

## THE ARCHDIOCESE OF SARAJEVO

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For the last twelve years the Church in Vrhbosna-Sarajevo has been fluctuating between hope and fear. Hope arises from faith. Considering all that the diocese has been through, not just during the last twelve years but throughout the last centuries, its epitaph would have been written long ago were it not for the Divine Will to keep it alive. It is enough to remember that in the course of five centuries the percentage of Catholics in this land has fallen from around 90% to 17%, and that it was halved again in the course of the last war. Nevertheless, we keep asking ourselves the awful question: how long are we going to remain deserving of such protection? How long shall we remain capable of believing in the realities and values without which God himself can neither keep a people alive, nor sustain His Church residing in the people?

As in the case of all the Church in Bosnia-Hertzegovina, following the reconstitution of the ordinary hierarchy 120 years back, the Archdiocese of Vrhbosna has lived through upsetting events, recovering slowly over long periods, and flourishing for short stages. Only a church with deep Christian roots could have survived 400 years of Ottoman persecution, during which it was helped by the strong commitment of the Franciscan fathers, who were born and nourished by the faith of their own people. The two world wars and the difficult post-war periods - particularly the Communist regime - have left the signs of a new martyrdom. Nevertheless, or perhaps even as a result of all this, the Church has remained rich in faith and in the loyalty of its own people. The percentage of Sunday Mass attendance and reception of the sacraments remained very high. In the villages it was almost 100%. Between the two wars, the strength of church associations, amongst which Catholic Action, and the inexhaustible riches of spiritual vocations, up to a few years ago, were proof of the Church's vitality.

The last war, combined with the genocide (or so-called "ethnic cleansing") left disastrous consequences. In 144 parishes, some 690 church buildings were damaged or destroyed entirely. One third of the parish churches (52) were razed to the ground. Only 60 parish centres with parish priests and parishioners were left! Out of a total 528.000 faithful who declared they were

Catholics during the Communist era, only 186.000 were left at the end of the war. In four years of war the Archdiocese had lost 342.600 Catholics. Encouraged by the messages of the Holy Father, this particular Church, together with others in Bosnia-Hertzegovina has done its utmost to resist in the face of wickedness and destruction. Through numerous declarations the Church sought to condemn crime and encourage positive action. Aided by various Churches in Europe through their humanitarian institutions, our church has attempted to give concrete proof of her declarations.

However, the good name attained in the course of the war seems to have been, to a considerable extent lost, and this for various reasons which are still not clear. The political solution, the method adopted by the representatives of the international community for promoting peace, the general intolerance and the bad economic situation have together generated in Catholics a lack of confidence and a fear of the future. Unemployment (40,3%), unpaid workers (9.3%), increasing poverty (56,1% without the necessities of life, 33,3% of families having to live on € 150 monthly, workers "on waiting list" receiving € 20 monthly, 93% of all citizens convinced that they cannot survive economically in Bosnia-Hertzegovina) and the current situation all point to bad prospects (42,2% fear a further war), thus discouraging refugees from returning and encouraging the young to leave (65% wish to leave Bosnia-Hertzegovina).

Having given these details, I shall explain further reasons why the number of Catholics returning has been so low. Having been away for eight years of war, only 31.921 Catholics have returned to their homes out of a total of 342.600, and these are mainly the aged and the poor. Statistics show that last year there were 2.528 baptisms, almost two-thirds less than the 1991 figure (6.644). Still, the number of priests in the diocese (325) is higher than the 1991 figure (257).

The Church could not, and did not wish to worry overmuch on the unjust political situation, the discouraging economic conditions and the reluctance of her people to return. Guided by the hope expressed in the Gospel and the extreme courage shown by her priests, 80 parishes are once again officially open. Only four of these do not have priests physically present and have not yet started re-building the Church edifices. All activities are aimed at the survival of the Church - by giving the signs of hope.

All this has been possible thanks to the solidarity shown by the Churches of Europe through the intervention of the Episcopal Conferences, the various Caritas organisations, twinning between our ruined parishes and parishes

within other dioceses of Europe, and also the help of various diocesan and parish groups of Catholic Action. We are grateful to all who have been and are still keeping close to us in this ongoing commitment to survive as a Church and as a people, while lending a hand to others.

During these last decades the Western countries have been talking very enthusiastically about coexistence, ecumenism and dialogue. At times it would seem that they forget that only the living can coexist, and that only those who are well rooted in their own identity can give their contribution to ecumenism and dialogue - a very necessary contribution - between different beliefs. Although our Church cannot but be alarmed on account of her past experiences, she wishes to be truly ecumenical and open to dialogue. However, to do this she has to survive in the first place. And this will only be possible if her members can enjoy a dignified existence within their religious, national, and cultural identity in Bosnia-Hertzegovina.

My advice is that, in the case of our country, the priority should not rest on how to help Catholics who have been forced to leave, but rather how to assist those who still remain and help them to stay here. The influences of politics - both that of the international community who do not understand the situation, and our internal politicians who do not want to understand - is far from encouraging. This underlines the importance of the signals which our Church is trying to put forward, with the help and encouragement of the universal Church. Our presence in this Land with such a delicate situation will not be possible without the help of the universal Church in general, and of the European Church in particular!

It is in this light that I see this European meeting of IFCA in Sarajevo. And I extend my thanks to those who have desired it and brought it about! Thanks for your kind attention and your presence amongst us!