04/03/2026

Archbishop Joani of Albania reflects on predecessor’s legacy



By Corinna Robinson
March 3, 2026

Monday evening at Hellenic College Holy Cross School of Theology (HCHC), His Beatitude Archbishop Joani of Tirana, Durrës and All Albania delivered the keynote address opening a three-day international conference, “Anastasios: Archbishop, Theologian, Missionary,” marking the first anniversary of his predecessor’s repose.

Jointly organized by HCHC’s Huffington Ecumenical Institute and Missions Institute, the conference continues through March 4 with sessions on Archbishop Anastasios’s theological scholarship, his missionary work in Africa and Albania, and his role in global interreligious dialogue.

Moderating the opening session, co-organizers Fr. John Chryssavgis and Fr. Luke Veronis offered reflections on their personal interactions and mentorship from Archbishop Anastasios.

“Very few religious figures in the modern era rise so far above the crowd that they literally become legends of integrity and landmarks of faith,” Fr. John said. “Archbishop Anastasios is undoubtedly one such figure, a hierarch who still stands as a point of pride for Orthodox Christians everywhere and as a benchmark that defines the standard by which clergy and theologians and believers should be measured.”

His Eminence Archbishop Elpidophoros of America offered a welcome address, reflecting on how those present might carry Archbishop Anastasios’s example into the present. “In a world where polarization and retreat from rapprochement are seemingly commonplace, the gentle, patient, and humble manner of Archbishop Anastasios is called for now more than ever,” His Eminence said.

The keynote by Archbishop Joani was the evening’s highlight. His Beatitude began by reflecting on Archbishop Anastasios’s 1991 arrival to Albania, where he found “the land where the Church had been completely destroyed,” the atheist regime having destroyed or rendered non-functional 1600 churches, chapels, and monasteries, and left only 22 clergymen remaining.

From this desolation, Anastasios brought restoration–rebuilding or erecting over 400 buildings and forming 145 new clergy. “I would call him the man of resurrection,” Archbishop Joani said. “Not only the resurrection of the walls of the churches, but the resurrection of souls from darkness.”

Anastasios himself had understood this distinction precisely, Archbishop Joani said, teaching that “The greatest damage of atheism was not only the destruction of walls, but the destruction of conscience, of faith, of the relationship between human being and God.”

“Walls can be rebuilt, but souls require much deeper, more patient and more loving labor,” Archbishop Joani said. “He understood that people needed not only churches to enter, but someone who would speak to their hearts, teach them to pray again, and show them that God was alive and present. And this is precisely what he did.”



Archbishop Joani recalled several of Archbishop Anastasios's most central teachings: "Worship does not end in the church building, but continues as a service in the world;" "Love knows no boundaries;" and "Faith is not a static possession, but a dynamic pilgrimage towards God." These teachings, Archbishop Joani said, were inseparable from the life Archbishop Anastasios lived.

"These were not mere slogans. They were his life," Archbishop Joani said. "He preached what he lived, and he lived what he preached."

Archbishop Joani reflected that Archbishop Anastasios's entire ministry flowed from a single source: his "ardent" love for God. "Love for God and service to the flock are inseparable," Archbishop Joani said. "His whole life was a diakonia, an uninterrupted service to Christ and to every person he encountered."

Another phrase Archbishop Anastasios repeated nearly constantly, Archbishop Joani said, was "God will not abandon us."

"This faith was not naivety," Archbishop Joani said. "It was the deep conviction of a man who had experienced God in every moment of his life."

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Find more information, including conference livestreams, here.



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