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First the Kingdom of God:

A Festschrift in Honor of Prof. Dr. Peter Kuzmič

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Regardless of the efforts invested, we still fail to fit a person's life and all he or she has done in their life, or even in some part of their life, within the covers of a book. This is particularly difficult, almost impossible, to accomplish concerning persons such as Dr. Peter Kuzmič who has devoted several decades of his life to working within the Evangelical Pentecostal Church in Croatia and in the former Yugoslavia, in the Christian realm as well as in Croatian society. Persistently and unobtrusively he has proclaimed the Gospel of Jesus Christ and spread cognitive horizons in our region while founding schools and colleges, enriching people through media with the scope of contemporary theological, philosophical and social thought, endeavoring for the rights of the dis-empowered, disabled and ordinary people and, last but not least, promoting the basic Christian values of marriage and family, testifying to them with his own life.

Notwithstanding the impossibility of placing a person's life and work within the covers of a book, it has still been decided at the Evangelical Theological Seminary (ETS) in Osijek to contact the people with whom Dr. Peter Kuzmič has worked, collaborated or encountered, and ask them to give their opinion about this man whom they have known personally from their perspective, exactly the way they have experienced him on occasions which have evinced their mutual collaboration and engagement. The leadership and his friends at ETS consider the publishing of the book – the Festschrift – to be the most appropriate way to honor their founder, promoter and rector for all he has done on behalf of the seminary, as well as for the Christian and social community he belongs to. His 65th birthday was selected as an appropriate occasion for this to be done.

This book, this Festschrift, is actually already in our hands. It is a voluminous book, but from each of its sections and articles, the evaluations and reviews of those who have been honored to see their texts published rise like bubbling wellsprings. This only shows that the number of those who were willing to write about Peter Kuzmič was much greater than is possible to publish in this demanding issue in publishing terms.

In order to know, however, what the book is about, this is a concise overview of its contents for those who may not have seen or perused it and who would certainly like to be informed about the life path and work of Dr. Peter Kuzmič as presented by his contemporaries. This is also for those interested in finding a list of published articles and books from his biography, and his pastoral, scientific,

priestly and other works all in one place.

I would like to point out that this book entitled *First the Kingdom of God: A Festschrift in Honor of Prof. Dr. Peter Kuzmič*, published in 2011 by the prestigious Croatian Evangelical Theological Seminary in Osijek is endorsed by the editorial team consisting of eminent Christian theologians: Miroslav Volf, Corneliu Constantineanu, Marcel V. Măcelaru and Krešimir Šimić. The book is a written and edited Festschrift, as the title reveals, in honor of professor Dr. Peter Kuzmič, the founder, rector and one of the professors of the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Osijek, on the occasion of his 65th birthday. The book is comprised of 894 pages and besides the Preface (in Croatian and English) and the Biography of Peter Kuzmič (in English), it also contains four separate chapters with material classified by subject.

Even just a glance at the book reveals that it abounds with personal impressions and recollections written by Kuzmič's friends as well as those who he has met or encountered over his 45 productive years; it also abounds with scientific papers dealing especially with Kuzmič's theological/biblical work. The published contributions are actually expressions of friendship as well as gratitude and intrinsic respect fostered for him by his friends, colleagues, associates, and especially his students to whom he has mediated his abundant knowledge.

Through their contributions, the authors wanted to emphasize anew Kuzmič's tremendous contribution to overcoming many inter-Christian preconceptions as well as his readiness for pursuing the most adequate solutions in the time given. Namely, he has been constantly engaged in daily witnessing to the Christian faith in his family, among colleagues and in society in general. Kuzmič has worked for the proclamation of the fundamental features of this faith to others, by introducing them to others, rather than forcing those features upon them.

His great contribution is discernible in the fields of biblical studies, missions and ethics, namely, Christian ethics.

The book contains 50 articles which are, as already noted, varied by subject and by their scientific as well as academic and non-academic argumentation. The editors published the contributions in the original languages in which they were written, therefore, along with the numerous articles in English, there are also articles in Croatian, German, Russian, Slovenian and Serbian; there are articles both in Latin and Cyrillic script. All of them discuss the accomplishments and the activities of Dr. Kuzmič.

Regardless of the many and various interests Peter Kuzmič has been devoted to, the editors found that the contributions received, and it should be noted that only a part of the received contributions were included in this ceremonial occasion, should be divided into four sections, four areas which would reflect Kuzmič's humanitarian, scholastic, scientific and priestly work. Miroslav Volf,

Ivan Golub, Krešimir Šimić, Radovan Bigović, Bonaventura Duda, Radomir Rakić, Mato Zovkić, Feri Kuzmić, Dragutin Matak, Danijel Brkić, Aleksandar Birviš, Antal Balog, Damir Špoljarić, Toma Magda, Josip Jendričko, Julijana Mladenovska-Tešija, Stanislav Marijanović, Jaroslav Pecnik, Žarko Puhovski, Katarina Kruhonja, as well as many foreign authors have expressed their impressions of him through their contributions.

In order to point out Kuzmić's theological education while also presenting him as the visionary, teacher and mentor that he is, the authors of the articles desired to emphasize through their writing his role in the founding of the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Osijek as the first and only such institution in the region of the former Yugoslavia; it should also be mentioned that, not only was it the first theological school in this part of the world, but it was also an institution which formed and directed theological education in this region. Beginning with the postulate that without a school there is no education, and without education there can be no true proclamation of the Christian faith, Kuzmić has directed his primary work precisely in that direction, in the direction of founding an educational institution.

The second section consists of articles devoted to scholarship, that is, to Peter Kuzmić as theologian, mission expert and ethicist, which reveal that although an expert for translation of the Scriptures into Slavic languages, Peter Kuzmić has also contributed considerably in other areas of theology as well. To this end, the authors also list his title: Eva B. and Paul R. Toms: Distinguished Professors of World Missions and European Studies at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in the USA.

The third section consists of articles dealing with the subject of Christian leadership and ministry within whose scope is the discourse about Peter Kuzmić as a pastor, evangelist and a global leader. One learns through these texts that Peter was not only a priest, a missionary and a pastor, but also the former president of the Evangelical/Pentecostal Church in Yugoslavia and later in the Republic of Croatia, and that he was the president of the Protestant Evangelical Council of Croatia. However, to be an evangelist while not living according to the evangelical principles would certainly be an apostasy, therefore, already at the beginning of the war in the Republic of Croatia, he founded a humanitarian organization called Agape through which he assisted thousands of distressed refugees and exiles, especially in Eastern Croatia where the war was most severe. There are a great number of associations with theological orientation in which Peter operated and worked as the founder and president of the International Fellowship of Evangelical Mission Theologians (INFEMIT); together with Dr. Hogan and Dr. Y. Cho, he is the co-founder of World Assemblies of God Fellowship and the humanitarian association WAGRA. Through his activities and accomplished results, he earned

an inclusion in the global issue of *Who is Who*.

The fourth group of articles elaborates a very important area of the human existence – faith and life, and in this segment it presents Peter Kuzmič as an analyst, speaker and prophet. Beginning with the conviction that faith pervades and encompasses life as a whole, within culture and society, it was not difficult for Kuzmič to get involved and engage in the contemporary, in many ways post-Christian, society while preaching and testifying to the Christian faith regardless of the fact that the modern person often seizes the present religious declaration of faith and pursues another while searching for the meaning of life and ad hoc solutions for their problems – caused by illness, old age, abandonment, social isolation, etc. Kuzmič endeavors for the following: to find adequate models and ways of speaking and interpreting the Gospel and its messages in the contemporary world. He strives to relate his religious convictions to the common person, the poorest and most endangered through his columns – sermons published in the Slavonian newspapers such as *Glas Slavonije (The Voice of Slavonia)*.

However, Kuzmič believes that it is not enough to only preach nice and meaningful sermons, but to be socially and politically active as well. He personally gave a great contribution for the preparation and execution of the Dayton Peace Agreement which ended the war in the former Yugoslavia; he also contributed to the understanding of the post-war Croatian reality by working through the Croatian Helsinki Committee for Human Rights. Thus, within the scope of this institution he was able to warn the Croatian public of the existence of many people within the Republic of Croatia, besotted by the liberation of the State, who were suddenly left politically and socially unprotected and on the existential windward side, whether as exiles and refugees or as victims of partial privatization. To the unprotected, especially to those who returned, he was able to offer hope and a possibility for solving their life's problems.

There is one more of Kuzmič's activities that I want to mention since it is so familiar and close to me, and that is his interviews and public appearances on the national TV, namely, on the shows *Ekumena* and *Duhovni izazovi (Spiritual Challenges)*. In those media appearances, due to his rhetorical skills, eloquence and quick thinking, fearlessly and irregardless of what others might say – which is the merit of a true Christian intellectual - he always expressed our “inherent” need to structure Croatian society on the foundations of evangelical righteousness. He managed to “upset” some of the people who held political and ecclesiastic positions through his appearances, but at the same time, which is very important, he knew how to break down thoughtful bonds in the minds of many non-democratically focused individuals and groups.

It is important to note that Peter Kuzmič has been honored multiple times in Croatia and abroad. Among his prestigious decorations is the award of Reda

Danice hrvatske s likom Katarine Zrinske which he was given in 1998 by the president of the Republic of Croatia, Dr. Franjo Tuđman, for his contribution to the culture of the peaceable, inter-religious, multiethnic and intercultural living. Additionally, he received a recognition from the city of Osijek and the Croatian Helsinki Committee, as well as many other awards and recognitions in his homeland and abroad.

In order to avoid completing this text without saying who Peter Kuzmič actually is, we offer some of the most important facts from his biography which was done for the writing of this book by his adult daughter, Tatiana; I have selected here only several parts of it. The amount of biographical data creates a new opportunity for getting even more familiar with all the things the honoree has been involved in.

Peter Kuzmič was born on July 26, 1946 in the small picturesque village of Nuskova in Slovenia as the fourth of five children to father Leopold (Lipota) and mother Ema Kuzmič who were members of the local Pentecostal church. After finishing elementary school in his home village and high school in Belgrade, he signed up for theological studies in European Bible College, near Frankfurt in Germany; after his refinement of the English language in England, he continued his studies in the USA. In Germany, he met his wife, Vlasta Volf, the sister of Miroslav Volf, who had gone to study in Germany from Novi Sad, where their father was a pastor. At Southern California College, Peter earned a baccalaureate degree and after that a Masters degree from Wheaton College near Chicago, Illinois.

Due to his extraordinarily well done paper for his Masters degree on the Gospel According to John, in accordance with the writings of the church father Theodore of Cyrus, he obtained a scholarship to Harvard where he dealt with the textual critique of the old Slavic church manuscripts. When the Yugoslavian government complied with his prior request to start a theological school, he returned to Croatia and founded the Biblical Theological Institute in Zagreb in 1972. This opened an opportunity for educating young generations of Protestant pastors in southeast Europe who were not allowed to study in Western European countries; due to the contemporary global political circumstances, many prominent theologians were able to lecture at the Biblical Theological Institute.

However, Peter was not at rest. He enrolled at the Catholic Theological Faculty in Zagreb and completed the studies with a doctoral dissertation done at the suggestion of his "Doctor-Vater", Father Bonaventura Duda, a Franciscan and a professor at the Faculty. The dissertation was published in 1983 by the publishing house Kršćanska sadašnjost under the title *Vuk-Daničićevo Sveto pismo i biblijska društva*.

In 1982, the Biblical Theological Institute was moved to Osijek, and with it

also Peter and his family which had expanded during their stay in Zagreb. From Osijek, Peter had an opportunity to travel to prestigious American universities and global congresses where he was able to speak on the truth and the credibility of the Gospel.

During those guest tours, he received offers to stay and lecture at prestigious American and other universities. He declined all those attractive offers to stay there permanently and lecture; he came back to Osijek where he continued with his work as an educator. Due to his public appearances through which he offered some new perspectives to a society which was saturated with State-fostered atheism, he had an opportunity to write daily columns (personal diaries) in the Zagreb newspaper *Danas* (Today) in 1989, thus informing the then Yugoslav public about the life of the Protestant churches in the country.

As a person who loves the brotherhood and unity in Christ, he continued his evangelical pastoral and teaching activities after the break up of Yugoslavia. Because their apartment in Osijek was on the front lines, he moved to America with his family for safety reasons; he traveled back to Osijek occasionally and provided updates for the American public about what was happening in his homeland. He participated in the preparation of the Dayton Peace Agreement. Later, he was given the opportunity to lecture at Gordon-Conwell Seminary; he still teaches courses such as Theology of Mission and Evangelical Views on Catholicism and Orthodoxy, and he leads doctoral studies.

After the end of the war in Croatia, Peter continued with his work in the public, tirelessly advocating democracy, and religious and national freedoms. He also continued with his work at the Evangelical Theological Seminary where he presently works as rector. Thanks to him, I have also had the opportunity to hold a lecture within the course *The Sociology of Religion* in the 2005-2006 academic year. In the newspaper *Glas Slavonije*, he regularly writes columns under the title "Vrijeme i vječnost" ("Time and Eternity"). He also cooperates with other public media – newspapers, radio and television.

Since 1972, he has published numerous articles and six books in the fields of biblical translation, hermeneutics and theology. Many of his articles and the books have been translated into several world languages including, but not limited to, Chinese, Korean and Arabic.

Concluding this concise overview of the magnificent monographic work which has been prepared and edited in honor of our egregious and dear friend Peter Kuzmič, I would like to add something else based on my personal experiences with him. All of us who have been given the opportunity to find ourselves in his company are always graced with the atmosphere of his joyful life which he simply spreads with his pleasant talk and smile. Whenever I see him, he is never angry or brusque, but always ready to talk about the problems of contemporary society,

whether Croatian, Western European or American, where all the problems of the nowadays intersect; societies where there is a constant need to point people to the values of the Gospels which need to be read and interpreted in different times and cultures in the languages the people understand.

Peter Kuzmič was and remains a persistent pursuer of the truth, namely, the evangelical one, but also a pursuer of people for whom this world is not a “valley of tears”, but a place where we can live and act in a Christian way.

Ivan Markešić

Translated from Croatian by Ljubinka Jambrek