

Family Affair

This past July, John and Michelle Kazanjian did something that many Christian parents dream of...they traveled with their five girls, ages 14–4, to live as missionaries for a month in Istanbul, Turkey. Their time there was an unforgettable family “vacation,” filled with many unexpected challenges and blessings.

The Kazanjians gather around Mesrob I, the Armenian Patriarch. (l. to r.: Mary Beth, Michelle, Gina, Tasha, Christianne, Ani and John)

Editor: John has been to Turkey on five separate occasions, working for Renewal Ministries to establish connections with Catholics there. What was the purpose of this particular trip?

Michelle: Because the Lord has put it on John’s heart to do mission work in Turkey, we felt like it would be good for the whole family to also go, to experience the culture and the people and to grow in our appreciation for the ways John serves there. We have wanted for a long time to do mission work as a family, but found little opportunity in the Catholic world for all of us to go. So we decided to create our own mission trip. We were especially drawn to Turkey because John is Armenian and grew up in Turkey; we wanted our children to discover first hand, an important part of their own heritage.

Editor: What kinds of things were you intending to do there?

Michelle: The Patriarch of the Armenian Church had invited our family to come and work at a summer youth camp for orphans on an island in

Istanbul. This was very appealing to us because it would provide specific opportunities for our girls to interact with Armenian children, to teach English, do crafts, and lead bible classes. When we arrived however, we found ourselves in the middle of a political tug-of-war. The camp, although run by the Church, is under the authority of the government, which is very anti-religion. The political leaders did not allow us to work with the camp, and so we had to look for other opportunities.

Editor: What activities occupied your days?

Michelle: We met a young priest in the Armenian church there, named Fr. Durdad, who became our advocate in finding places to minister. John and I gave talks at midweek prayer services in various Armenian churches. John would speak in Armenian, and then translate for me as I shared. We also visited hospitals, singing and ministering to patients. Most of the places we visited, the travel was long and difficult; it would often take a full day, between the ferries, buses, crowded trains and walking, to attend a two hour meeting. Regrettably, our children didn’t get to do as much

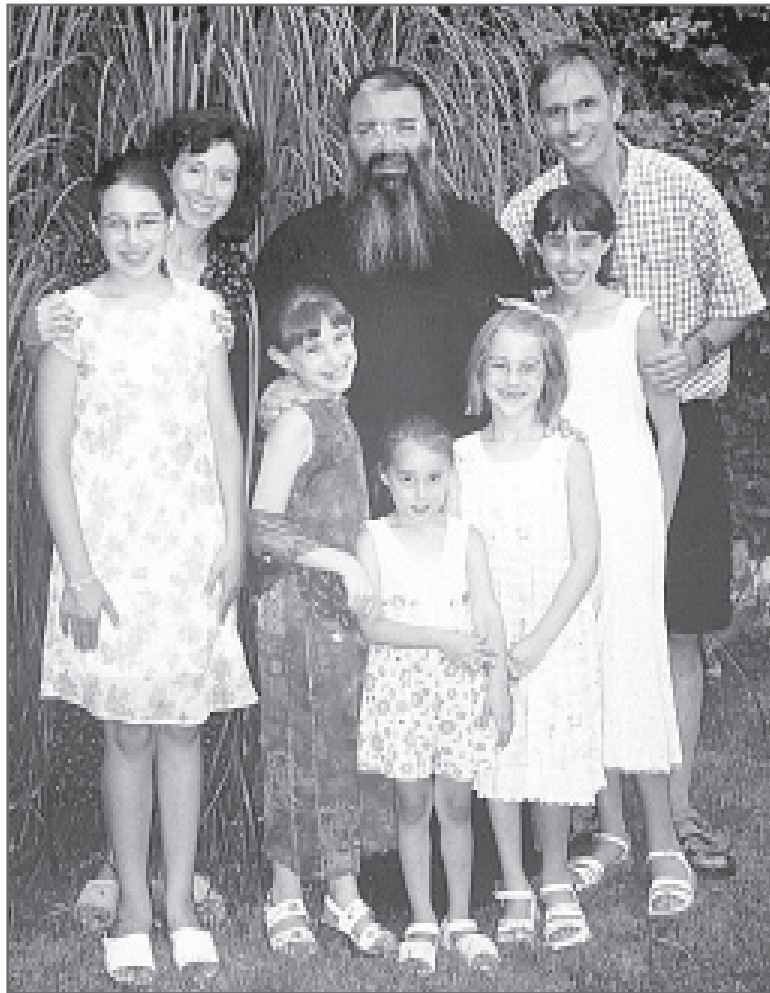
as we had hoped. They helped with the children at the churches, but spent a lot of time sitting at meetings, where they couldn’t understand the language.

Editor: Marybeth, what were some of the most memorable parts of the trip for you?

Mary Beth (14 years old): The people in Turkey were friendly and that really made a difference for me. The place we stayed was small and not very nice, and everyone spoke a different language...it was kind of scary. But the people were so friendly. They would meet us on the street and invite us for tea and cookies. We also met some uninvited guests in our apartment—lizards that appeared on our walls and beds!

Editor: What’s it like to communicate with someone when you don’t speak the same language?

Mary Beth: We know a few useful words in Armenian, but we can’t really hold a conversation. It was difficult to interact with the children there. We taught a bible class for younger kids and it was



Interview with the Kazanjian Family

really hard because we couldn't talk. But they were very kind and loving and reached out to us by taking our hand or sitting next to us. I found it hard to be a witness when I couldn't express to them why I was there. They thought we were rich Americans who had come to vacation on their island.

Editor: Ani, what did you appreciate most about your home after being in a foreign country and what did you learn while there?

Ani (13 years old): There are so many little things that we hardly notice at home like clean running water, a stove, a washing machine, clean floors, quiet, space, and our own beds. It helped me see what things are like for my dad when he travels and how I can pray for him when he's away. I learned a lot of practical things, like how to wash clothes in a bucket, how to sit still and wait.

Editor: Gina, you're 10 years old and your dad told me you were always hungry!

Gina: The food there was really different. We ate bread, lots of bread, fruit, vegetables, and noodles. We didn't have much variety because we only had a small gas burner. Sometimes though, we ate dinner at other people's houses.

Editor: Did your ideas about what it means to be a missionary change?

Mary Beth: I felt like God was telling me, "You can't talk to these people and you can't tell them about me. You can't be a witness in any of the ways you can at home. But if you can love them and see me in them, you can be a missionary."

Gina: If you smile and sit still and be good, if you show them love by hugging and kissing, then you are being a witness.

Editor: I know that taking the whole family on a trip like this is a huge endeavor. What were some of the personal challenges that you faced as you planned and awaited the trip?

Michelle: I was scared to go—the air travel since 9/11, fear of unrest in Turkey, their unstable government, the well being of the kids. I was anxious, but I tried to turn it over to the Lord in faith. I knew once we boarded the plane, there would be no turning back. In the end, it was a wonderful time of learning to trust the Lord for our daily circumstances, over which we had no control. We prayed constantly, for every detail of our day. We came back with a greater desire to have a missionary spirit at home in our daily lives, to witness to and share the Gospel with people who speak our language and share our culture.

Editor: At the end of your trip you visited Rome. Tell us about the wonderful blessing you encountered there.

Ani: We met a nun who took us to Castle Gondolfo. She let us stand in the front of the line with her sisters as we awaited an audience with the Pope. When the gates opened, the sisters grabbed our hands and ran with us to the front of the barrier, directly in front of the Pope.

Gina: One nun kept telling Tasha, "When the babies go up with their mothers to see the Pope, I will lift you over the barrier and you can run up and hug the Pope." The nun lifted Tasha over and she began to walk up by herself to see the Pope. The Swiss Guard brought Mama over to help Tasha. Christi looked very sad and almost cried, so he let her go up too. Christi ran up onto the platform where John Paul's chair was, and gave him a big hug. Then Mama lifted Tasha up and she kissed the Pope. It was really sweet!

Editor: Christi, can you tell me how it felt to hug the Pope?

Christianne (age 8): I didn't really think about it much. I just wanted to do it and it was very special for me.

Editor: Tasha, how did such a little girl get so close to the Pope?

Tasha (age 4): I walked! When I saw the Holy Father I kissed him on the cheek and I liked it very much!+

Please join us for our
monthly day of
Prayer and Fasting
for God's mercy on the
world on the first Friday
of every month
in the year 2002:
Friday, November 1
and
Friday, December 6.

▼ Christianne runs to embrace the Pope as her proud mother looks

