

Celebrating the Eucharist in Bosnia

The Missionaries of the Precious Blood of the Teutonic Province decided in the spring of 1988 to establish a mission in Bosnia. We went there to the southeastern "edge" of Free Europe, to the "suture" between the Western-Roman and the Eastern-Byzantine cultural zones, to the "trenches" where Latin and Orthodox Christianity had for centuries contended with each other, to the Balkan peoples who for seven centuries had been entangled in bloody wars and upon whose backs the powerful governments of the West, South and East, especially in this century, had carried out their vendettas with each other.

The Serbian and Croatian peoples had come from the East and settled in the Balkans in the seventh century, at which time they began to become Christian. For five hundred years the greater part of this territory was under Turkish rule, when many Christians became Muslim.

In all this confusion, the Catholic Church was a source of strength and safety for the people of Bosnia and Croatia. There were only brief periods of peace. The Church was almost always a bleeding church, and remains so to this day.

We had gone to Bosnia purposely to be near Jesus in his Way of the Cross. We wanted to gather up the blood, his Precious Blood shed in his brothers and sisters, and offer it up to the heavenly Father, so that it might be fruitful for the Church, its persecutors, and for all humanity. We had gone there purposely to find God and to discover his infinite love.

And so I went to the a Catholic people in the Balkans. I knew one thing about them for sure: for centuries they had yearned for freedom; for centuries they had suffered violence and bled; for centuries they had remained true to their Christian faith and to the Bishop of Rome. In my heart I carried along the charism of St. Gaspar, the liberating message of the Blood of Christ.

In Nova Topola the Bishop put a tumble-down house at our disposal, of which two rooms were more or less inhabitable. This was the parish house. About three hundred Catholics of Croatian, Polish and German ethnic backgrounds belonged to the parish. About eighty-five percent of the population of this area were Orthodox Serbs or Muslim Bosnians. A church, badly damaged in World War II and in two subsequent earthquakes, stood next to the parish house. Next to the church was a convent of the ASC Sisters, who had been there nearly one hundred years. Nearby was a small construction shed where we moved in for the time being. "We" were a young Bosnian priest, a couple of candidates for the C.P.P.S., and myself.

Toward the end of 1989 a campaign of lies and hatred began which caused anxiety among the people and fanned racial hatred. In the meantime we had established a second C.P.P.S. house in Zagreb, the Croatian capitol. I moved there with four candidates for the Community. In September 1991 the invasion of Croatia had already begun on a broad scale. Hundreds and then thousands of refugees began to pour into the city every day. We were in our still uncompleted house only three weeks when it became filled up to the rafters with refugees from Croatia and Bosnia. The war kept coming closer, as houses, streets, and squares were filled with more and more refugees. Fear and misery increased every day. I experienced the event as an ever tightening death grip around the neck of the nation.

I do not know any more how many people sought refuge in our house. Immeasurable sorrow, shrieks of terror, depression, anxiety attacks, despair. Day and night I talked with individuals hours on end. Everyone had problems all the time. There was hardly ever a night that passed quietly.

As a rule we celebrated the Eucharist together in the house chapel very day. It was a blessed event that transformed our pain and fear into trust and thankfulness. The Word of God often struck us as being so concrete, illuminating our human darkness with divine light. The presence of God in the Eucharist gave us security. People had lost everything, but no one could take God away from them. This "thread" of faith remained unbroken, the stream of the Blood of Christ could not be stopped; no one doubted, not even for a moment, that God was love. We were all immersed as it were in the cup of the Blood of Christ, and our adoration opened itself out in every word, in every extended hand, in every shared pain, even in the impossibility of easing the pains and despair of the other. It was an uninterrupted adoration, day and night, a constant presence of a dying and loving God which found its expression and explanation in the cup of the Blood of Christ. The Blood of Christ. Continuous pain and continuous divine love. We remained steadfast in our adoration. I all the necessary and multifaceted activities we undertook -- humanitarian aid for thousands of refugees, letters to church and political authorities, speeches in Austria, Germany and Switzerland-- in all these activities we remained steadfast in our adoration.

I discerned in myself that I had to stay here. I could not walk away from all of this. I could not betray the Blood of Christ. But the burden became too great. After a stay in a hospital in Austria in the summer of 1992, I went to our

community in Schellenberg. Soon groups of refugees from Bosnia-Herzegovina started coming into Liechtenstein. There were also individual refugees, arriving legally or illegally. In a letter I had written much earlier to the Provincial I said, "A man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho...and fell among robbers. We cannot stand idly by and move on." And so a network for dissemination of reliable information came into being, and from that proceeded all kinds of humanitarian aid campaigns.

Here in exile the coming together and reconciliation of members of different ethnic groups who had been enemies at home is often possible. It is a long and thorny way with many setbacks. A broader aspect of the eucharistic cup, of the Blood of Christ, is evident here: reconciliation. Psychically ill people seek healing from experiences of loss, from shock, from deep-seated anxiety, from feelings of hatred, from endless sorrow. And such healing is not possible without reconciliation with the enemy -- at least interior reconciliation, even if external reconciliation is often not possible.

One thing I know for sure: God can use us for his liberating activity among other human beings even when we are weak, fallible and sinful. St. Paul writes: "Yet Christ was crucified in weakness, but he lived by the power of God. And we are weak in him, but we will live with him before your eyes by the power of God" (II Corinthians 3:14).

(Fr. Willi Klein, C.P.P.S., "A New Missionary Challenge", a talk given at the XVI General Assembly, Rome, September, 1995)