

Pro Vita: *For the born and unborn*

In Romania, World Vision supports the work of Orthodox priest Father Nicolae Tanase, 41, who models how community care can help prevent abortion and child abandonment.



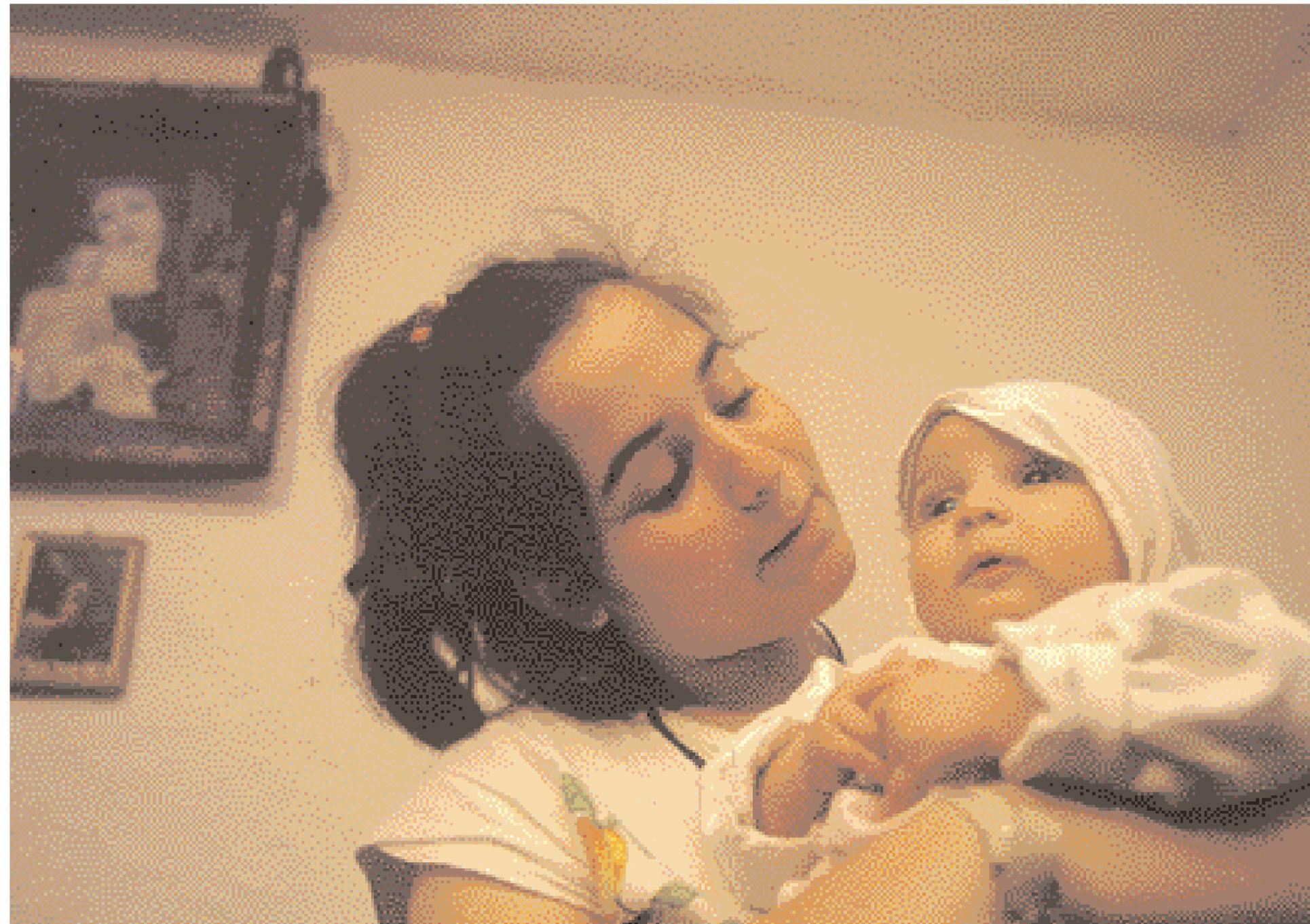
We are family: In return for their room and board, single mothers and homeless teenagers staying at Father Tanase's center agree to care for abandoned babies who have been left in Valea Plopului.

"Hristos a înviat," shouts Eugenia Neagu, her breath feathered on the crisp morning air as she greets a passing neighbor. "Christ is risen!"

The kerchiefed farm woman, threatening her immobile oxen mired in the muddy path, waves back sheepishly. *"Adevarat a înviat. He is risen indeed."*

These sacred words have echoed through this Romanian village, Valea Plopului, for more than a thousand years. Christians in Romania exchange this traditional greeting between Easter and Pentecost Sunday to celebrate their risen Savior. This Easter holds renewed hope for Eugenia Neagu, 15, and her 3-month-old daughter, Andreea Iasmina. Abandoned and rejected by her family and her child's father, Eugenia found a home in Valea Plopului, a huddle of gingerbread-trimmed cottages tucked below the Carpathian mountains, 60 miles north of Bucharest, Romania's capital.

Kids caring for kids: Eugenia Neagu, 15, refused to abort or abandon her daughter, Andreea Iasmina, despite pressure from her family. "Eugenia is still a child herself. She calls out for her mama in her sleep," comments Eugenia's roommate. "But she takes better care of her child than some mothers here. Most girls her age would have abandoned the baby."





Village of refuge:

(top) "Our home is not beautiful, but it is open," says Valea Ploputui resident, Vasilica Popescu, with her foster child, 8-month-old Gabriela.

(middle) A young, single mother enjoys a warm welcome at Father Tanase's center, and a hot bowl of *ciorba*, a tangy Romanian soup.

(bottom) "I like to make the babies laugh," says Bucharest volunteer Marc Tudose, 22. He came to Valea Ploputui to hear his musician father perform a charity concert one night and stayed for a month to care for the children.

Eugenia is one of 10 single mothers and their babies cramped into two bungalows with no indoor plumbing. But the women do not complain about the crowded conditions. They are only too glad to be in this safe haven run by Father Nicolae Tanase, an Orthodox priest and founder of Pro Vita, a national organization of believers, doctors, and priests committed to caring for single mothers and abandoned children. World Vision has supported this practical, pro-life ministry since 1993.

"I was three months pregnant before I even realized I was expecting," Eugenia giggles with embarrassment while awkwardly diapering Andreea. "My mother took me to the doctor and offered him a lot of money to abort the baby late. I was glad he refused to do it."

When Eugenia was seven months pregnant, her mother abandoned her and her three younger brothers. The landlord evicted them from their one-room apartment when they failed to pay the rent. Eugenia's boyfriend, who left town for military service, offered no moral or financial support. Eugenia delivered her baby by Caesarean section in a Bucharest hospital with no family or friends beside her.

With nowhere to go, Eugenia stayed in the hospital for three months. Doctors tried to persuade her to give the baby up to an orphanage. "I ran out on the balcony and threatened to jump if they took Andreea from me," says

Eugenia, smiling defiantly. Finally, the hospital staff referred her to Father Tanase's center. The priest drove to Bucharest himself to bring Eugenia and her baby back to Valea Ploputui.

Eugenia's decision not to abort Andreea or commit her to an orphanage is significant in Romania, where more than 1 million abortions are performed annually. A decade after Romania's revolution, the country still suffers the fallout from birth control practices entrenched during the former Communist regime.

A restrictive 1966 law permitted modern contraceptive use only for very limited medical and social reasons with the goal of rapidly increasing Romania's population and work force. Without access to birth control, many women sought illegal abortions often performed by untrained practitioners. From 1979-1989, Romania's maternal mortality rate was 10 times higher than any other European country. Most of these deaths were abortion related.

Even after contraception was legalized in 1991, Romanian women, suspicious and ill-informed about alternative methods, continued to use abortion as a family planning method. By 1993, Romania reported the world's highest rate of legal abortions—almost 200 per 1,000 women aged 15 to 44—a rate seven times higher than that of the United States.



Fatherly frolic: Lucian Cizmaru, and his foster mother Maria, joke with Father Tanase. Lucian was the first abandoned child the priest brought to Valea Ploputui in 1992. Almost 100 children are now cared for by village foster families.

Under communism, women who chose not to abort but who struggled to adequately care for their large families, were encouraged to place their children in state-run orphanages. Hundreds of thousands of unwanted and abandoned children were warehoused in understaffed, underequipped Dickensian institutions.

Today, the number of institutionalized children exceeds that of pre-revolution Romania. While basic conditions in these centers have greatly improved thanks to the continued investment of personnel and resources by World Vision and other agencies, orphanage care is no substitute for a family's care.

Economic analysts point to poverty as a source of Romania's social woes, including child abandonment and abortion. As many as one in five Romanians live below the poverty line while the country transitions to a free market economy. An average salary here is just \$100 a month—barely enough for families to cover rent and food.

However, Father Tanase, married with five children of his own, is convinced that a spiritual malaise underlies Romania's crisis. "Ask 100 people and they will tell you this is an economic problem. That's not true. Doctors abort because they do not have faith in God. Men beat their wives because they do not have the

fear of God in their souls. The root cause is a lack of faith."

Putting feet to his faith, in 1992 Father Tanase decided to tackle the problem. One by one he began bringing single, pregnant women and abandoned children to his parish in Valea Ploputui, encouraging the community to care for them.

Twelve-day-old Lucian Cizmaru was his first charge. Lucian's mother, a destitute, single woman, entrusted her son to her village priest who contacted Father Tanase, asking if he could find the child a home. Braving a mountain blizzard, Father Tanase traveled several hundred miles with the infant bundled in a cardboard box in the back seat of his rusting Mercedes,

a donated car held together with bits of wire and wisps of prayer.

The next morning, he brought the baby to church, tucking him in a warm corner of the sanctuary before commencing the Orthodox liturgy.

"As we sang that morning, we heard a baby crying," says Maria Cizmaru, a Valea Ploputui parishioner. "Several people ran to the window because we thought the wailing was coming from the snow banks. Then we saw this child in a box!" Maria was still cradling Lucian after the service when Father Tanase asked if she would take him home. A mother of four, this farmer's

village did not laud Maria's charity. "The men asked my husband how he could raise a stranger's child," says Maria, shaking her head sadly. Rumors spread that Lucian was the illegitimate son of the couple's 18-year-old daughter. Snubbed in the market and openly ostracized, Maria drew courage from her conviction that Lucian was God's gift.

"When I was young, I had an abortion. I felt very guilty afterward," confides Maria, nervously fingering the collar of her faded cotton dress. "I prayed and confessed my sin for many months, but somehow I didn't feel any better. When Lucian arrived, Father

and acceptance of Lucian eventually sparked a transformation in Valea Ploputui. Today, foster families here care for 97 abandoned children, and provide moral support for single mothers, like Eugenia, who come to stay in the village. Although they receive a small allowance from Father Tanase's ministry, money is not their motivation.

"I would gladly care for one or two more children, but we only have one heated room," says Vasilica Popescu, balancing 8-month-old Gabriela on her hip outside her shuttered cottage. Vasilica, a mother of two young children, took in Gabriela despite her husband's unemployment. "This has been good for Gabriela and for our family. Our village has changed since we began working with Father Tanase. We are united in a common goal—helping these children and the pregnant mothers who seek refuge in our village."

Father Tanase takes heart from the compassion he sees germinating in Valea Ploputui. He prays Christians in other villages will emulate this pro-life model of community care.

"In the beginning, we just spoke out against abortion. We did not plan to bring children here, but the women began leaving their babies," reflects Father Tanase, stroking his voluminous beard as he considers the reasons for his ministry's success. "Then the pregnant mothers came, not for material help, but because they found love here." 🍷



Pots of love: "If your own children can live on what you have, you can cope with one more soul," asserts Maria, a mother of five, including her foster son, Lucian. "What is one more child when you are cooking a pot of soup?" Left to right: Maria's husband, Ion; Lucian, and Father Tanase.

wife was uncertain how her husband, Ion, would react to another mouth to feed. Seven years later, Lucian is still their cherished baby.

Initially, neighbors in this cloistered, tradition-bound

Tanase said to me: 'God has brought you this child as a sign of his forgiveness.' Today, Lucian is our son. I could never give him up. We love him too much."

The Cizmarus' devotion

the babies' revolution

The world watched in fascination as Romania's nine-day revolution culminated on Christmas Day 1989 with the execution of dictator Nicolae Ceausescu, abruptly ending 45 years of communism. However, neglected children in Romania's state-run institutions would have a longer wait for freedom and justice. A decade later, they are finally reaping the benefits of new child welfare and protection reforms that put the responsibility for child care back in the hands of the family and the community.

"I call it the babies' revolution," comments World Vision Romania's national director Christopher Shore. "The old, communist-era structures of centralized direction and control are being replaced with community-oriented, locally-controlled services. The real promise of these reforms, for which we have long advocated, is that our work can shift from treating symptoms to dealing with core problems: preventing child abandonment, reducing institutionalization, and breaking the cycle of despair and poverty," enthuses Christopher, a Canadian with 15 years of service in Eastern Europe.

Rodica and Rudolf Herchi, young parents from the industrial town of Câmpia Turzii, are among the hundreds of Romanian families World Vision is helping keep together. They say their participation in a World Vision support group for 80 low-income couples prevented them from abandoning their children to an orphanage.

"In the group, we discussed how to find a job, prepare nutritious meals, and develop good relationships with our kids. Most of all, the group gave me hope. I don't know how I would have coped with all our problems without their support," says Rodica, 23. She confides that she considered putting her newborn, Rudolf, and her 1-year-old son, Flaviu, in an orphanage after her husband lost his job at the town's wire factory. Hundreds of parents in Câmpia Turzii have consigned their children to orphanages since the factory laid off 3,800 workers.

The Herchis can barely afford food on the \$35 per month Rudolf earns doing odd jobs. But they are determined to keep their sons at home. "It's best for them to be with us, no matter what our situation," Rudolf insists.

To date, no children from the 80 families involved in the Câmpia Turzii support groups have been admitted to orphanages.

With help from a grant from the United States Agency for International Development, World Vision



plans to expand such community programs, reducing the total number of institutionalized children in three counties by 31 percent, and the annual rate of new admissions by 67 percent over the next four years. "Our goal is to stop the flow of children into institutions by helping parents to cope and to keep their children at home," says Christopher Shore. "This may not sound like glamorous work, but here in Romania, it's a revolution."

World Vision in Romania

- World Vision began working in eight state-run orphanages in 1991. Teams of expatriate medical professionals provided therapy for hundreds of developmentally delayed children and training for orphanage staff.
- Since 1992, World Vision has helped reunite more than 600 orphanage children with their families and placed 50 in foster care. Some 150 children have been adopted by Romanian families.
- Ninety percent of Romania's AIDS patients are children. World Vision Kids' Club organizes camps and activities for HIV-infected children.
- Combating unemployment, World Vision's \$2.6 million microenterprise development program has created more than 600 new jobs, and sustained another 2,150 by providing loans to small businesses.
- World Vision is helping people regain their trust in the church after 45 years of communism by supporting local ministries which serve the community.

Parents in training: Newlyweds Gabriel and Gabriela Vasilescu, weekly volunteers at Bucharest's Orphanage Number One, moved up their wedding date so they would be eligible for World Vision's foster parent training program. "We know orphanage children do not receive the love of a family," says Gabriel, 18. "We can do something good for at least one of these children."

Karen Homer, who served in Romania from 1991-1992, returned there recently to report on World Vision's progress.