

Wonder

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Title: **“Incarnate Love”** Author: **Fr. John Breck**

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In this season of Christ’s Nativity, the title of Vigen Guroian’s fine collection of essays on ethical issues [Incarnate Love, University of Notre Dame Press, first ed. 1988] comes back to me with special poignancy. For the past several years I’ve spent a couple of weeks each spring in Romania, visiting theological faculties, monasteries and parish churches. I just returned from my first fall visit, with most of the ten days spent in Transylvania. More than any previous trip, that brief tour made me aware of the material deprivation so many Romanian people still face in this post-Communist era. It also made clear the depths of love and commitment with which many more privileged Romanians, together with a significant number of Americans and other foreigners, are attempting to meet the needs of the poor, the sick and the marginalized.

Poverty conditions in parts of Eastern Europe, as in the developing countries of Africa, are at times beyond the comprehension of most Americans. One evening the family who was hosting my wife and me drove me into downtown Cluj. There, in a small religious bookstore, I met a woman in her mid-seventies who earns her meager living translating articles and books for a local Orthodox publisher. Her income does not allow her the luxury of buying the heart medication she needs, although it is relatively inexpensive. Often she does not have enough to eat, simply because she has no money at all. The concept of “disposable income,” or even of a bank account, is incomprehensible to her. Yet she is a person of culture and quiet dignity (she apologized that her French was not as good as it used to be, then in that language she conversed fluently about her situation, but also about French and Romanian literature). She has a son on this side of the ocean, a computer programmer who used to send her money on occasion. His live-in girl friend, though, has forbidden him from doing so any longer, and the mother now receives nothing from him. If she doesn’t starve to death, it’s only because a few friends offer her what they can out of their own limited means. And hers is hardly an isolated case.

Other situations also tug at heart and conscience. During the Ceausescu era, government policy outlawed contraception as well as abortion – not for moral reasons, but to increase the population for political and military purposes. Now the country is rife with abandoned and abused children (every month an average of six children are abandoned in the single city of Cluj).

Small but significant efforts are underway, nevertheless, to address this well-publicized and still critical situation. Craig and Victoria Goodwin, for example, working in conjunction with the Orthodox Christian Mission Center in Florida (www.ocmc.org) have bought and renovated a large house in a poor section of Cluj. With teams of volunteer workers, they care for some half-dozen orphans less than two years of age. Under the eaves they have two rooms set aside for pregnant women who are looking for the support necessary to allow them to bring their child to term rather than resort to an abortion. The home is spotless, very well equipped, and the atmosphere is warm, loving, and compassionate.

Little Angela, about 18 months old now, looked up at me with her dark eyes and timid smile. She is part Gypsy and so has little if any chance of being adopted in her native country. Those eyes followed me as I left the house, and we peered at each other through the window. If I could have put her in my pocket and brought her back with me, I would have. But there's a moratorium on foreign adoptions, although, as always, there are ways around it. A couple in the States fell in love with Angela some time ago and are working hard to make her their own – and may God fulfill their desire! Meanwhile, the Goodwins are devoting themselves to her and to the others, with tender affection and extraordinary self-sacrifice (although they would not see it that way). I finally left the house and returned to our friend's apartment. For hours that night I lay awake, marveling at little Angela's gaze, but also at the work the Goodwins are doing. A handful of kids, that's all. But it's a gift of life to each of them.

Some thirty years ago I was hunched, terrified, in the back seat of an old French DS, tearing down the autoroute at 180 km. per hour. The driver was a hotshot young businessman, who nevertheless lived his Catholic faith with seriousness and a certain sense of joy. We just learned that today he is in Romania, working with orphans.

A close friend in France, who many years ago became a nun in the Romanian archdiocese, is making plans with others to create an orphanage in Moldova. Once it's completed, they will be welcoming several hundred children and providing them with everything from medical care and education to a quality of "family" love most of them otherwise would never know.

And so it goes. Simple people like ourselves, with no other agenda than to "be Christ" to the poor, the abandoned, the "rejects" of contemporary society. And just as many stories, of course, could be told of people in this country who work to improve living conditions, education, and medical care for those in poverty, and who do so with "incarnate love." That is love which has taken flesh. It is love like the love of Jesus, who spoke a word or touched a wound, and brought healing.

In this Christmas time, we can only give thanks to God for the gift of that love, as Jesus Himself incarnated it, and as it becomes incarnate through the lives of all those who make of their existence something of a reverse tithe. They live on ten percent of their resources and offer the rest to the less privileged. May God bless their efforts and strengthen their dedication. May He allow them to touch others with the same healing power He conveyed to Peter's mother-in-law, to the woman with the issue of blood, and to Jairus's deceased daughter. And may He touch our own hearts as well, that we might share in those good works, that we might in our own lives and activity give flesh to that love that knows no bounds.

Archpriest John Breck is on the faculty of St. Sergius Institute in Paris, France. He holds an M.Div from Yale University and a Theological Doctorate from Ruprecht-Karl University in Germany. He writes a column for the website of the Orthodox Church in America entitled "Life in Christ" from which this article was taken.

Discussion Questions:

What tugs at your heart and conscience?

How has God demonstrated His amazing gift of love to you in your life? Name specific examples.

How have you incarnated Christ's love to those around you? Do you? Is it something you are conscious of?

What kind of agendas do you have in your life besides "being Christ" to those around you? Are these agendas necessarily bad or harmful?