



Hieromonk Andrew in a 1993 television interview (see page 177),
several months before his martyric death.

A Quiet Hymn, Full of Light

THE ASCETIC LIFE AND MARTYRIC DEATH OF
HIEROMONK ANDREW (KURASHVILI)
OF COMANA, REPUBLIC OF GEORGIA

Ye are the light of the world (Matt. 5:14).

I. INTRODUCTION

IN AUGUST 1992 a fierce separatist conflict erupted in Georgia's northwestern region, Abkhazia (also known as Abkhazeti). Formerly renowned for its natural beauty and for its resorts along the Black Sea, Abkhazia became a site of ethnic cleansing. Relying on mercenaries and volunteers from Chechnya, Central Asia, Eastern Turkey, Syria, and Jordan, as well as Russia and the Ukraine, Abkhazian separatists killed 20,000 people and forced 250,000 to flee their homeland on foot. The vast majority were Georgians, who made up 44 percent of that region, but also within these numbers were Armenians, Estonians and Jews.

The seeds of this conflict had been sown by Soviet policies dating back to the middle of the last century. Soviet authorities had sought to destabilize the area through forced resettlements, ethnic discrimination and propaganda. With the fall of the Soviet government in the early 1990s, a vacuum of power ensued. No longer contained by

A QUIET HYMN, FULL OF LIGHT



Western Georgia and Abkhazia.

authoritarian rule, ethnic hostilities erupted, leading to the civil war that left Abkhazia shattered.

Archbishop Daniel (now Metropolitan) of Sukhumi (the capital of Abkhazia) has described the nature of this conflict as follows:

“This war was a fire lit by another hostile party between members of one Church. This was a hideous fratricidal war which poured out fraternal blood. The participants of this war were sons of one land. We co-suffer with the Abkhaz people, for their widows, fathers,

A QUIET HYMN, FULL OF LIGHT

mothers and children, in the same way as we do for our own. The Abkhaz population was drawn into the war. It was not an expression of their will. During the time of my residence in Sukhumi and even now during our period as refugees, there have always been Abkhaz people in the flock. When we speak of evil committed by them, we must understand that this was the activity of unhealthy elements, which, unfortunately, are to be found among us [Georgians] as well. We must not in any way equate these elements with the Abkhaz people, just as we must not equate the evil that takes place in Georgia with Georgian people.”

Out of this dark and terrible struggle emerges a ray of light displaying God’s glory amidst suffering: the life of Hieromonk Andrew of Comana. Although Fr. Andrew lived for only a few years after his conversion to Christianity, his life was a fulfillment of the Beatitudes, ending in his martyric death while standing at his post, the altar of Christ. His ascetic life, in step with the desert fathers of the early Church, provided the foundation for his voluntary sacrifice, manifesting God’s power. In an interview months before the slaying, his spiritual father, Metropolitan Daniel, made the following statement foreshadowing the glory that was to come for Fr. Andrew:

“We shouldn’t lose heart when we are crucified, for Golgotha is followed by resurrection and ascension. These are the words with which today I would like to address the Georgian people. This deep mourning and sorrow we have had to endure is, at the same time, a great victory. Once again we should acknowledge that without martyrdom, without being tormented, our revival, our reconstruction, our spiritual growth has never occurred. Everyone who accepts this adversity and offers his most precious sacrifice amidst this misfortune will receive a great reward from our Lord.”

In the following pages the ascetic struggles and martyrdom of Fr. Andrew are presented in the words of those who knew him best. May his life inspire us all to take up our cross and follow Christ.

THE ORTHODOX WORD

2. YOUTH AND CONVERSION

*Novice Maria:**

How is one to depict the ascetic life of a monk whose spiritual life was like a hidden, contrite prayer to God, like a quiet hymn, full of light?... Inwardly illumined with light, Fr. Andrew unceasingly beheld it. He beheld it also in those ineffably difficult moments which fell to his lot. Spiritualized and enlightened by this gentle light of Christ, he was made worthy of the highest ascetic labor in Christ—martyrdom.



Paata as a child.

*Novice Nana (Kurashvili):***

On April 3, 1966, a male child was born to the family of Elgudja Kurashvili. He was named Paata (Bata) after an ancestor who had sacrificed his life for Georgia in a battle with pagans and whose head was brought back to his father (Giorgi Saakadze, the great Georgian commander of the seventeenth century) after he had won the battle. Paata's own father,

Elgudja, had been raised on Communist ideology, but had always fought for honesty and decency, and had raised his children in

* In the world, Manana Anua, daughter of Subdeacon George. He served with Hieromonk Andrew in Comana and was slain on the same day.

** Fr. Andrew's youngest sister.

A QUIET HYMN, FULL OF LIGHT

this manner. He taught his children to rejoice at the well-being of others.

In the days of the Communist regime Elgudja managed to rescue the icons from the local church in the village of Bagdadi in Imeretia (western Georgia) and took some of them to His Holiness Patriarch Ephraim II, the Catholicos Patriarch of Georgia at that time. The remaining icons he kept in the Regional Ethnological Museum that he had personally founded. He was both the director and at the same time the watchman of the museum.

In spite of his efforts to guard the museum it was robbed several times, and among the items stolen were the icons that he had previously rescued. None of the icons were found, but miraculously, ten years later, after a monastery was opened in the museum building, the icons were unexpectedly returned.

Paata's mother Lamara worked in the home, raising eight children, four of whom have served in the church. (After the death of Fr. Andrew, one of his brothers, Ioane [John], became a priest, and two of his sisters, Ryassaphore-nun Vasilissa and Novice Nana, are now living in convents.) The example of their mother's kindness and love helped the children draw closer to God.

Paata was a kind boy, sometimes proud and fiery, but always fair. He loved animals, especially dogs. After eighth grade he continued his studies in a technical school and at the same time worked in a wire factory. It was a long distance to his place of work, so he stretched a cable across the river and went to work by way of this shortcut. Most of the money he earned went to his large family.

Paata was physically very strong. In his grade school years he had been a sports champion in Graeco-Roman wrestling and karate, and competed rather well. He didn't like to study much, but he loved



Paata as a teenager.

THE ORTHODOX WORD



Fr. Andrew's family. Standing second from left, Fr. Andrew's siblings:
Nun Vasilissa, Priest Ioane, and Novice Nana.

literature, especially the novels by Goderdze Chokheli [a contemporary Georgian author and film producer].

He returned to his village, Bagdadi in Imeretia, and began to lead an ordinary life very much like that of his peers. He had many friends and, like every young Georgian man, liked to dine and drink together with them. After several years it became clear that such a life wasn't satisfactory for him. He began to search for the treasure of spiritual grace which he had lost.

When he was eighteen years old, he began to serve in the military and was stationed in Hungary. [Until the year 1989 young Georgians were compelled to serve in the Soviet military.] He wrote many letters and was extremely happy when many letters would arrive from his large family. He used to say that his only joy in those days of his life

A QUIET HYMN, FULL OF LIGHT

were letters from Georgia. His every word was saturated with care and love, especially when he wrote letters to his mother. Outwardly he served in an honest way, but after discharge, at the first convenient opportunity, he expressed his inner protest against military service. He gathered everything he had possessed in the army and threw it all into the river. Thus all his memories of the army were drowned in the river.

This was at the time when Georgian independence opened the path for many to the Church. Many people were coming to the Church, and a lot of them remained to serve there. There was at that time a Christian library in Bagdadi which was headed by Ilia Karkadze, who subsequently became Paata's godfather and is now a priest. Fr. Ilia remembers that one day he met Paata and, after a short talk, Paata asked Ilia for some books since he had become interested in the Christian Faith. Paata chose several books and went home. He completely changed his way of life from that day forth. He read for hours at a time and didn't go out. His interest grew and his knowledge deepened.



Paata in the army.

Monk Simon.*

Fr. Andrew told the story of how he experienced for the first time the spiritual power contained in the Holy Scriptures. As he read the

* Formerly Novice Gabriel, who labored with Fr. Andrew in Skhalta and Comana, and who is now a monk in the Sedazeni Monastery above Mtskheta.

THE ORTHODOX WORD



Gelati Monastery.

sacred text, he was so absorbed in the word of God that he did not leave his house for a week. At that time, the word of God penetrated his soul to such an extent that he soon began to live the ascetic life with fiery zeal and renounced the ephemeral pleasures of the world, fully offering his youth to God.

Novice Nana:

After some time Paata learned that he wasn't baptized. The reason was that the priest who had baptized him was not an ordained priest. So he asked his friend Ilia to be his godfather. This was in 1991.

People who had awakened and revived to faith were frequently traveling across the country to visit and pray at the holy places. Such groups often traveled to Adjara (southwestern Georgia). [Much of the populace of this region had been forcibly converted to Islam in the seventeenth century and efforts were being made at this time to bring the

A QUIET HYMN, FULL OF LIGHT

people back to the Christian Faith.] Paata was among those people. In 1991, during Great Lent, Paata visited for the first time the Monastery of the Holy Apostle Andrew at Skhalta in Adjara. Later he went to Skhalta again and this time he didn't come back. Instead he stayed in the monastery there. At that time the Superior of the monastery was Archpriest Grigol (Abuladze), who soon was sent to another location. [Fr. Grigol now heads a large children's home in the city of Zestafoni in Imeretia.] The Priest David, now Metropolitan Daniel of Sukhumi and Abkhazeti (northwestern Georgia), subsequently the spiritual father of Paata, was appointed Superior in his stead. Fr. Grigol asked Paata to go with him, but Paata refused. Later he said, "Fr. Grigol is a very wonderful person, but it is different to be with him as a monk."

Paata visited his friend and godfather Ilia in the famous Gelati Monastery near Kutaisi in Imeretia. After visiting his family he went to the village's forest and lived for a couple of weeks in a cave and prayed. Then he returned to Skhalta.

Abbess Theodora of Bodbe Convent:

I first met this extraordinary man in the Skhalta Monastery. Fr. Andrew at the time was not yet a novice. His name was Paata. There wasn't anything that distinguished him except that he very seldom spoke and, when he did, he said little. It was precisely this that attracted my attention. I asked the Abbot, Hieromonk Ephraim, what kind of a man this was who always remained silent. Fr. Ephraim praised him and said that he was oblivious of himself and was a zealous man of prayer who prayed for hours at a time in church before the services. I recall how Bishop Daniel and Fr. Ephraim once left for Sukhumi, and Paata spent the Great Fast in total seclusion and, without murmuring, celebrated the Feast of Christ's Resurrection alone. Soon after this, on the feast of Pentecost, he received the monastic tonsure.

Novice Nana:



Myrrh-streaming Georgian icon of the Apostle Andrew.

On his birthday, April 3, 1992, he was tonsured a monk. He was named after the holy Apostle Andrew, who had once preached in Adjara. In August of the same year, he was ordained a priest and, as the Hieromonk Andrew, he became the Superior of the monastery. About this period of his life Nun Christina (Dashniani) recalls: “Once I asked Fr. Andrew how he came to the Church. He started his story by telling me about his father. He loved his father very much. He said that his father had eight children and that he loved icons very much. He gathered so many icons that two rooms were given to him by the government to house the icons. Fr. Andrew said that when he was going to go to Skhalta he chose the

Iveron Icon of the Mother of God and took it with him.”

Fr. Andrew had his own farm. He worked the land himself, and the harvest was enough for himself and others. He baked bread and prosphora very well. He read the entire Book of Psalms every day and made two hundred prostrations. Then he read the Akathist to the Most Holy Theotokos in the church and served a Moleben to St. Andrew the First-called.

For five months he was isolated in Skhalta because of the snow. During all those months Fr. Andrew prayed long and often. He later said, “If a man knew what it [monastic isolation] was, he would leave everything and choose this path.”

A QUIET HYMN, FULL OF LIGHT

*Monk Simon:**

The strivings of Fr. Andrew were austere: he ate and slept little, and no one knew exactly when he would “steal” snatches of rest. Fr. Andrew never slept in a bed. He used to sit on planks close to the wall and put his legs on the chair, and he slept that way. His soul longed for solitude, to live where man had never trod, to abide there in mystical conversation with the One Who had called him to such a high service of godliness. Archimandrite Daniel, to whom he was in obedience, forbade him to pursue such a life at the outset. Soon thereafter the newly consecrated Bishop Daniel ordained Fr. Andrew to the priesthood, following which the young ascetic began to burn even more ardently for the desert life. He avoided speaking even more than he had previously, and he disliked extended conversations with laymen and especially with women. He showed severity to himself first of all, and because of this integrity he was able to require strictness of those who surrounded him.

3. LIFE IN COMANA

Novice Nana:

He wanted to work with and be close to his spiritual father Bishop Daniel.** The Bishop knew this very well, and promised to take him as soon as a good opportunity opened up for Fr. Andrew. Soon Bishop Daniel took Fr. Andrew with him and blessed him to be the rector of the St. John Chrysostom Church in Abkhazeti. Fr.

* As related by Monk Alexie Tzirdea and Novice Alexie Ksutashvili-Lenski in “Andrew of Abkhazia: A Georgian Hieromartyr,” *Scara*, vol. 3, no. 4 (December 1999), pp. 169–71.

** Bishop (now Metropolitan) Daniel (Datuashvili) was consecrated in May, 1992. He was assigned to head the Sukhumi-Abkhazeti Diocese after the death of Metropolitan David of Sukhumi early in October of the same year. Many of Bishop Daniel’s spiritual children accompanied him to Sukhumi.

THE ORTHODOX WORD

Andrew received a blessing from His Holiness Patriarch Ilia II to do this. He wrote a letter to his brother at this time in which he did not mention that he was going to Sukhumi (Abkhazeti), since fighting had already broken out there.* He simply wrote that he was changing his place of residence. But his parents found out everything.

Abbess Theodora:

I don't remember how and in what circumstances I became close friends with Fr. Andrew, but when he came to Sukhumi we were already great friends. He often gave me words of counsel. At first it was a bit unsettling for me. I thought, How is it that the novice of yesterday is giving counsel to me, a nun with some monastic experience? Nonetheless I heeded him with great attention. I won't forget what he told me with his peculiar Imeretian accent: "How I feel pity for you, Matushka. How long will you, a nun, have to be involved in worldly affairs?" He was very wise and attentive. After his ordination the first service that he celebrated was in our church. In the evening I handed him the *Manual for Sacred Services*. I wanted to help him become familiar with it, but he had figured it all out, and he conducted the service without a single mistake.

* Fighting broke out in Sukhumi on August 14, 1992. Abkhazian separatists as well as Zviadists (followers of ousted Georgian ex-president Zviad Gamsakhurdia) had long since been engaging in the systematic sabotage and destruction of railroads, bridges, roads and communication systems, in addition to taking hostages and seizing train shipments. On August 10, 1992, newly elected President Eduard (George) Shevardnadze called in troops of the Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of the Interior to serve as a military guard. Abkhaz separatist leader Vladislav Ardzinba then appeared on television and announced that the Georgian Army was advancing on Sukhumi. On August 14, separatist forces under Ardzinba then opened fire on the Georgian armed forces and the Abkhazian conflict began. Military action ceased on September 27, 1993, with the withdrawal of the Georgian military, but in the intervening eight years atrocities, reprisals, and ethnic cleansing have continued unchecked against the civilian population. See V. Keshelava, ed., *The Policy of Genocide and Ethnic Cleansing in Abkhazia (Georgia): A Main Tool of the Aggressive Separatism* (Tbilisi, Georgia: Azri, 1999), pp. 17–42.

A QUIET HYMN, FULL OF LIGHT



Sukhumi Cathedral.

Once in the evening Fr. Andrew and Novice Gabriel had walked from Comana to Sukhumi. They were very tired and hungry. The table was quickly laid for them. I marveled at how little Fr. Andrew ate. I thought that it was more difficult for a hungry person to limit his intake of food than to entirely refuse it. I told him about this and I was amazed at how meekly he accepted my comment.

Monk Simon:

When His Grace Daniel was appointed Bishop of Sukhumi and Abkhazeti, his spiritual children, Fr. Andrew and I, moved from the Skhalta Monastery [in Adjara] to Sukhumi. I was a novice at the time

THE ORTHODOX WORD



His Holiness Patriarch Ilia II and
Metropolitan Daniel of Sukhumi.

with the name Gabriel. Sukhumi was desolate—around us silence reigned. Soldiers would appear on the streets here and there on patrol.... There wasn't any shooting at this time. It could be heard somewhere far off in the distance.... It was the middle of February [1993]. There still remained three to four days until the beginning of Great Lent. With the blessing of Bishop Daniel we were sent to Comana. Fr. Andrew and I went on foot, then by bus, and only with great difficulty did we reach Comana. Along the banks of the Gumista River there were detachments of Abkhazian soldiers, and there-

fore it was dangerous to travel along this road.

The Comana Church of St. John Chrysostom is situated in the center of the village on a small hillock. We were met at the church by the Anua family. They were overjoyed by our arrival. They had been waiting for a priest for a long time (there was no one to serve in the church), and so for that reason they were extraordinarily happy when they saw Fr. Andrew. There wasn't anyone in Comana besides soldiers. Subsequently the soldiers began to come to church quite frequently. They were tired of the war, and Fr. Andrew's preaching supported them. At first the soldiers had not shown any interest toward the Faith, but gradually Bishop Daniel gave them all Communion of the Holy Mysteries of Christ. We went quite often to the front lines, to the foremost positions, and continued there to conduct conversations about faith in God. Several times we stayed in the village of Akhalsheni.... The local

A QUIET HYMN, FULL OF LIGHT

residents and the soldiers were cheered by our visit. Unfortunately, in this land blessed by God, faith among the people has been very weak. Fr. Andrew had to preach often in order to strengthen their faith a little.

*Monk Simon:**

The hostile demons, seeing the struggles of Fr. Andrew, began to attack him openly. Novice Gabriel witnessed how one night they attempted to strangle Fr. Andrew. The next morning, Fr. Andrew's neck was covered with scratches and bruises. To his brother, Novice Gabriel, he said, "Take heed, you will have to suffer this battle of the demons against you alone." "I cannot win this battle, Father, ... unless God delivers me from their warfare." That night, however, the Novice Gabriel did indeed face an attack of unleashed demons, but he arose victorious with the help of God and through the prayers of Fr. Andrew.

In general, Fr. Andrew did not like long conversations. He spoke directly and to the point; in a few words he would successfully move the heart of his listeners to repentance and awaken in them an irresistible longing for the things of heaven. Once Novice Gabriel made a comment that he found the books of the Old Testament to be lacking significance and meaning. Fr. Andrew punished him with a week of silence. Fr. Andrew was also given the gift of tears. Prayer ceaselessly sprang from his heart and the remembrance of death ever remained in his thoughts. He saw sorrows as blessings, humbling the heart as necessary in order to "keep the mind in hell and despair not," as spoke St. Silouan the Athonite: a spiritual state which is accompanied by hope in the unlimited mercy of God. As St. Macarius the Great had not even been sure of his salvation after he had ascended into the midst of the angels in heaven, and as St. Poemen the Great had told his disciples concerning his hopes for gaining eternal good things, "Believe me, son, all will be saved and only I will inherit eternal fire," so too Fr. Andrew

* Tzirdea and Ksutashvili, "Andrew of Abkhazia," pp. 169–71.

THE ORTHODOX WORD



The Church of St. John Chrysostom and its compound in Comana.

very often replied with a question to those who asked him how he was doing, “Do you not have the fear of death?”

Fr. Andrew had great love and reverence for the Holy Fathers who defended hesychasm and who were practiced in the Jesus Prayer. Like them, Fr. Andrew knew experientially the road full of obstacles which those who fully engage themselves in this Prayer must face. Fr. Andrew greatly loved the writings of St. Silouan the Athonite, the Egyptian Patericon, and St. John Chrysostom’s Letter to Monastics. How greatly it displeased Fr. Andrew when someone would say that in our days it is impossible to emulate the Fathers of ancient times. Fr. Andrew would immediately ask, “Why, why is it not possible? Is not God the same yesterday, today and forever?” (cf. Heb. 13:8). God granted to Fr.

A QUIET HYMN, FULL OF LIGHT

Andrew the gift of seeing into the hearts of men and of understanding the spiritual state of those who came to him. He immediately understood why someone suffered from a certain spiritual ailment and straightway gave him the most beneficial remedy.

*Nun Maria:**

Those of us in the Church of St. John Chrysostom in Comana had been praying to God that He would send us a priest who would not weary of serving daily services. At that time we did not have a priest, so my daughter Manana (at the present time the novice Maria) and I, with the blessing of His Holiness Patriarch-Catholicos Ilia II, served a Paraclesis on Thursdays at the sarcophagus of St. John Chrysostom and on Fridays at the spring of the Holy Martyr Basiliscus (the site where the torture of St. Basiliscus took place in A.D. 308).

Thus, once after we had finished Matins (after the words, Most Holy and Blessed Master, bless), the doors of the church opened and Fr. Andrew entered holding in his hands an icon of the Mother of God. Having offered thanks to the Creator and His Most Pure Mother, we venerated the icon.... The Lord had fulfilled our desire—He had sent our church a truly holy man. Fr. Andrew spent all his time in prayer and at work. Pitying him, I asked him more than once not to pray so much. I asked him to perhaps shorten the quantity of prayers a little (very frequent Liturgies, Paraclesis, All-night Vigils). Smiling at my words, he replied that it had been two years in all since he had been baptized, since



Zoya Anua (now Nun Maria).

* In the world, Zoya Anua, wife of slain Subdeacon George.

he had completed his military service, and he had allowed much time to slip by. Now he had the opportunity to compensate for what had been lost, for the years he had wasted.

Novice Maria:

In those days during the war, when death had become a second reality of life, what faith, love and light did a priest need to have, so that amidst this all-encompassing spiritual darkness prayer might here be raised to Heaven for the sending down of “peace from above and great mercy”!

In this difficult hour, by His unfathomable Providence, the Lord revealed to the Georgian Church the twenty-seven-year-old hieromonk, Fr. Andrew—a quiet lamp of hidden faith and love for Christ.

Just to look at Fr. Andrew’s face was amazingly touching. He was entirely penetrated with a kind of interior chastity, reverent awe, and at the same time great simplicity. Although Fr. Andrew carefully concealed his monastic labors from others, it was impossible to look without tears at his strict attitude toward himself and, at the same time, at his amazing mercy and condescension toward others. The primary hidden exploit of his soul was his constant mourning and unceasing repetition of the Jesus Prayer, which helped him amidst the most difficult circumstances to preserve his inner light unextinguished. His constant striving for solitude and inner silence never diminished....

In those torturous days of the war, when fear and alarm often overcame his flock, the meek smile on his handsome, pensive face, his soft, tranquil speech, and the blessed peace that filled his soul would bless with unearthly consolation human hearts tormented and jaded by the war, transmitting to them his quiet peace and calm. Ever meek and modest, pensive and silent, he was gentle. He never grew angry with anyone, and he covered ordinary human weakness with his amazing magnanimity and love.... His heart’s compassion truly knew no

A QUIET HYMN, FULL OF LIGHT

bounds: almost the entire supply of food and groceries brought to him would be given away with a kind of childlike joy to those in need. Continual Liturgies in church, Vigils at the grave of the Holy Martyr Basiliscus, frequent ascents of the Mountain of the Third Finding of the Head of St. John the Baptist, sleepless entreaties at the sacred sarcophagus of St. John Chrysostom for the sending down of peace to his beloved Iberia—this is what filled the ascetic life of Fr. Andrew in Comana. He often gave Holy Communion to soldiers, performed baptisms, and preached. Through his labors he illumined unbelievers and those hearts blinded by despair with the sweet Light of Christ, carefully uniting them to His ineffable, divine love....

Television Interview with Fr. Andrew:

QUESTION: Fr. Andrew, the village of Comana is the hottest spot in this battle. The grave of St. John Chrysostom is in this village... (the rest is unintelligible)

FR. ANDREW: You know, I don't feel fear. Somehow I don't feel it. This absence of fear is given by the Lord. I am not afraid now, as God's hand is on me. I am in church, so what else can be said? There are no more sounds of shooting. They have ceased, although I heard some the other day. Somehow it is the Lord's grace and I am not afraid.

QUESTION: Do people come to church? All the soldiers here are residents of this village. Besides them, there are other young people from various areas of Georgia here. Do they come?

FR. ANDREW: Yes, the soldiers come—well, those who are close to Church life. Some of them are not. Anyway, those who are religious come to church with an open heart.

QUESTION: Do they find consolation here?

FR. ANDREW: Well, I do whatever I can. I talk to them and try to explain as well as I can about He Who Is.... Yes, the soldiers come, but there is no civilian population here now, just one or two men....

THE ORTHODOX WORD

QUESTION: Are there any women and children? Are there many of them?

FR. ANDREW: Only those who repaired this church—they do come, as well as one or two others....

QUESTION: Fr. Andrew, what is your point of view on the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict. How can it be solved?

FR. ANDREW: I should certainly give the answer of a clergyman. We all know that it is caused by our departure from God; and then, this is also the result of our relationship with Russia. To eliminate it is impossible, but everything is possible for the Lord. If it is His will, anything can happen. Our Church preserves a prophecy that our Georgian Church will be strengthened in the last times. And actually, these are the last times. One can say that the end is near, for everything that was handed down to us by Church tradition as signs of the coming end is being fulfilled.

We also know from the Holy Fathers, from our ancestors, that in these times our ministry to God and the fullness of life with our Lord will not end here in Abkhazia and in this village, whereas it will be lost in the world. But this will not come to pass if there is no peace in the country. We hope that peace will come by the Lord's will. If you want to know what can be done from the human point of view, I am sure I really don't know.... I haven't even thought of it, for it is not for me to decide.

QUESTION: Still, what can be done?

FR. ANDREW: From the human point of view it is very difficult to solve. I don't know what is to be done here. This present time is sent to heal us and everything will end well, but it won't come soon. I only have hope in the Lord and His will; I truly depend on His will.

Nun Maria:

Fr. Andrew loved solitude. He loved to pray alone, especially at night and early in the morning in church. Once Fr. Andrew said to me,

A QUIET HYMN, FULL OF LIGHT



The spring of St. Basiliscus.

“May God reward you for the construction of such a beautiful church, but I beg you to allow me to remain alone in this church.” I could not give my consent: “This church was entirely rebuilt by my husband and me. Never, until my very death, will I leave it,” I replied. Then I showed him the charter from Metropolitan David [who died in Sukhumi in 1992] in which he had decreed that, in the event of our deaths, my husband and I should be buried in this Church of St. John Chrysostom. Having read this, he embraced me and said, “God has commanded us to serve together. Evidently it is not my lot to dwell in solitude.”

Monk Simon:

Fr. Andrew dearly loved to walk to the spring of St. Basiliscus, and from the spring he would go to the Martyr’s grave. He would entreat God on behalf of this sinful world. Several times he came under

THE ORTHODOX WORD

rifle fire, but this did not frighten him. When the danger appeared to have passed, then peacefully smiling with his unusual smile, he would say, “Glory be to God, I don’t have any feelings of fear.”

*Monk Simon:**

After the Muslim enemies had fired shots over the monastery many times, Novice Gabriel asked, “Fr. Andrew, are you not afraid?” Fr. Andrew replied, “If you don’t fear the eternal torments, why do you fear Abkhazians? You, Gabriel, do you not fear death?” Seeing the answer of Fr. Andrew, he reflected deeply on the death of the soul and the possibility of not gaining the inheritance of the Eternal Kingdom. Novice Gabriel answered, “God’s will be done....” And then Fr. Andrew continued, “Are you sure you have fully placed yourself under God’s care?” We see in this reply of Fr. Andrew the same attitude in facing death as we see in the Holy Fathers: unshaken hope in the mercy of God, permanently doubled with the knowledge of one’s own personal nothingness.

Abbess Theodora:

Before his death we were in Comana. It was already dangerous to go there. Fr. Andrew did not rush when serving the Paraclesis, and just as peacefully we returned to the church. On the return journey we had an interesting conversation. Unfortunately, I don’t remember everything. We spoke about monasticism in the last times. Fr. Andrew said that he felt spiritually closer to St. Silouan of Mt. Athos than to all the rest. Fr. Andrew tried to emulate the monks of the past in everything. He was careful and moderate in conversation. He preferred solitude. The Lord and the inner life—this was the axis of his life. He always yearned for seclusion. Once I jokingly told him that he was in deception (in actual fact, of course, I did not think so). He pondered and

* Tzirdea and Ksutashvili, “Andrew of Abkhazia,” pp. 169–71.

A QUIET HYMN, FULL OF LIGHT

then replied, “Mother, for me this is not some great ascetic labor; I simply cannot live otherwise.”

Once the brethren and the priests, with the blessing of Bishop Daniel, went to the blessing of the house of Fr. Seraphim, a priest in Sukhumi. Fr. Andrew was among us. At first everything was going according to the standard form—everyone was serious and attentively heeding the celebration of the house blessing. But when we saw a mandarin tree in the garden, everyone like little children began to delight themselves with the mandarins. I at first saw that Fr. Andrew was displeased. He could not reconcile himself with the interruption of the sacred service. His displeasure scandalized one novice, and Fr. Andrew was very distressed that his gesture had so offended someone. He felt anguished and did not know what to do....

Nun Eleni:

Our pilgrimages to Comana had great importance for us during the war. We often walked there, where our hosts were the restorers of the Comana Church of St. John Chrysostom: Zoya (Alexandrovna Adamia) and Yuri (George) Anua,* and their daughter Manana. Manana illumined us by her meekness, peace and kindness and by her voice, reminiscent of the sweet cooing of a dove. The warmth of their entire family, which we experienced at our first meeting, helped us a lot and supported us during the entire time of our stay in Sukhumi.

Hieromonk Andrew celebrated the services in the Comana Church of St. John Chrysostom. His endurance was amazing. I conversed with him. It was very difficult for him to be amidst people. The entire time he yearned for solitude, for absolute reclusion. He was seeking an isolated, peaceful place. But it was impossible in Abkhazeti at that time to find peace and tranquility. This disappointed him. “Every day I celebrate the Liturgy, I touch the altar, but I do not have the experience for this, nor the striving, and I am unworthy of this,” said Fr.

* See his Life following this article.



The altar of the church of St. John Chrysostom in Comana.

Andrew. Many times he had prepared to leave, but he knew that now was not the time to abandon Comana. The services taking place here and the grace coming forth from them were providing shelter for all of Georgia, especially Abkhazeti. The residents who were left in Comana likewise needed consolation.... He possessed extraordinary sensitivity, responsibility and thirst for prayer. Daily he read the entire Psalter—from beginning to end. He was a man of few words; he reckoned it a luxury to express his

feelings. He once warned us not to come to Comana before twilight, before it grew dark, since soldiers from the Abkhazian army came to the church almost every day (in numbers of no less than forty). May the Lord give rest to his radiant soul, lofty and full of holiness....

Monk Simon:

With each day the circumstances in Comana became increasingly more complex. Artillery fire did not cease. They were firing directly at Comana. There were casualties amongst the civilian population, too. During one bombing the Anuas' house burned down. The family was left beneath the open sky. But we never saw tears in their eyes, rather it was they who consoled us: "In everything there is the will of God. The main thing is that God has not forsaken us."

Only one thing troubled Fr. Andrew: that he be able to meet death worthily in the event of an enemy invasion.... But I (Novice Gabriel) was constantly in alarm.... When Fr. Andrew would see me in such a state of disturbance, he would say: "Do not be afraid! It is

A QUIET HYMN, FULL OF LIGHT

frightful to remain without the Heavenly Kingdom. Prepare yourself. One must be ready for everything.” Right then I would calm down.

For some reason I was convinced that the enemy troops would not seize Comana, that the local saints would not allow the holy places to be desecrated.... But I was mistaken. It seems that the Lord was requiring of us something entirely different. He wanted to see in us real faith, from which we were yet very far. In this lay the causes of our sorrow....

The situation grew more acute with every minute. It became unbearable for me. Every falling shell seemed to fall right into my heart, every shot seemed directed right at me.... I couldn't pray any longer, I couldn't find any peace. When Bishop Daniel learned of my condition he transferred me to his residence [in Sukhumi], and it became easier.

Novice Nana:

Several days before the tragedy in Comana, Bishop Daniel sent Fr. Andrew home to visit his parents and calm them down, since the situation was intensifying.

Fr. Andrew returned home on foot from the Rioni train station [in Imeretia]. He had spent the whole winter with only prosphora and water as his sustenance. After the long period of fasting and prayer, his face exuded heavenly light. His astonished mother cried, “You look just like Christ, my son!”

Being away for some time, the young priest worried about his parish in Comana. That was why he was in a hurry. He visited his friends and relatives, visited the places he loved, blessed a friend's house. A day later, only with difficulty did he catch a ride on a military helicopter. His younger brother Imeda wanted to go with him very much, but Fr. Andrew refused to let him. With that refusal he saved his brother's life. After that day the roads were totally closed, but Fr. Andrew managed to get to Comana anyway. He remained until the end in his poor cell to finish his holy duty before God and man.

Nun Maria:

The war was approaching closer and closer to Comana. The predicament was becoming more acute every second. We were praying constantly, asking God to save our land. Three days before the sack of Comana, Bishop Daniel came to us with Mothers Theodora and Eleni. His Eminence gave us a blessing to abandon Comana in the event of the departure of our soldiers (a military detachment—a battalion situated not far from the church commanded by Zaza Pakemiani). But the soldiers fought to the last man and did not leave Comana, and later they were all to perish in battle. May God grant them the Heavenly Kingdom! Eternal Rest!

From the fourth of July the territory of Comana was in the center of fire. They were shooting from all sides. We all gathered in church. I asked Fr. Andrew if we should leave Comana. Pondering a little, he replied: “No, we shouldn’t leave Comana. Today we will pray all night and in the morning serve the Divine Liturgy....” Shells exploded every second. The courtyard was rife with bullets. The walls of the church shook.

Novice Maria:

On the fifth of July, 1993, at a moment of terrible trial when Comana was surrounded and mortal danger was very close, Fr. Andrew called all of us to accept with Christian dignity and humility this most difficult trial and to bear it as sent and permitted from above....

When the enemy forces entered Comana and foreign voices could be heard in the vicinity of the church, each of us sensed how real was the proximity of death. Even in those moments there was a reflection of deep tranquility on Fr. Andrew’s face and in his gaze, inwardly calming us and giving us the possibility of spiritually comprehending all that was transpiring.

It seemed that the very powers of Hades itself were set in array around the church: every possible kind of projectile and shell was

A QUIET HYMN, FULL OF LIGHT

exploding on the land of Comana.... Suddenly we heard voices crying out for help. Without delay Fr. Andrew walked toward the cries, being led by a miracle through a rain of bullets under cover of the church. The cries were of old people from the home for invalids who had remained in Comana. In a short time the battle shifted right to the church courtyard.



Hieromonk Andrew.

4. A REFLECTION OF LOVE AND GLORY

Nun Maria:

At three o'clock in the morning Fr. Andrew said, "Any minute death might come, therefore let us now attend to Confession and Communion." All of us confessed. Fr. Andrew brought the chalice forth from the altar and gave us Holy Communion for the last time.

Novice Maria:

Fr. Andrew quietly and calmly declared, "Prepare yourselves for Confession." He heard everyone's confession right on the spot and communed everyone with the Immortal Mysteries of Christ. After Communion he asked everyone to remain silent and secluded within themselves, so that amidst the hell that surrounded us, we might hear the quiet but ever-victorious voice of Eternity.... These moments were unforgettable.... For it was in these minutes that the depths of the radiance of Fr. Andrew's soul were made known with special power, the radiance of the most gentle love of Christ which *shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not* (John 1:5). It seemed that Fr. Andrew was in

another dimension, where eternal harmony and beauty reign, and which all the powers of hell have not the strength to destroy, for the source of this ineffable harmony and beauty is the Lord Himself.

Nun Maria:

At 4:30 a.m. we were surrounded. They yelled at us to open the door for them. With father's blessing my husband Yuri opened the doors. Then they led him off, hitting him with their machine guns. [It is now already two years (as of 1995) that we have not seen him. He vanished without a trace.]

Novice Maria:

In a little while they took Fr. Andrew, who silently, humbly, and with interior prayer met the moment toward which his entire life had been leading.... He quietly bowed his head before the ineffable Providence of God and bravely received a violent, martyric death from an executioner blinded by evil.

Nun Maria:

When the soldiers led Fr. Andrew out of the church, they told him they would kill him. He knelt down to pray, and his murderer shot him in the back of the neck. Instead of slumping forward as would normally happen, his body fell backwards—he did not bow down before his murderers. For the next twenty minutes his blood flowed like water.

Then our torture began. They accused us of shooting from the roof. The Abkhazian soldiers who stormed Comana consisted primarily of drug addicts—this could be determined from their eyes. Reviling us and shouting, they forced their way into the church and desecrated everything that they could. They turned over the sarcophagus of St. John Chrysostom, looking for booty....

After the arrest of Fr. Andrew and Yuri, within several hours a

A QUIET HYMN, FULL OF LIGHT

youth entered the church and said, “They killed your priest.” We rushed out into the courtyard. Shot by his executioners, Fr. Andrew lay on the ground with a peaceful, blessed smile on his face.

Novice Maria:

The half-closed eyes of Fr. Andrew were filled with ineffable blessedness, and a radiant smile was impressed upon his face. He was a reflection of the highest noetic love and glory. We carefully carried Fr. Andrew’s light and childlike body into the church and placed it between the open Royal Doors in front of the altar.



Early carved stone icon of the Crucifixion from Western Georgia.

Nun Maria:

There we prayed the entire night. With holy oil we anointed his face, his hands and his feet; we cleaned his clothing, placed in his left hand the prayer rope with which he prayed all twenty-four hours of the day. Against the background of a bright blue altar covering, the face of Fr. Andrew was very beautiful....

Novice Maria:

A miracle occurred.... In the blazing July heat, when normally the body of a slain man would rapidly decompose, Fr. Andrew’s body remained entirely incorrupt. The blood that we collected on the site of his martyrdom did not coagulate: it continually flowed from the mortal wound on his head. This miracle shook up no small portion of the

Abkhaz soldiers. Many of them asked forgiveness and, troubled, could not hide their tears. There were even some who personally wanted to settle the score with Fr. Andrew's murderer, to which we could in no way agree, for Fr. Andrew himself had never given us this right, but had told us to place all our hope in God. Within several days the Abkhaz soldiers told us that Fr. Andrew's killer had been injured by a mine and had lost his right arm and leg. Nevertheless, through Fr. Andrew's prayers the Lord granted him life so that in deep repentance he might redeem this horrible and grievous sin.

Nun Maria:

The death of Fr. Andrew marked a breaking point in the course of the fighting. It seems to me that through his pure blood he redeemed the sins of all Georgia. . . . With abuse, shouting, reviling, the aggressors entered the church, but seeing Fr. Andrew in blood, they instantly grew silent and left in shame, which they were unable to hide. . . . That night Manana and I could not sleep—we prayed and chanted a funeral for Fr. Andrew. Soldiers from the Abkhaz army, with machine guns in hand, looked on in amazement. They were amazed that we had no fear. We were given fearlessness and strength by the Lord Jesus Christ and His Saints: John the Baptist, John Chrysostom, and the Martyr Basiliscus, who were right in our church and who invisibly protected us.

In the morning an order (telegram) came from Moscow: "The Church of St. John Chrysostom has worldwide significance and neither the church nor the property should be harmed. Increase the protection and do not touch the ministering clergy." A guard detachment was posted right away.

After all these events Yuri's wife, Zoya Anua, and his daughter Manana were captive for fifty-two days in the Church of St. John Chrysostom. In front of an old wonderworking Tikhvin icon of the Mother of God, here in the Church of St. John Chrysostom, Zoya Anua made this vow: if they both, mother and daughter, remained

A QUIET HYMN, FULL OF LIGHT

alive, they would receive the monastic tonsure. So it happened. But it was impossible for us to remain in Comana any longer. Some time after the capture of Comana, at the order of the Russian Ministry of Defense, by God's mercy my daughter Manana and I were escorted from Comana to the Sukhumi airport by Russian pilots via helicopter. We managed to meet with Bishop Daniel in Sukhumi, and the next day we flew to Tbilisi. We were met at the office of the Georgian Patriarchate by His Holiness and Beatitude, the Catholicos-Patriarch of All Georgia Ilia II.

With the Patriarch's blessing Zoya Anua was tonsured a nun with the name Maria (in honor of St. Mary Magdalene), and her daughter Manana—Novice Maria—likewise walks on this same path. Today they both serve in the Monastery of the Georgian Patriarchate.

Some time later, an eyewitness informed Nun Maria of the details of the martyrdom of Subdeacon Yuri Anua. His bestial torture took place at the spring of the Holy Martyr Basiliscus and continued for twenty-four hours. He was not shot immediately; they beat him for a long time, shot him first, then hung him on a tree, shot various parts of his body and only then did his sadistic torturers execute this great hero of Orthodoxy, Yuri Anua. May his memory be eternal! Eternal rest to his soul!

O Righteous God! Jesus Christ! I pray to Thee on bended knees! Illumine with Thy Divine Light the souls of Fr. Andrew, Geno Adamia, David (Zhiuli) Shartava* and all the soldiers who fell in battle for Georgia. Remember them, O Lord, in Thy Kingdom, give rest to

* Shortly after the withdrawal of the Georgian military and the cessation of military hostilities on September 27, 1993, David (Zhiuli) Shartava, Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the Abkhazian Autonomous Republic, and twenty other council members, as well as the Mayor of Sukhumi, Guram Gabiskiria, and the Chief of Police Tengiz Rapava, were tortured and executed. In the ensuing months hundreds of teachers and more than seventy doctors were exterminated, along with many thousands of civilians, including women and children. Eight years later over 250,000 Georgians from the Abkhazeti region are living as refugees or IDPs in Georgia.

THE ORTHODOX WORD

their souls, forgive them all their transgressions, voluntary and involuntary, and grant them Thy Heavenly Kingdom! Amen!

Novice Maria:

On the seventh of July, on the feast day of St. John the Baptist of the Lord, we placed the martyred body of Fr. Andrew in the blessed ground of Comana, burying him near the wall of the church. On Fr. Andrew's grave there stands a wooden cross as an image of the spiritual cross which he so loved and which uplifted him and granted him a crown of martyrdom. How gently did the Lord reveal Fr. Andrew, who illumined our souls with the Light that knows no evening, with which his soul was filled. His life was a trembling prayer to God, a quiet hymn, full of light.

Nun Maria:

I think that he received from the Lord these crowns: the crown of virginity, the crown of humility, and the crown of martyrdom.

Abbess Theodora:

It was difficult to accept the horrible news of Fr. Andrew's murder. Not long ago I saw him in a dream. He showed me his grave and, with his habitual meekness and simplicity, he softly and peacefully said, "I don't need anything, except fence it off with sticks." I do not know if he will be added to the choir of [canonized] saints, but I often ask him to pray before the throne of God for the salvation of my soul.

Novice Nana:

Fr. Andrew bequeathed to Georgia's churches and monasteries as his last breath the wonderfully translated *Three Keys for the Treasures of Inner Prayer*. As Archbishop Zosime of Tsilkani mentions [in his introduction], "When this pastor worked on that book, a severe battle was taking place near Comana. Even in that hard time, in a time of terrible

A QUIET HYMN, FULL OF LIGHT

danger, Fr. Andrew didn't abandon the Church and found his only consolation and hope in closeness to God through the path of interior prayer."

After Fr. Andrew's martyric death his godfather, Priest Ilia Karkadze, had the following dream:

"We were walking together along a hill.... We saw burned fields, overturned tanks, fleeing soldiers.... Suddenly the weather changed. Lightning and a thunderstorm began and we ran towards a tent that was the only shelter in the vicinity. Running ahead, Fr. Andrew left me behind. He went up to the tent door, turned back toward me to bid farewell, and disappeared behind the door. I became frightened and did not want to continue my way. I turned back.

"This is the way Fr. Andrew entered the heavenly tabernacle, while I remained outside," Father Ilia recalls with regret.

Hieromonk Andrew's
siblings:
Ryassaphore-nun
Vasilissa, Priest Ioane,
and Novice Nana.



THE ORTHODOX WORD

Editor's note: The following is a brief Life of Subdeacon Yuri, who was slain with Fr. Andrew.

Yuri (George) Dimitrievich Anua was born into a pious Orthodox family in the city of Ochamchire in Abkhazeti, Georgia, on August 6, 1934, the feast of the Russian Passion-bearers Boris and Gleb. From earliest childhood Yuri was not simply a faithful and church-going youth—he burned with love for God. He finished intermediate school with a gold medal and finished the Moscow Engineering Construction Institute with a diploma of excellence. He worked as a construction engineer, and for many years he occupied the post of Director of Construction in Abkhazeti.

In 1963 he married Zoya Anua (the future Nun Maria), a lawyer by profession. They raised a daughter, Manana (Novice Maria), and a son, Malkhaz, who graduated from the Department of Russian Linguistics at Tbilisi State University.

Yuri labored ceaselessly for the glory of God. Using his construction skills, he was able to complete three projects of international significance. Without any help from the authorities, he restored the ruined fifth-century Church of St. John Chrysostom, where the saint's relics lay for thirty years. Second, Subdeacon Yuri constructed 1500 metal steps to the peak of the mountain of St. John the Baptist, where the head of the Prophet and Forerunner was found in the ninth century. Finally, during the years of the Communist regime, at the decree of local party activists an immense reservoir for raising trout was constructed on the territory of the spring of St. Basiliscus. Then a miracle took place—three times unbelieving people started to stock this reservoir with trout fry, but they never achieved success. The fish died out and the reservoir became heaped with muck, which remained there for years and spread stench all over Comana. Subdeacon Yuri also cleaned up this holy spring, which has colossal spiritual, curative power.

The war in Abkhazia brought a stop to his labors. After all civilians had fled Comana, Subdeacon Yuri, his wife and daughter

A QUIET HYMN, FULL OF LIGHT

remained with Hieromonk Andrew. Their desire was to meet their fate in the church they had rebuilt.

On July 5, 1993, at 5:00 a.m. the Eshera battalion, consisting mostly of drug addicts who had joined the ranks of the Abkhazian Army, first entered Comana. They then swarmed the territory of the Comana church.

Soldiers removed Hieromonk Andrew and Subdeacon Yuri from the church. After the slaying of Fr. Andrew, this fearless soldier of Christ was tortured at the spring of St. Basiliscus. After twenty-four hours of being beaten, hung from a tree, and shot in various parts of his body, Subdeacon Yuri was finally executed.

May the Lord receive his righteous soul into His Kingdom. May he rest with the saints in the Heavenly Kingdom. Amen.



Subdeacon George Anua.