



A JOURNAL OF ORTHODOX FAITH AND CULTURE

# ROAD TO EMMAUS

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# “THE MYSTERY THAT MOVES THE WORLD NOW HAS A NAME”

How 150,000 Mayans Turned to Orthodoxy

The 2012 “Mayan apocalypse”, the end of the ancient Mayan calendar dreaded by many outsiders, was viewed by native Mayans as the beginning of a new era; and indeed, for 300 Mayan communities in Guatemala and Southern Mexico, the end of the ancient cycle has coincided with their conversion and subsequent reception into the Orthodox Church by the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople. Join *Road to Emmaus* as we interview Archimandrite Andres Girón de Leon, the founder and spiritual father of this remarkable movement, and Reverend John Chakos of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of North America, who has moved to Guatemala to assist him.

## Early Christianity in Guatemala

RTE: Father Andres and Fr. John, thank you so much for joining us. Can we begin our conversation about this astonishing conversion of Mayan natives to Orthodoxy by describing their pre-Christian belief and how they first became Christian?

FR. ANDRES: The Mayan religion was grounded in both earth and heaven. They had many gods, but one overall Father God who oversaw all of creation. Their religion was close to monotheism; lesser spirits were under the guidance of the One God, who was the Maker of heaven and earth.

In 1492, the first Spaniards came with Columbus to America, and particularly important for us, to Santo Domingo. From this time on, the Spaniards

*Opposite: Mayan Orthodox Christians greeting Metropolitan Athenagoras of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Aguacate, Guatemala.*

With thanks to Jesse Brandow for the use of his warm and lively photos of the Guatemalan Orthodox Church and Mayan people.

conquered the American Indian people by force and slavery, and although there were some devoted missionaries who cared deeply for the people, Christianity came as part of that colonial movement. The Mayans were frightened by these powerful invaders and although they received baptism, many never gave up their pre-Christian religion and beliefs, but maintained their old sacred places out of sight of the Catholic authorities. As generations passed and Catholicism took hold, people began mixing elements of their native religion with Christianity. These mountainous regions are very remote, and even dedicated priests could hardly get to these people. There is a saying in Guatemala for something extraordinarily rare; just as you would say, “Once in a blue moon”, here they say, “Like the visit of a bishop”.



Fr. Andres Girón de Leon and Fr. John Chakos.

RTE: Did this syncretism bear any resemblance to Santeria, the mix of native Caribbean and West African slave religion that uses some outer Roman Catholic forms?

FR. ANDRES: No, Santeria involves magic. It is a fact that the Mayan people have never been involved in witchcraft or magic. Also, Orthodoxy has not been imposed. These people have willingly and wholeheartedly converted to Orthodoxy on

their own. Almost all of them were baptized Catholic and many came from the recent Catholic Charismatic Renewal movement, which very much discouraged pagan customs, including invoking the “patron”, the native deity, with the attendant sex, drinking, incense and rituals around the fiesta. The charismatic movement did away with the remnants of these unChristian things.

RTE: So, would you say that God led them through the Catholic charismatics?

FR. ANDRES: Yes, absolutely. And once they discovered Orthodoxy, they felt they had found an expression of Christianity that seemed native to them, that fit their spirits, because they deeply respect God and the sacred things of God. It seems now that the Mayan pagan world has ended, and that there has begun a beautiful search for Orthodoxy.

*Opposite: Mayan Orthodox mother and daughter in Todos Santos. Courtesy of Jesse Brandow.*



RTE: Father Theotimos Tsalis, a spiritual son of the famous missionary Fr. Cosmas of Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of Congo) once told me that there were pre-Christian customs that made it very easy for the people of Zaire to come into Orthodoxy. For instance, although western anthropologists claimed that his people worshipped their ancestors, he said, "We never worshipped our ancestors. We went to our ancestors' graves to thank them for the lives they had led and the gifts they gave us. We knew that their spirit and teaching was inside us. We would ask their help in our lives and leave offerings, as Christians leave flowers at graves, but it was never the ancestor worship that the western anthropologists thought it was. It was a very short step from there for us to begin venerating saints. We can't know for sure if our ancestor was a saint – we can be grateful to him, but we can venerate these people who we know were saints."

FR. ANDRES: Yes, we encourage the Orthodox Mayans to both honor and remember their ancestors, whom they call, "Los Grandes Abuelos," the "Great Grandparents," as well as to venerate the Orthodox saints. Of course, most Indian people were previously Catholic so they are used to the idea of Christian saints, and on the feast days of All Saints and All Souls, they love to bring food. They used to bring the food that their relatives liked in life to their graves. Now they also bring it to church for the saints. It takes time to introduce the Holy Fathers and Orthodox saints into this tradition, but it is coming.

RTE: Isn't that why we call them the Holy Fathers? We feel they are akin to us, not just the "Holy Theologians" or the "Holy Church Writers." Also, many cultures have these shared meals. After Pascha and on memorial days, the Orthodox Slavs have picnics beside the graves of their family and friends.

Your account of the early history of Latin America is a reminder that the Russian missionaries had many conflicts with the administrators of the Russian-American company over the well-being of the native peoples. Catholic missionaries surely did the same in South America.

FR. ANDRES: Yes. Fray Bartolomé de las Casas (1484-1566), at first a settler in the New World and then a Dominican monk, was one of the first evangelists to the Mayans and he fought against the slavery and oppression of native peoples for over fifty years. Bishop Francisco Marroquin (1499-1563) was the first bishop of Guatemala, as well as the provisional governor, and he translated Christian texts into many native languages. Both men fought

against Spanish colonialists who had been awarded large tracts of Guatemalan lands and then needed local workers to cultivate them. They naturally looked to the Mayans for this labor – it was a subtle form of slavery, in which they didn't kill many people, but they did use them. It was the missionaries who tried to defend them. Have you ever seen *The Mission*, based on the work of the Paraguayan Catholic saint and Jesuit Roque González de Santa Cruz with the Guariani people? It's one of the greatest films I've ever seen. The Jesuits defended the people against colonial prejudice, and sometimes they themselves were martyred.

In our own century many good Maryknoll Fathers came to Guatemala and identified powerfully with the Indians. I have to be honest here. I became a priest because of these fathers and we named many of our villages after twentieth-century Catholic martyrs who gave their lives for the people of South America. The Catholic Church was my mother and she made me what I am – the Lord, the sacraments, the saints, the Mother of God – everything, I first learned to love there. I didn't come out of darkness to Orthodoxy. I came from a great light. My coming to Orthodoxy has made me appreciate my Catholic upbringing even more, and the Mayan people came to Orthodoxy the same way, although many of them took a middle step by becoming independent and charismatic. I have a debt to the Catholic Church and I have to be grateful.

RTE: Why did the charismatics feel that they had to leave the Catholic Church? Most Catholic charismatics in North America stay within the institutional church.

FR. ANDRES: Some traditional Catholic bishops in Guatemala did not approve of the charismatic renewal movement, so they left. Also, many people became disillusioned after Vatican II. I myself fell in love with the Catholic Church when I was a young boy because I felt the mystical holiness of the Church. We were all attracted to the sanctity. Somehow after Vatican II the other-worldliness seemed to slip away, as if they had changed clothes.

RTE: It is a good lesson for Orthodox who are ready to jettison traditional languages and cultural practices to make the faith "more accessible" for people. That was exactly the motive of the Catholic change, which attempted to recover practices and traditions from the early undivided church, such as turning the altar around to face the people and using local languages.



However, many Catholics feel that they lost both mystery and their connection to tradition in the attempt.

FR. ANDRES: Yes, that mystery is important for the human soul.

### The Journey of Archimandrite Andres Girón

RTE: Father, can you tell us your own story? You were ordained a Catholic priest rather young – will you describe those early years?

FR. ANDRES: There were a number of different groups of Mayan Catholics in those days –mainstream Catholics, charismatics, and even a branch of Old Believer-type traditional Catholics who didn't have musical instruments. I had all of these people to minister to, and later I had an active Catholic seminary with seventy-five students. To be a priest is a great challenge here because you are a healer of the whole human being, bodies as well as minds and souls. When I went to remote villages I had to take my box of medicines to doctor them, as I still do now. I've spent my life learning medicine as well as serving the sacraments.

RTE: How did your work develop after your ordination?

FR. ANDRES: My father, who served two terms in the Guatemalan senate from 1958 to 1962, was assassinated by the army for helping the people. When my family was exiled I went to the U.S. as a Christian Brother, a Catholic order that teaches in parochial schools in the inner cities, and I also worked on a Master's and a Ph.D. at this time.

There, in the early 1960's, I had a life-changing experience. In Memphis, Tennessee I met a black man, a really black man who wasn't of my religion. I had deep sympathies for the cause of the Negro people, and had joined in a local protest when I met Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. for the first time. He was a real holy man, and he shocked me with the word of God, with the power of Jesus Christ. I began working with him and before our first protest march he instructed us in non-violent action: "If you are insulted you have to bless them; if they do violence to you, you must be peaceful; if they spit in your face, you have to say 'thank you'." There was a lot of violence, the police were tough, and we had high-pressure water hoses turned on us, but it didn't matter. Later, I was with him again when we marched to Washington D.C.

*Opposite: Rev. Fr. Andres Girón with a young parishioner. Courtesy of Jesse Brandow.*

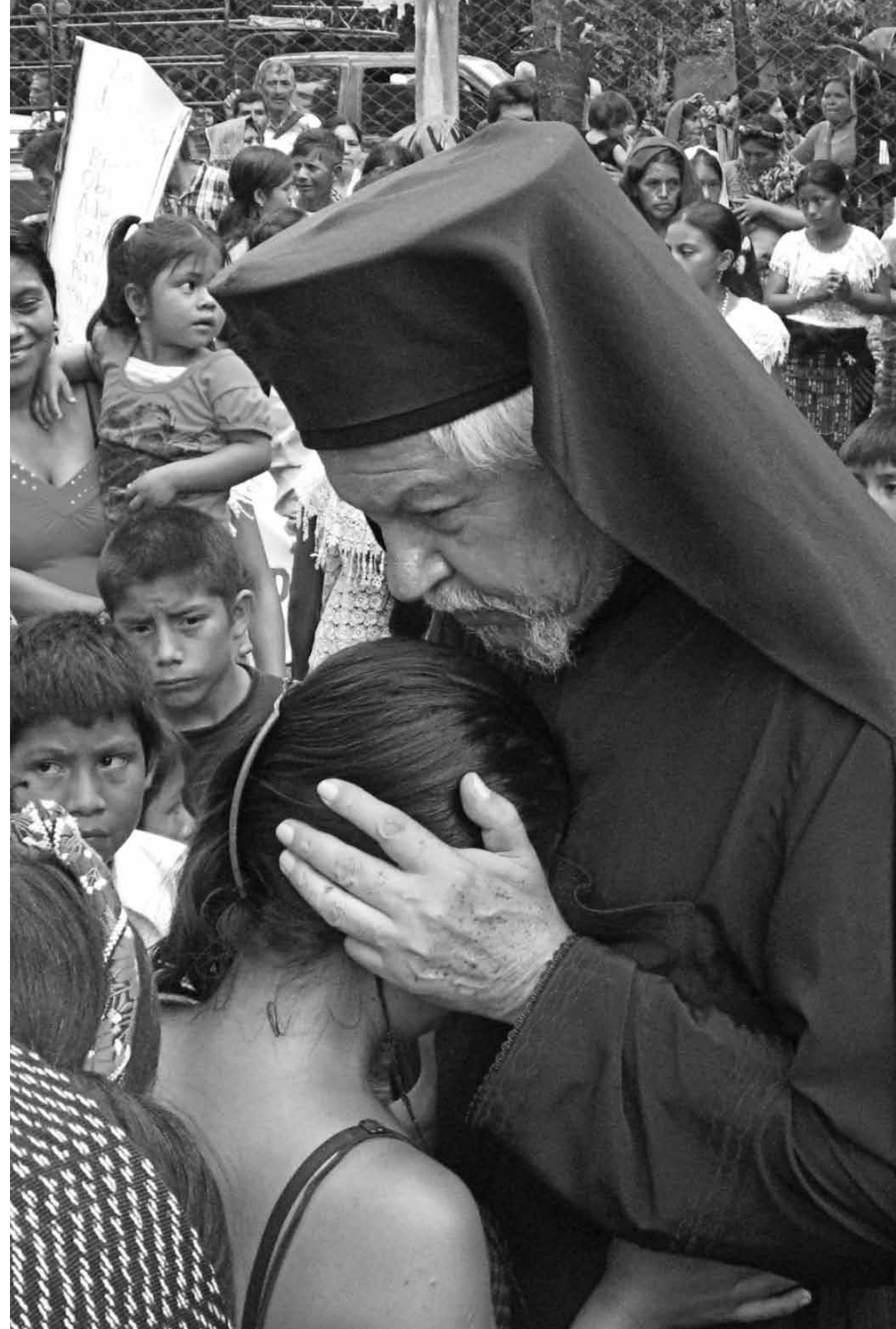
A man is made by his environment and mine was violent. I carried violence in my body, my mind and my heart, but that man changed my life. After I met him, I told him that I believed that the only answer for change in Latin America was through violent revolution, that I believed this with all my heart and that I was going back to Guatemala to begin, but Martin Luther King changed my mind. His energy swept over us and changed us. He taught me that non-violent action is the only way, and that you have to pursue people through love, not through hate. So I spent much of that decade watching King and reading Gandhi, who also taught that you resisted evil, not by violence, but by absorbing it into yourself. When your opponent sees what you are doing they will change. King told me to come back to Guatemala, and I returned in 1970.

Another thing happened to me before I left Memphis. I had already been ordained, but I was only a religious man, not a spiritual man. Once, as I was assisting with Holy Week services, right beside the cross in the middle of the church was a beautiful woman giving a bottle of milk to a tiny young boy with hydrocephaly, a huge deformed head. That child looked up at me and smiled, and it changed my life. That boy gave me power. I saw Jesus in his eyes and in his huge head and I fell on my knees and cried, "God, what do you want me to be? ...My God I will do whatever you want me to do!" I understood then that being a priest and bringing Jesus to people is the best thing in the world. You have to love Jesus. You have to feel that He is here.

One day, not long after I returned to Guatemala, I was visiting parishioners on horseback, and because I was hungry, I stopped at a house to ask for a tortilla. The woman said, "I'm sorry, but we have nothing, not a single tortilla." I was so shocked that I decided that somehow I had to begin to help, so I organized a non-violent land reform movement. All of America once belonged to the Indians, but for the last forty years the Mayans have been trying to obtain the right to buy back the land that was stolen from them to feed themselves. Can you imagine? Even if they had money, they couldn't buy land. We have a moral responsibility to help because it is the poor who work the land, not the rich who own it and fly over in helicopters.

Even now, 71 % of the land of Guatemala belongs to 1% of the people, and the land reform we did accomplish came at a huge price. The landowners and the government wanted to kill me. For more than two decades I had to have eight bodyguards just to stay alive and I was shot three times, once

*Opposite: Fr. Andres prays over a young Mayan girl. Courtesy of Jesse Brandow.*



while serving mass in the altar. After 27,000 Mayan people marched and protested we finally received 45 large pieces of land where we established villages. But I never gave people land without Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ and the land revolution went together. I did it because I believed in Jesus. I am convinced of the saving power of love.

RTE: Were you also involved in Liberation Theology or with Che Guevara?

FR. ANDRES: I did read Liberation Theology, but I was not a follower of Che Guevara because I don't like Communism. Communism doesn't belong to us. It's a foreign idea imported into Latin America and it's rubbish. Being communal, in community, is native to the Mayan people, not Communism. It is impossible to talk about Christ and Marx because you cannot compare Jesus Christ with anyone. Many good Catholic priests and nuns who wanted to help the poor found themselves in conflict with the government and sometimes with church authorities. They were often called Communists, but that wasn't true.

RTE: Did you ever try to work in government yourself?

FR. ANDRES: In 1986 I helped to organize a non-violent March for Peace to stop Guatemala's thirty-six year civil war. Two years later I ran for president. Although I was a Catholic priest, I had special permission for the nomination from my bishop and Pope John Paul II, but I withdrew from the campaign because there was too much moral corruption bound up with the election. I served as an elected senator from 1991 to 1995 when we worked on land reform, and one term as Guatemala's ambassador to the United Nations.

RTE: What an amazing life.

FR. JOHN: Because Fr. Andres took the side of the indigenous people, he was not popular with those in power, particularly the military. Not only was he shot while saying mass, but his car was blown up, and yet another time he was attacked and his bodyguard was killed. Here the social movement and spiritual movement are intertwined, and because of the material work Fr. Andres did for the Mayans while preaching Christ to them as a Catholic priest, they first asked him to be their spiritual leader and have now followed him into Orthodoxy.

RTE: Father Andres, how did you meet Orthodoxy?

FR. ANDRES: I first learned of Orthodoxy, not in seminary, but through a western-rite Uniate Catholic priest from Hungary, Fr. Joseph Fekete, working in the most impoverished rural area of Guatemala called Coban. Although he followed the western rite, he had eastern Orthodox theology. When the next Catholic bishop came, however, Fr. Joseph was kicked out. I was a parish priest then, and said, "My brother, come live with me." The bishop was very angry at me, but Fr. Joseph lived in my house for many years. Later, I studied theology in Rome where I became acquainted with students from Orthodox countries, began to visit Orthodox churches and studied their theology.

When I led the land reform movement to help the poor obtain land to feed themselves, we were happy when we were finally given these tracts of land, but the Mayans were really searching for something else, something more spiritual: the life of God within them. Their desire to have a real relationship with God was very pure and this is what the whole world is searching for, the elemental need of a person to meet his Creator.

RTE: How then did you come under the Ecumenical Patriarchate?

FR. ANDRES: I was Orthodox in belief for more than twenty years before I became canonically Orthodox. I longed to be Orthodox, and around 2007 I talked to the Antiochians and to the OCA several times; in 2010 we finally came under the Ecumenical Patriarchate.

### Father John and Presbytera Alexandra Chakos

RTE: Father John, can you tell us your story now? How did you end up on mission with Fr. Andres and the Guatemalan Mayans?

FR. JOHN: My wife and I both grew up in the Greek Church. We were young and idealistic; I was a high school teacher and my wife was a seamstress, and at the end of 1965, four years after its founding, we joined the Peace Corps. We were asked to work in the *favelas*, the slums of Rio de Janeiro, and there we came into contact with real poverty like we had never seen. There were moments when we were both crying, there was so little we could do. This depth of poverty provoked a crisis of faith that led to a period of great doubt and struggle, but afterward there was an awakening for both of us.

In 1969 our faith returned as a revelation and I went to seminary at Holy



Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology in 1971. After ordination, we served in three different parishes, in Chicago and Aurora, Illinois, and for thirty-one years in Pittsburgh, but we always retained our love of mission. Our parishes were very involved in international mission trips and in supporting long and short-term missionaries. In fact, our Pittsburgh parish first brought the Indonesians over in the 1980's. We had the whole Indonesian Orthodox Church in our house for the summer when they were chrismated by Bishop Maximos of Pittsburgh, and then their clergy went to Holy Cross.

We also visited many Orthodox monasteries around the world. Our first trip to Guatemala was to the Antiochian orphanage run by Mother Ines and her sisters in 1999, where we adopted our daughter, and on one of many subsequent trips we met Father Andres. The moment I retired, we left to come here on mission. I assist Fr. Andres with priestly formation, and my wife has a school and workshop for ecclesiastical sewing. She teaches the women how to make cassocks, vestments, and altar cloths, and I assist Fr. Andres.

RTE: I understand that you also had a part to play in Fr. Andres becoming Orthodox.

FR. JOHN: Father Andres had been Orthodox in belief for many years, but was geographically very isolated and told me of his desire to become canonically Orthodox when I first met him at the orphanage. I contacted the Orthodox Christian Mission Center and they sent two priests with me on a following trip, Fr. David Rutger, the associate director of OCMC and Fr. Antonio Perdomo of Texas. Father Andres picked us up at the airport in Nueva Concepcion and gave us a four-day tour. We each wrote our own reports, and they were given to SCOBA, the national assembly of Orthodox bishops.

I assumed that the Mayan mission would go with the English-speaking OCA, but the next thing I heard was that they had come under the Ecumenical Patriarchate. Our Guatemalan priests, Fr. Andres Girón and Fr. Michael Castellanos, were chrismated by two priests of the Ecumenical Patriarchate under Metropolitan Archbishop Athenagoras of Mexico City, Central America and the Caribbean, and were ordained by the metropolitan as archimandrites in 2010. Interestingly, when I had first met them, they were already commemorating Patriarch Bartholomew.

*Opposite: Mayan children. Courtesy of Jesse Brandow.*



FR. ANDRES: Rev. Fr. Andrew Vujisic and Fr. Peter DiLeo-Vulic, the two priests under Metropolitan Athenagoras, returned to Puerto Rico and as I very much needed help I asked Fr. John to come to us. The metropolitan gave us five years to convert these people, but I said, “It took Russia four hundred years to convert its people. I may not live to see it, but we are working on it.”

RTE: Does the mission also receive practical help from the patriarchate?

FR. JOHN: The Ecumenical Patriarchate’s metropolitan of Mexico has jurisdiction over twenty countries, mostly ethnic émigré communities, and he simply doesn’t have the resources. This is the first true indigenous mission for the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Central and South America, but the Mayans aren’t waiting for anyone. They are following Fr. Andres’ lead and doing it for themselves. The Mayan communities are self-supporting and this is a good place to study how mission really works.

RTE: I wouldn’t be surprised if people from other countries pick up the Mayan model.

FR. JOHN: Yes, other central and South American communities are already sending people to see what we are doing. As we train seminarians, we will also send them out to other groups of people in other countries. We have the blessing and prayers of the patriarch and the metropolitan, who will ordain our clergy, but we aren’t waiting for them to “help”. We are going ahead.

RTE: Father Andres, although you are native Guatemalan, I understand that you aren’t Mayan.

FR. ANDRES: Too bad I’m not, because the majority of my country is Mayan. They are the ones who do the dirty work for those of Spanish background, and they are the most beautiful people in the whole country because they have a very powerful sense of community. They don’t like to do things individually, but together. I became involved with them twenty-five years ago through land reform, and because many of them live in remote places where the Catholic Church rarely reached – some of these villages had not had sacraments for twenty years – a large group of these Mayans who had obtained land during the reforms asked me to be their spiritual leader.

*Opposite: Young Mayan boy in Todos Santos. Courtesy of Jesse Brandow.*



The Mayan people are the most religious people I've ever met. They have a tremendous need and love for God. Even though we are unworthy, when we visit these remote villages, they are so happy to see a priest that they receive us on their knees with incense. They have a simple fervor that finds expression in concrete action; for example, a few weeks ago we had a large family – men, women, grandparents, parents, aunts and uncles, children – travel five hours to come to us for confession and Holy Communion. I am so proud to serve them. As a priest you have to be holy because they are calling you to be holy.

RTE: Along with a strong sense of community, what else can you tell us about the Mayan world-view?

FR. ANDRES: The Mayan people see life as a circle. You start at one point and when you come back around to that point, you start a new life. In the center of the circle are the directions: north, south, east and west. We are not part of the world, we are the world. Everything that happens in Latin America, or China or Africa happens to all of us because we are not part of a specific location, we are part of the whole world.

These people are very near to earth and heaven. They are near to earth because they are very conscious of the balance of nature. They are near to heaven in that they become heaven for us. Being near to earth is an act of receiving; being near to heaven is an act of giving, and the Mayan people do both. When they give, they are in communion with the Giver of Life.

FR. JOHN: Since we human beings first walked upon this earth there has been an understanding that there is something more out there. It was difficult to put a name to, so we used our imaginations because we knew there was something behind the world that gave it purpose and meaning. The ancient Greeks, for example, came up with a mythology, a whole pantheon of gods, as did other ancient peoples. The Mayans had their own understanding of how all of this came into being. What we do know as Orthodox Christians is that, that which was not named before, the mystery that moves the world, now has a name—Jesus Christ. What was hinted to us before is now clear and manifest. God is incarnate. As St. John the Evangelist says, "...that which we have heard, that which we have seen, that which we have gazed upon, that which we have touched..."

## Catholic and Protestant Responses

RTE: How do the other faiths respond to you, particularly the Catholic Church which has been here for five hundred years?

FR. ANDRES: It is natural now that the Catholic Church is trying to defend Catholic Guatemalans against both Protestant and Orthodox missionaries. Some bishops don't like me at all, but I understand them.

RTE: When did the first Protestant missionaries come?

FR. ANDRES: In 1872. They were from New Orleans, invited by the Guatemalan president, Justo Rufino Barrios Auyón. He wasn't a Catholic, but a mason, and he invited the Protestants down to divide the Catholics. From that invitation has come many splinter churches – a babel of religions that now include Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons. It is very confusing for the Indians and not transforming when Protestants tell them to renounce the sacraments, the saints, the Mother of God, and tradition. The hook that many Protestants throw out is that if you tithe to God through their churches, then God will return it to you by the thousands, but if you don't tithe, you are robbing God. The Guatemalan Catholics fall through pure ignorance. Some of these Protestants want to break all of the local customs and the culture. If we don't respect the Mayan culture we will destroy what these people really have to give the Church and the world.

RTE: Surely, there are sincere Protestants who also respect the culture, but such a diversity of faiths must be terribly confusing. How then did the Mayans come to Orthodoxy?

FR. ANDRES: When you are in a country where there are no material answers, there is a search for God that you will never believe. Their search for God came through their physical poverty.

RTE: Mother Teresa once said that in its poverty, India was much richer spiritually than North America with its material abundance.

FR. ANDRES: I would dare to say that also.

## The Mayan Orthodox Christian Community

RTE: Father, will you describe the demographics of the Mayan Orthodox population in Guatemala?

FR. ANDRES: The total population of Guatemala is around 14 million, about the size of Ohio. About 67%, or 8 million, are Mayan. Poverty and illiteracy are still great problems. We now have 150,000 active Mayan parishioners in 300 communities and many others who are moving towards Orthodoxy. This is why the local Catholic Church is very concerned, and why in Guatemala the Catholics are even rebaptizing Orthodox who come to their churches, which is not done anywhere else in the world.

FR. JOHN: Fr. Andres not only works with the Mayans in Guatemala, but he also has fifty-two vibrant parishes in Chiapas, Mexico, mostly made up of Guatemalan refugees who had to leave during the wars, but who have kept their identity and languages. There are also some native Mexicans.

FR. ANDRES: We have already baptized (or chrismated if they already had a Trinitarian baptism) and married almost all of these people. We have eight priests, all ordained under the Ecumenical Patriarchate. Four of our priests are Mayan and four are Latino priests of mixed Spanish-Mayan blood. I am the only one who is not Mayan. I'm Spanish and Italian. We also have 500 catechists, both men and women.

The Guatemalan Mayans speak twenty-one distinct languages, and many more dialects, and it is very difficult to get them together speaking one language. The only unifying factor is Spanish, which they need to learn to survive, but there are still many communities that don't speak Spanish, and I have to use translators.

FR. JOHN: Father Andres also has Mayan communities in Oakland, Denver, and Seattle (all of whom are working towards coming into Orthodoxy). When anyone falls ill, the whole community comes together to pay their bills and get them cured. When someone dies, they gather money together for the funeral and send them back to Guatemala to be buried. They have a community bank account that everyone contributes to.

*Opposite: Native Guatemalan priest Fr. Blas, traversing a field to reach a local church. Courtesy of Jesse Brandow.*



FR. ANDRES: This sense of community exists in every Mayan village whether in Guatemala, Mexico, or in the United States. Wherever someone dies, the viewing is at home. People come and pray through the night with the family, and not just a few people. The whole community or village or town comes and stays all night. They bring food and pray, eat, and drink.

The same happens when people are married. There is a fiesta and the father of the man who is going to be married brings you a cup of small balls of cocoa. If you take a ball of cocoa, that means that you have accepted his invitation and the next day you come with a gift. The men bring pieces of wood, or roofing, hammers, sinks, cabinets; the ladies bring food. They have a big fiesta and build a house for the new couple in one day. This is the first wedding present; it's a beautiful custom. This community sharing is one of the most powerful things about the Mayan culture, and the question of how the first Christians lived is very close to the heart of the Mayans. The 16th-century Fray Bartolome de las Casa once said of the Mayans, "these people are better than we are."

### Orthodox Guatemalan Schools

RTE: Do you have Orthodox schools?

FR. ANDRES: Yes. In Nueva Concepcion we have a mission center, primary and secondary schools for boys and girls with over 700 students, an adult school of about 250, and a college of 400. The college trains agricultural engineers, mechanics, teachers, computer technicians, accountants, and we are going to start a nursing program this year.

FR. JOHN: The students who attend the schools and college are all Guatemalan, but not all are Orthodox. The schools are a gift of the Orthodox to the community. Father Andres has also developed many village schools.

RTE: My goodness! How do you support all this?

FR. ANDRES: Through our three large farms and (*laughing*) our chain of gas stations that are named for the Theotokos. Also, we don't own any churches. Each church belongs to its own village, and they build and maintain it themselves. They give us a little money for gas expenses, but we take care of ourselves.

*Opposite: Marriage of young Mayan Orthodox couples in Aguacate. Courtesy of Jesse Brandon.*



FR. JOHN: For the village schools and collective farms, Fr. Andres arranged for low-interest loans from the government. As these collectives pay back the loans, they also keep some of the profit to support themselves, and everything keeps growing. He is very respected and is also the main arbiter of disputes within the communities, as both priest and magistrate. He also helps with legal issues, such as illegal attempts to repossess land, and he takes medicines to the villages.

After a twenty-year attempt by the Guatemalan government to enculturate Mayans as Spanish-speakers, there is now a huge push among the Mayans themselves to hold onto their traditions and language. They are teaching their children about their identity and having them learn the Mayan languages as well as Spanish. One of our biggest problems is that the influence of North America is causing many young people to want a more modern life. For example, a young Mayan man recently showed up at the mission who was so poor that he only had one pair of pants, but he'd spent his savings in Santiago to buy a pair of new pre-frayed American jeans with holes in them. These jeans neither cover him in bad weather nor are they functional, he had absolutely nothing but misplaced style.

FR. ANDRES: These young people don't have meat; they are chewing bones.

### Training Priests and Catechists

RTE: Is there anything in their world-view that makes it a challenge for Mayans to become Orthodox?

FR. ANDRES: Yes. In the beginning I had a very difficult problem. When I first presented the idea of married priests, it was rejected because the Mayan Catholics had had five hundred years of celibate priests and believed the only true priest was a celibate priest. Now, they've begun to learn about the eastern Christian tradition and it's a little easier. Nevertheless, I understand very well the value of celibacy. A married priest in Guatemala gives the church fifteen days of service and then takes fifteen days to support his family. I understand perfectly that this must be done, but single priests without families can give 100% to their parishes and you see the difference between the two. They are equally dedicated, but the single priests have much more time for their people and it shows. We hope to start a monastery soon.

FR. JOHN : Although my experience is limited, I haven't found any doctrinal problems except among some of the formerly evangelical Mayans, whose untheological experiential background gives them a little difficulty. What is needed is a long course of individual catechesis. We have to channel this vibrancy into a doctrinal understanding that will give it substance and foundation, without the excesses of the charismatic movement.

FR. ANDRES: The charismatic movement didn't have a foundation. It was experience without knowledge.

RTE: What would you say is your greatest need?

FR. ANDRES: More clergy. We have just opened the Sts. Peter and Paul Seminary in Huehuetenango, with a small community of students, their wives, and two former Catholic priests. I also hope to get advanced Orthodox seminary training for some of my priests in North America. Father John helps me with training here.

FR. JOHN: I've been involved with the priestly formation – teaching the new clergy how to do the services, including the liturgy, pre-sanctified liturgy, Lenten and festal services, paraklesis, the akathist, the hours, and the sacraments. These seven priests are extremely dedicated. They follow Father's example and receive no income, although they travel to extremely remote, almost inaccessible mountain places at their own peril, sometimes twelve hours away. We try to find well-translated Spanish materials about Orthodoxy to help with this, and we are beginning to translate into the native Mayan languages. There are already some good Catholic translations of scripture and patristic literature, but there are also some Protestant translations, or rather mistranslations and misinterpretations, that are quite appalling. They are playing with us, and it is evil to divide people with wrong translations.

FR. ANDRES: I am now trying to recruit men from the villages who might eventually be ordained to the priesthood. They aren't going to be at the level of the North American seminary graduates because they don't have the educational background, but they can still function within the community and be respected figures. We have been sending some of our priests to good Catholic or Protestant schools for Greek, Hebrew, Bible Studies, and Church history, but we also hope to send men to study at Orthodox seminaries in the U.S. and eventually to build up our own seminary to a higher level. I've



already sent one seminarian to Greece. He is not only a priest now, but an iconographer and a good one, and we are introducing icons and icon screens into the village chapels.

RTE: Your idea of mid-level training sounds much like the traditional island *sholea* vocational seminaries in Greece that don't demand a graduate theology degree, similar to St. Herman of Alaska Seminary in Kodiak, Alaska. How do you train your catechists?

FR. JOHN: We've been teaching some of the older ones for years, and presently we have about 500 catechists. They are eager to learn and we try to teach basic dogma, church history, liturgics, and sacraments. Most are very knowledgeable about the holy sacraments, and all except one of them can read and write. They meet together every two months at the mission center in Nueva Concepcion, and pay as much as a month's salary to get there from remote villages. We don't have dormitories for them so they carry their own bedding and sleep on the floor. In our last meeting, the rain was hitting the tin roof so hard that we couldn't hear ourselves speak. It was an adventure.

### Moral Authority: Healing the Body, Mind and Spirit

RTE: You've spoken several times about taking medicine to the villages. Do you have any ideas about training community health workers who could use both contemporary medicine and Guatemala's healing plants and herbs?

FR. ANDRES: Yes. We are starting the nursing school I mentioned and the Mayans are also natural ecologists. They respect and honor the balance of nature and preserve the countryside.

FR. JOHN: In Guatemala, the Church and the life of the people are intertwined. Father is involved in every aspect of their lives: health, education, farming, legal issues. In the first half year I spent with him, people were knocking at his door at all hours of the day and night. I've never seen him say no to anyone.

One day, a woman came to us who had severe chronic sores on her leg and had been told by doctors that it had to be amputated. She came to the mission and sat down on the porch to show us her leg. Father Andres listened

*Opposite: (l. to r.) Rev. Fr. Michael Castellanos, Rev. Fr. John Chakos, Rev. Fr. Antonio (being ordained), Rev. Fr. Nicholas Hernandez (Chancellor of the metropolis), and Metropolitan Athenagoras. Courtesy of Jesse Brandow.*

to her story and said, “We’ll heal her.” He cleaned the sores, put alcohol on them, and bandaged her leg up, all the while praying. He told her, “Come back in a few days, and we will see how it is.” When she returned two of the sores were completely gone, but the third was still very bad. He repeated the cleaning and bandaging again, praying all the time, and when she returned a few days later, her leg was completely healed.

Father Andres also does exorcisms. I once saw him pray over a young girl who was so violent that her relatives had to bring her by force. After he prayed for some time, there was a change and she became peaceful. She came back the next Sunday nicely dressed to thank him and to take Holy Communion. If you want to know what the church in Guatemala is like, read the *Acts of the Apostles*. This is the primitive church. These people live by faith and grace.

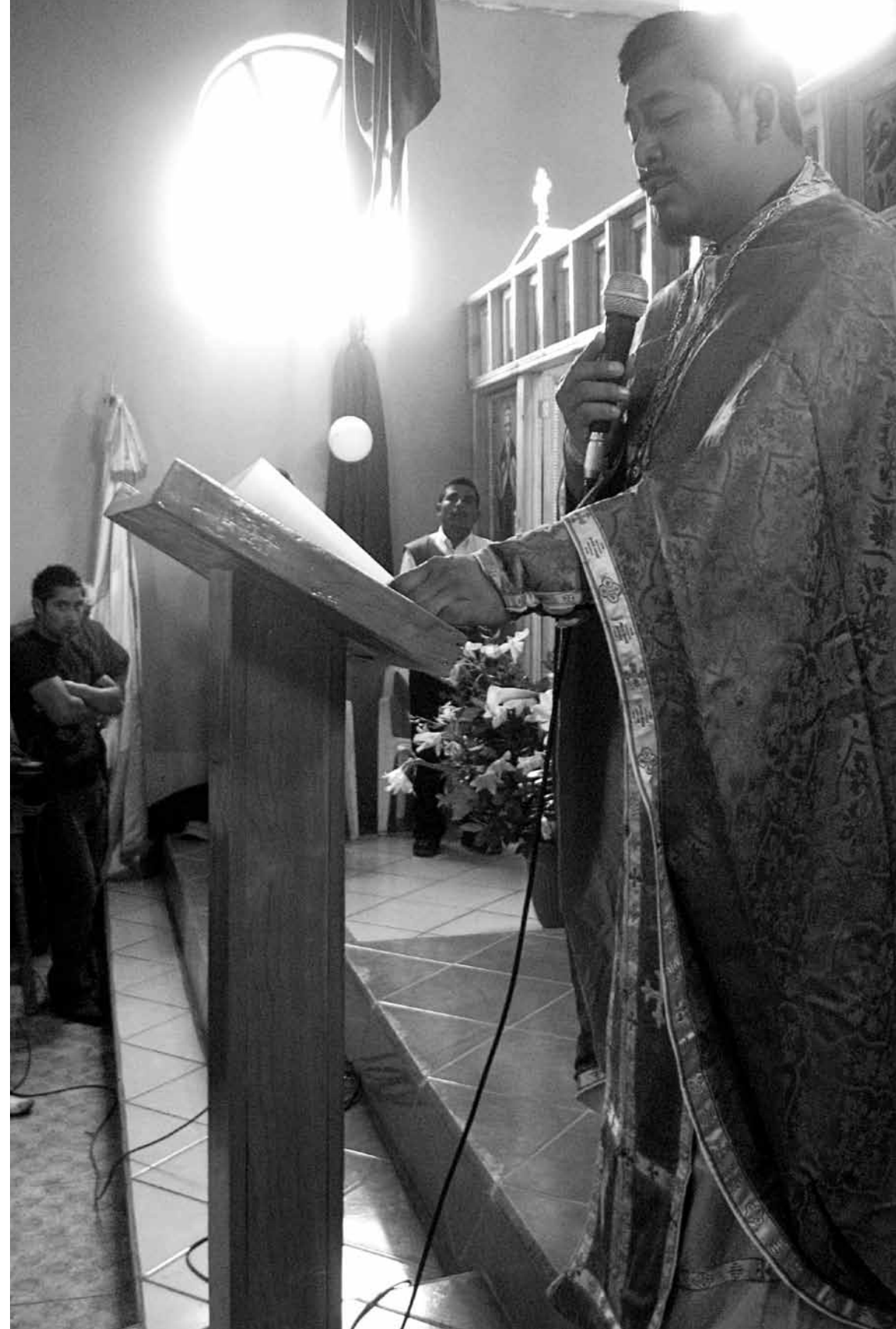
Because of his political connections, Fr. Andres can call up officials to get things done for his people, yet when he goes to a village he doesn’t ride in as a king, but exclusively as their servant. The authority he has is not based on influence and control, but because he loves them and will do anything for them. They know this and will do anything for him. As a Catholic priest he was a circuit-rider by jeep, horse, on mule, by foot, for many years. The Mayan people did not suddenly wake up one day and decide to be Orthodox—they became Orthodox because they love Fr. Andres and he is their father. He has moral authority.

### The Hogar Rafael Ayau Orphanage

RTE: Wonderful. We also often hear about the Hogar Rafael Ayau orphanage in Guatemala. I imagine you work closely with them?

FR. JOHN: Yes. Some of the orphans live with us at various times, and a choir of older boys trained by the sisters often helps when we conduct services in the villages. The seventeen boys that live with us have been a real blessing to the Orthodox Church in Guatemala by teaching the priests and the faithful how to chant the services in the traditional manner. Of course, in the future some adjustments will be made to allow the vibrant Guatemalan way of worship to find expression in the life of the Church.

*Opposite: Rev. Fr. Evangelos, a celibate priest, travels to dozens of parishes in the mountainous highlands of Guatemala and southern Mexico. Here he preaches to his home parish of Aguacate. Courtesy of Jesse Brandow.*



The orphanage in Guatemala City is run by a native Guatemalan abbess, Mother Ines, and two sisters: Mother Ivonne is also Guatemalan and Mother Maria is Filipino. They became disenchanted with the churches they'd grown up in and came to the Antiochian Orthodox Church in the 1990s in Mexico. In 1867, Rafael Ayau, Mother Ines' great-great-grandfather, had opened a "House of Mercy" to care for needy children and orphans. The government confiscated it in the 1950s, but in 1996 offered it back to the sisters if they would again care for orphans. After working on the building for a year, they received 150 children from different places almost overnight. I first became involved in 1999 when my son, who was a short-term missionary in Tanzania, married a young woman who had been working at the Hogar. I began to come back every year, as do many others. We now receive a couple of work-crews and missionary teams every month.

The sisters are about to move the orphanage from their downtown location to a lake that is about a half hour from Guatemala City. They've built an enormous facility of dormitories, classrooms, workshops, everything. Mother Ines is behind all this. Like Father Andres, she came from a family of privilege and uses her resources for the children.

### Mayan Women, Ritual, and Elders

RTE: Speaking of the sisters, Father, in one of your talks you mentioned that Mayan women are very shy. How do they respond to Orthodoxy?

FR. ANDRES: The best! (*laughter*)

FR. JOHN: Father Andres never discourages the women. Although they are from a culture where women have never had leading roles in the community, many of the women catechists are the backbone of the church.

Although the women are shy and reserved, I've never seen friendlier people than in Guatemala. After liturgy is over in the U.S., people kiss the hand of the priest and then leave. In Guatemala, it's not like that. You have to kiss and hug everyone: men, women, and children. You are greeted with the warmest embrace imaginable. When these very shy women confess, they don't stand at arm's length – they put their arms around your neck and whisper in your ear. The floodgates open. For both men and women Mayan and Latino worship in general is participatory and very expressive, and we cannot expect them to sit quietly in pews. Their joy and love of life are expressed in the service.

FR. ANDRES: God gives you life and you have to express that. When you come as a priest to these remote places you find hundreds and thousands of people waiting with welcome signs, who throw flowers as you pass by. They have tremendous respect for the clergy. When the metropolitan visited, the people wept openly and unashamedly, and they won't kiss a priest's hand unless they are on their knees. Their worship is very intense, with musical instruments, singing, and clapping. It is a powerful, intense faith. They are a very warm people and at the end of liturgy, you not only hand them the antidoron, but you have to hug and kiss each person. You have to touch them. There is a tremendous sense of community.

The Mayans like ritual. When you walk into a room in Guatemala you must greet each person whether you know them or not, and when you leave, you personally say goodbye to everyone. In the Mayan culture they have many Orthodox customs: processions, using incense, and making prostrations by touching their foreheads to the earth. They have a reverence for sacred places as well as people, and they honor holiness. Mayans still sometimes offer gifts to God in other places than the village chapel, but before they offer gifts to God in this other place, they go and ask the chapel if they can use another place.

FR. JOHN: Another thing they have in common with the Orthodox is reverence for their elders, who are the main keepers of the Mayan tradition. The village elders are the guides, the judges, the magistrates, and Mayan laws supersede the laws of the country. For instance, if someone is taking drugs they throw him out of the village. If you steal and are caught, you will be punished with a public beating and your hair cut to mark you as a thief. If you harm the community, your identity is taken away and you are expelled. The authority to do these things is retained in the elders, not in the younger educated men. The cities in Guatemala are different, very cosmopolitan, and there you see the breakdown of modern society, but the villages are a completely different world.

When Mayan communities come to the Orthodox Church, the elders lead the way. It's very common that a village of 150 or 200 families will come together and decide, "We want to be Orthodox." Their elders guide them.



## The Mayan Calendar and the End of an Age

RTE: What did the Mayans think about the end of the Mayan calendar in December 2012?

FR. ANDRES: They were laughing at people who thought it meant the end of the world. To the Mayans, it signals the end of an era and it signified changing the mind of the world for something better. There has to be a miracle within the hearts of people and something is going to happen. They think that the world is not going to end, but to change for the better. They hope for a world of peace and justice.

RTE: Perhaps bound up with their new-found Orthodoxy. Are there other countries in Latin America with indigenous movements towards Orthodoxy?

FR. JOHN: There is a growing church movement in Cuba with the newly-built Russian Orthodox Cathedral of Our Lady of Kazan, which began services in 2001 and was consecrated in 2008 by Met. (now Patriarch) Kyrill. The Greek Orthodox cathedral dedicated to St. Nicholas was built by the Cuban government in lieu of returning a Greek church they confiscated in the 1950's, and was consecrated in 2004 by Patriarch Bartholomew. Parishes in other parts of Latin America are mostly émigré Ukrainian, Greek, Arab, or Russian Orthodox, not native missions. The only indigenous mission in Central America is in Guatemala, where the people themselves are spreading the faith.

RTE: How can we help?

FR. ANDRES: People can send us donations at: [www.thewordfromguatemala.com](http://www.thewordfromguatemala.com), or they can come to Guatemala and help. We can use almost anyone with skills. Students are welcome for the summer. Please write to us at: [frjchakos7@msn.com](mailto:frjchakos7@msn.com) if you are interested in coming.

RTE: Fr. Andres, in conclusion, what would you like to say to the Orthodox of Europe and North America?

FR. ANDRES: (*laughing*) Whether you like it or not, we are Americans too, and I believe that the Mayan people are going to affect the life of the entire Orthodox Church. ✦

*Opposite: Rev. Mother Ines and Rev. Fr. Michael Castellanos on the grounds of the new Monastery of the Holy Trinity and Hogar Rafael Ayau Orphanage near Lake Amatitlan. Courtesy of Jesse Brandow.*

