

THE WAR ON CATHOLICS IN CROATIA

By Karen Lynn Krugh

In the midst of writing this, I learned that the Pope has postponed his "pilgrimage of peace" planned for September, 1994, to Sarajevo, citing concern for the safety of those who would come out to see him during his visit. Bosnian Serbs have said they cannot guarantee the Pope's safety. Indeed, they cannot even guarantee that the Pope's plane would land safely. The Vatican has said the Pope plans to make a trip "as soon as circumstances permit. " The Holy Father's two-day visit to Croatia's capital of Zagreb will go on as planned.

The world has been aware of the tension between Orthodox Serbians and Catholic Croats at least since the day in 1914 when a young Bosnian Serb assassinated Catholic Archduke Francis Ferdinand of Austria-Hungary in Sarajevo, setting off World War I. More recently, John Tagliabue, in a special to the *New York Times*, wrote that the apparent unforgiveness "of what they [officials of the Orthodox Serbian Church] view as the complicity of some Roman Catholic bishops in the killing of Serbs in Croatia during World War II" caused them to block the Holy Father's proposed visit to Serbia's capital, Belgrade, this past September.

The signs of hostility are clear. But what remains unclear is whether the fighting is due more to ethnic division or religious hostility. According to Christopher and Judy Chapman, a missionary couple from Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, the tactics of war speak for themselves. The Chapmans, a Catholic doctor and nurse with three sons, have been providing medical and pharmaceutical supplies to war-torn areas of Bosnia-Herzegovina for more than two years. Estimates have placed their relief efforts at more than \$30 million dollars.

During a recent visit to New York, I had the opportunity to speak with the Chapmans to discuss the situation in Bosnia-Herzegovina. We discussed specific attacks on Catholics and the relief efforts that their organization, the Catholic Medical Foundation, is providing. They were accompanied by Bishop Ratko Peric of Mostar-Duvno and Dr. Vladimir Simunovic, a Harvard University-schooled neurosurgeon and Bosnia-Herzegovina's deputy health minister. Dr. Simunovic also serves as Executive Director of the Foundation.

Judy began by describing the situation as "a personal war against Catholics." When the Serbs attack a town, she said, the first thing they destroy is the church. "In Balkan culture, the Church is the center of life," Judy said. "Anything that happens in life happens in a church, from birth to death. To destroy the church is to destroy the spirit."

The Serbs, commonly labeled Orthodox Christians, despite the fact that their own Bishops admit more than 70% have never been baptized, are very sophisticated in their war tactics. "There is definitely a desire [among Serbs] to destroy the Catholic Church," Judy said, "because it's a powerful force." The Catholic faith, said the Chapmans, is more important to the Croats than their jobs, more important than their livelihood. The Serbs are well aware of this dedication. After the Serbs destroy the church, they destroy the hospitals. That way, the Chapmans explained, they've killed the body and the spirit. Bishop Peric calls the relief efforts "physical and spiritual work." After they've destroyed the churches and the hospitals, they allow for a false sense of security to return to a community, and the first day the children return to school, the Serbs will bomb the building in order to destroy an entire generation of Catholics. It takes such massive and total destruction for the Croats to leave. As Bishop Peric explained, most will try to stay in their own diocese.

Since the fighting began, the number of Catholics in the former Yugoslavia has decreased from 830,000 pre-war to about

400,000 currently. The number of priests and religious living and working in the region has decreased dramatically. Of the original 275 parishes, about 150 are not approachable. Permission is required from either Serbs or Muslims to gain access to them. In all, about 80% of the country's Catholics are refugees, their homes having been destroyed in the war. Bishop Peric's own home was destroyed by Serbian shelling.

Because the Serbs were in control under the Communist regime, when the former Yugoslavia dissolved, they were able to gather up all the weapons, disarm the people and take control of all positions of power.

Chris explained the overwhelming influence of the Serbs: "the main journalists are Serbs, the articles and the editorials are written by Serbs, and the leader of the troops in Sarajevo is Serbian." The Croats don't have that sophistication, Judy said. For fifty years, the Croats resisted the Communist reign, forsaking jobs, positions of power, etc. Judy described the Croats as, "naive, very simple, very religious and very forgiving."

The forgiving nature of Catholics is evident in the care provided by Croatians to all the sick, injured and needy, regardless of the religion of the patient. Croatians provide most of the care in hospitals, which is where the Chapmans first became involved. "Why do you help all?" Judy wondered aloud. "Because if you're a true Catholic, you can't say no. There is a tremendous persecution of Catholics. But as they [the Croatians] live to care for their enemies, so must we [Catholics]." Chris described one incident in which Muslims grenaded their own children and then the Croatian physicians fought to save the lives of the sick and injured. It is this same war-tactic which led the Bosnian Serb leader, Dr. Radovan Karadzic, to discourage the Pope's visit to Sarajevo telling papal envoy Msgr. Francesco Monterisi that Muslim troops might launch an assault during the visit and blame the Serbs.

The naivete and trust of the Croatians may not change enough to catch up with the sophisticated techniques of the Serbs. But, in time, through the communication between the Muslim, Serb and Catholic leaders, the medical care provided by the Catholic Croats, and the international relief efforts pouring into the country, we can only pray that the world will soon see an end to the ethnic and religious cleansing, the now three-year-old war in Bosnia-Herzegovina. And as Bishop Peric said during his visit to New York, "We have to pray. Jesus Christ is our Peace."