

January 2026

Dear Faithful Friends,

We found ourselves wandering through the foothills of the Alps in Southern France on a dark, windy and cold evening in early December. We were traveling to a property obtained for a rehabilitation center in France by an organization connected with Europe Teen Challenge. The property has not yet been used for a rehab center, but rather, for refugees from the war in Ukraine. We spent the next two hours with several of the refugees.

It was an odd mix of people from different nationalities. The group was made up of me, an American; my Portuguese colleague and years-long friend, Francisco; a French-speaking rehab leader from Martinique named Eddy; another Portuguese man now living and working in Corsica, Ricardo; and six Ukrainian refugees from Ukraine's second largest city, Kharkiv, which has been utterly devastated in the war with Russia. The six men were living with their families in the building where we met. They expressed little hope of ever returning to their Ukrainian homes—even IF they haven't been destroyed.

The conversation was awkward at first. English, French, Portuguese, Ukrainian and even a little Russian was spoken. Finding a common ground for conversation was truly a challenge. We settled on English translated to Ukrainian. The conversation was slow and ponderous, but we all persisted. A general sense of sadness pervaded the conversation. Our new-found acquaintances seemed dispirited as they talked about their lost homes and uncertain futures. They have already been "living" in France for two years with no end in sight. Two of them were former addicts in recovery and literally bore the marks of rough street life on their bodies.

Only God, by His Spirit, could arrange such an encounter as we had on that night. The conversation shifted from present realities to the goodness of God who has a plan for all of us. That's when the cloud of hopelessness began to lift. We all shared our dreams and visions for a better world and a desire that the Lord would return. "Maranatha!" When our time drew to a close, big hugs and even Eastern-European-style kisses were shared. The six men walked into the cold night as we went to our vehicle. I can still see them standing there waving and placing their hands over their own hearts in gratitude. "God, have we encouraged our brothers tonight?" I wondered to myself.

I can't get the evening out of my mind. Something very deep in God's Kingdom occurred that night. It's hard to put words to it. I am so thankful, too, that you all have helped make it possible for such meetings as that to occur. Thank you for your faithful support and prayers which make such evenings possible!

God's richest blessings on you in 2026,

Tom