ten thousand of them, because there are around ten thousand Ukrainians and around three thousand Russians in Croatia—that means that they can pay more to rent apartments, right? And that means that my rent is going to skyrocket very soon.

So last year my rent went up 100%, and my salary went down. And this is terrible, you know, because it’s really hard to work because I have to travel from one church to another. I have three churches. One is in the capital, Zagreb, the other one is in Karlovac, and the third one is in Split. So I have to travel.

And it’s getting harder now. It’s almost impossible for me to make it to three churches a month because there are no funds for that. My church can’t help me because they’re in the same situation as I am. So how can they help me at all? They really cannot. Yes, thank you. Another question? Yes, Don?

**Don Maurer:** Almir, when Denny and I were in Croatia four years ago, you were always wondering whether the government would come and seize your church. Is that still a problem or a possibility that you could lose it at any time?

**Almir:** Yes. Currently we have a contract with the government for the next four years. But there is a clause there that they can actually take our space, the first space from us again any time they want. They’re never going to say for partitioning, no. But because of the high prices of everything, or for renting stuff, I don’t think that they would take it from us because we are paying them, you know. And I guess they would rather have some money than no money. So I don’t think it will happen now during this crisis.

**John:** So is the government pro-Catholic Church then?

**Almir:** Yes.

**John:** Okay.

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**Almir:** So the Croatian government is pro-Catholic Church as we talked about Russia, right?—with the Orthodox Church and the Putin government there. It’s basically the same with Croatia and in Serbia. Most Serbians are closely tied with the Serbian Orthodox Church. The government is basically financially supporting the Serbian Orthodox Church, and Croatia is supporting the Catholic Church, not the Protestant Church.

The Counter-Reformation is still active; you need to understand that. It’s really hard because you’re Americans; you live here. You can go to the Baptist church, the Pentecostal church, the Reformed church, the Lutheran church. It’s not like that in Croatia; it’s different. For example, Croatians are Catholic; Serbians are Orthodox. What are Protestants?

**John:** Outsiders.

**Almir:** Yes, outsiders. So I am basically a traitor to my homeland because I’m Croatian and I’m not Catholic. I’m a traitor because I turned my back to my faith, as they call it. Not true, right; not true.

Okay. You see, there are a lot of news articles about me, telling some bad stuff about me. But I also have friends in journalism. So they are helping me, you know; some have this one and some have that. Yes, Denny?

**Denny:** Doesn’t the Croatian government support all churches? They give money to all the churches. But what’s the percentage of—

**Almir:** So based on what I was telling you, the church in Croatia, as found in the court of law, became the basis for legal marriages and similar stuff. And we are getting some stipend for the old historical churches for the priests, and so on. So the buildings can be kept because it’s part of the heritage, right? So what this amount is is paid to where the stipend goes. And usually this money goes to the eastern part of Croatia which is called Slavonia, and all those churches are there. So physical church buildings from the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries are there. So most of the money goes there, because when the government gives you money you need to write them. They’re like a board to help you spend your money, right? And they are like the IRS; they hunt you down and see if you actually did that. So pastors are not usually paid, or they are paid very, very little. Like I said, my salary is \$6000 a year.

**Denny:** But the Catholic Church—

**Almir:** I think they get 1.8 billion *cunas* per year. We get about 20,000 *cunas* per year.

**Brave Man:** Where do you see the younger generation? In regard to the younger generation, would there be more Protestants, or are you saying that the younger generation is Catholic? What are the trends?

**Almir:** Well, the trend is the new atheism. The new atheism, of course, is Richard Dawkins, right? He teaches an ideology of radical Darwinism in a way. That’s what I call it; I’m not sure what you would call it here. And religion is something bad. So basically what we are having today with youth, and especially in our public schools, is that we are using all of this new atheism language. And unfortunately we are starting to combine it again with Karl Marx’s ideology, especially that religion is bad, that it’s opium for the masses and so on; you’ve heard of that expression from Marx, right?

And look, it’s not that different here in the States, okay? It’s very similar, right?; it’s not that different. But what we are trying to do is this. These kids aren’t stupid; they’re really smart. And they have all of their information on their iPhones and their Android

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phones, right? And if you're telling them the truth and if they're intrigued by the truth, they're going to check that on Wikipedia or YouTube or something similar, you know; they're going to check that. What they appreciate today is truth. So if you're honest with what you're telling them, and if they can find a confidant in you, then you can start sharing the gospel a little bit more with them.

And I have this very young, bright man in my church; he's 33. He was a valedictorian of his graduating class. He actually started at the campus in Croatia—I don't know what you call it;--it's the Rochester Institute of Technology; that's New York. So he was the #1 student in his undergraduate class. It's in the capital, Zagreb, so he didn't have to travel to Rochester, New York. So He was #1. And when COVID started then of course he would come here to give his speech, right?

So there are people—young people, educated people who are thinking, who are reading, who are doing this stuff. For example this Sunday I won't be in my church at Karlovac. But this young man Domagoj, he is going to preach and teach. He is also finishing his undergraduate degree in theology, a very, very bright young man; I'm very proud of him. Of course there are also girls and women—amazing, amazing people.

It's hard; it's especially hard for young people. But you know, if the gospel is preached surely and faithfully, people will come to Christ. Amen. And that's it. Yes?

**John:** Are you aware of any Catholic Church insiders or leaders that are attempting to bring more Christianity into the Catholic practice?

**Almir:** Yes. There is this thing called the Catholic Charismatic Movement. And it actually started through Pentecostalism, especially American Pentecostalism. And now if you see some Catholic gatherings they will have songs from “Hill Song” and all of that. I don't remember the titles; I don't listen to that. I like “Iron Maiden” more. And so they are using the Protestant methodology to bring people in and to bring the gospel to the music.

So there are priests doing that. They're not in good standing with the bishops, but they're trying to do that. So yes, there are those Catholic priests that are trying to do it, who are just trying to spread the gospel, especially to young people. Yes, Denny?

**Denny:** Obviously you desire our prayers.

**Almir:** Yes.

**Denny:** You desire the prayers of American Christians. But there are other financial needs.

**Almir:** I need your money; I need your money, people. *(Laughter)*

**Denny:** How much?

**Almir:** I need to raise \$10,000; that's a lot. I don't expect to raise it all from you, of course. But if you want to help me, I would like to show you the video. But I cannot do it right now because I made it with my friend from Ireland. She's a Presbyterian, a wonderful lady. She was actually a missionary in Croatia and she met her future husband there, and now they're living in Ireland; it's a really nice story.

So I need \$10,000. Why? Because the prices are up; everything is going up. I can barely pay my own housing as a pastor. And I have to travel all around Croatia in order to serve these churches.

So if I could buy my own apartment, or an apartment for the pastor's housing, I already have \$20,000. My father sold his shop. He gave me \$20,000 for the church so I can use it to buy that. I got a loan from my bank for \$10,000, and they gave it to me.

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They're crazy! (*Laughter*) And now I need \$10- to \$15,000 from American churches. So if you want to help me, if you can help me, I would be very, very, very, very happy and pleased and grateful. I would need to gather this amount of money by May. So if you can do that, if you would help me, if you can share the video or something, I can send it to Don and he can probably share it with you through some kind of groups or something. Do what you can. And of course Denny Baker is here. Providence Presbyterian Church is helping us to raise the funds. Yes?

**Denny:** Is there a main email I can send this video to? Okay. You guys can give me the main email account and I can send you the link of the video. It is very good.

If anyone wants to donate today, tomorrow, next week, you can write a check out to Providence Presbyterian Church. (77 Philips Lane, McKees Rocks, Pa. 15136) You know, that's the church that Don and I attend. Don is the organist there; he's the main guy. You can send it to us. On the memo line write down "Christ the King Church." It's in Karlovac; that's the main church that Almir pastors in Croatia. So send it to Providence Presbyterian Church. We would then wire it to Almir's church. So it's Providence Presbyterian Church, and on the memo line, "Christ the King Church."

**David Miller:** Is that written on the brochure?

**Denny:** No, it is not; I'll write it in. He says \$10,000; he needs \$20,000. As Don mentioned, those of us from Providence Presbyterian Church have been there three times now to support that church in some respects. I've asked Almir, "Do you want folks to come and visit you, or do you want us to send you money?" Okay, that's a difficult question. But he said that when Americans come to Croatia, when American Christians go to Croatia,—and I'm getting chills here; maybe it's cold out!—but when they are from Croatia, and they see that Americans love Christians in Croatia, they're so encouraged; they really are. And I've had an opportunity to know and make friends, especially in Karlovac, and they are amazing. They are such amazing people; they really are. It's a small church, but they are very much encouraged by American Christians.

However, as you heard before, Providence Presbyterian Church is supporting Christ the King Church, and they need more funds. If they can get \$20,000 by May, that would be very helpful.

**Almir:** You will accomplish a lot. You will probably inspire church planting to take place there. Some of the guys left. So if you're in a hurry you can leave. But I would like to pray for you at the end. And Denny, you can ask me some more questions afterwards.

**Mike:** Don, why don't you take that information and send it to Sig, and he can put it on the Brave Men email that comes out and the Brave Men website?

**Don Maurer:** Yes. I will email him the transcript anyway.

**Mike:** Yes. So you can send that and email the information to Sig. Okay?:

**Don:** Yes, okay.

**Don Rimbey:** I can make copies of this brochure and bring it next week.

**Almir:** Great. And there is my email, so you can also contact me there. Thank you very much.

Okay, so I would like us to pray the Lord's Prayer. And you are all Americans, so you will probably pray in English. But I will lead you in Croatian, okay? Let us pray.

**Transcriber's Note:** Almir and the Brave Men pray together.

**Brave Men:** Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And

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forgive us our debts (trespasses) as we forgive our debtors (as we forgive those who trespass against us.) And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.

**Almir:** Amen; well done! (*Applause*)