

From Romania with Love

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October 2002



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As I write this, I am in an apartment in Bucharest, preparing to leave the country early in the morning. Two weeks of traveling have taken their toll. I'm weary and drawn, homesick and melancholy. To make matters worse, the U.S. Congress has just passed a resolution allowing the President to wage war on Iraq, and the State Department has issued a warning to all Americans overseas to be extra careful of terrorist activities. My only jacket is bright blue, which really makes me stand out in the crowd of black leather and other subdued fabrics. I might as well have a target on my back.

I met a seasoned Romanian evangelist this week who offered the best advice he was given as he began his ministry. He said a missionary has to have the legs of a horse, the stomach of a cow, and the cheeks of a pig. The horse's legs are for stamina; the cow's stomach is to tolerate any kind of food; and the cheeks of the pig are to allow you to hold your expression regardless of the circumstances you find yourself in. It's good advice.

But there is another, more important dimension to how I'm feeling right now. I'm contented beyond reason. I've endured cold and smelly accommodations, inadequate hot water for a decent shower, and plenty of unfamiliar food. My body is sour, but my spirit soars. I'm battle-weary, but exhilarated; wounded, but triumphant. I'm returning from the front line with a glowing heart, not just because I'm coming to a home full of love, but also because the battle made clearly discernable progress in an invisible war. Listen in as I tell the Commander-in-chief about our conquests:

My Lord,

I have waged your battle on two fronts in the past two weeks and have witnessed your strength and power in both circumstances.

As you know, I went to Cluj the first week to join your forces in the battle against the disregard for life itself. This country has a profoundly sorrowful history that has led to widespread abortion and all its consequences. I discovered some of the most alarming statistics, like how 75% of all Romanian pregnancies end in abortion; how 90% of all women of child-bearing age have had at least one abortion, with a median of six abortions per mature woman; and how 80% of the women who discover their pregnancy in a medical exam express the immediate desire to "get rid of this thing." Motherhood seems to be almost shameful in this culture, and the results are devastating. Women are degraded to the point that they hardly know how to respect themselves. Post-abortion trauma leads to the survivor syndrome, producing women — and men — who are either too lenient or too restrictive in other intimate relationships. Men fail to support women with responsible behavior, making for a nearly hopeless situation.

And then there are the children who survive only to be thrust into unbelievable poverty. With about 100,000 abandoned children in desperate orphanages, the disrespect for life has reached new lows.

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Can they trust a doctor who performs three abortions to every delivery?

I even engaged in hand-to-hand combat one day, Lord. We went to see a maternity hospital where 2,500 deliveries a year — and a majority of the city’s abortions — are performed. Ironically, it’s located across the street from the pro-life battle headquarters. The congenial professor who gave us a gracious tour of his facility spoke warmly about mothers and children. He demonstrated how the doctors are putting their own money into improving the state-owned hospital to make things better. He made his not-so-subtle appeal for American generosity to help them upgrade the 19th century structures originally used as the stables for the queen’s horses. But he never even whispered about his bread-and-butter services that were in direct opposition to everything he supposedly stood for. A reference to abortion never fell from his lips. He even identified himself as “a Christian man.” It was chilling.

But in the midst of this battle, the Pro-Life Clinics in Romania served 3,500 women last year in four cities with free pregnancy tests, counseling on alternatives to abortion and post-abortion trauma, spiritual counseling and encouragement. Of course you know the results. Nearly half of those who came in bent on abortion left with different convictions. And the names of about ten percent of those who heard the gospel along with the counseling are now written in your Book of Life. What a triumph!

And now we’re following your lead in extending the battle on this front. We sensed your clear presence as we made plans for a multi-specialty clinic and birthing center unlike anything in the country. Not only will we be able to demonstrate respectful and compassionate care for mothers and their babies, but we can also see your plans for using profits from this venture to extend the counseling centers to as many as two dozen communities, reaching 60% of the country’s population. Wow!

The second week, I rejoined your forces in Pitesti for my eighth time, and found them heartily engaged in battle on yet another front. Corruption is a subtle, but incredibly destructive force in this culture. It shapes the justice system (if it can be called that), every corner of the economy, and even medical care. I still have a hard time grasping that an estimated 95% of all healthcare transactions involve some type of bribe. You need surgery? No problem. Just call your American relatives for money because the surgery can’t be performed without a bribe to the surgeon, even though the national health insurance is supposed to cover needs like these. Even simple visits involve some under-the-table exchange. The results include the poorest quality for the poorest people, untimely death from withheld treatments, and an insidious deterioration of basic therapeutic trust between doctors and their patients.

I saw the drama unfold in a heartbreaking fashion for some people I love. Tim, an American missionary, and his Romanian wife, Maria, are expecting their first child (as you well know, for you are the one who knits in the womb). We talked about the dilemma with their obstetrician-gynecologist. Should they offer a bribe before he asks to make sure they get good quality care? What do they do if he demands payment? Can they even trust a doctor who might withhold his best care if they don’t pay? Can they trust a doctor who performs three abortions to every delivery? Will he hold the same regard for care of the mother and child as would a doctor who is not corrupted by the culture, if one could be found? Will they be forced to abandon the healthcare system they are working diligently to enhance for the sake of their own safety? Lord, hold them in your arms, I pray.

But the Dr. Luca Medical Center in Pitesti is making real progress in this part of the battle. Patients know they can trust the services they find

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there, not just because honest market-level fees take the place of bribes, but also because the quality of care is predictably superior. We're seeing 50% growth this year in patient volume, and sense that we have entered a new stage of the battle. It's not over by a long shot, but we've set new standards for how medical care is to be rendered in this country, and we're doing it in a self-sustainable fashion.

The competition is still fighting unfairly, offering kickbacks to referring physicians, expanding their empires on the influence of stuffed pockets. They may even catch on to improving the quality of lab services and structuring appointments for individual attention in patient visits. They might learn to be nice to people if it is good for business. Sometimes it feels like corruption has the upper hand.

But we're still standing. In Ephesians 6:13, you encourage us to "put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand." We're still standing — and thriving — in the midst of the battle. Thanks Lord.

So there you have it — one soldier's report from the front line. Thanks for the opportunity to participate in the battle first hand — and to still be standing.

From Romania with Love,

Ken