

SOME MODELS AND FEATURES OF SPIRITUALITY AMIDST THE CONFLICT

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On the occasion of his recent visitation to our Croatian Dominican Province of The Annunciation of The Blessed Virgin Mary, the Master of Dominican Order, brother Gerard Francisco Parco Timoner III, apart from other suggestions, remarks, and proposals, mentioned a few things that caught our attention. The first one concerns the *sensus* of believers, that he noticed in our churches and convents, which testify that faith is not a mere theoretical discussion or an ideology, but something that is firmly rooted in the being of the people who live in this area. This feeling of faith has been going through various trials in other parts of Europe, so, in terms of that, we appear to be culturally and religiously different from other countries and peoples. The teacher's second remark concerns the still visible wounds of the war, that also left deep scars on the witnesses of those events, including us as religious men and women, laymen, soldiers and ordinary people. It is the wish of the Master of the Order, and brothers Pablo Carlos Sicouly, and Florentino Bolo, for us to share some experiences from those painful and sometimes overburdened historical events thirty years ago, which can possibly serve as a kind of thought and practical model for what has been happening for several years in Ukraine and the surrounding countries, today also in the Middle East, which daily threatens to escalate conflicts and

crimes on a global scale. It is this very point that will be the subject of our thinking and presentation.¹

History is the first issue that we want to think about. It is certainly unappreciative to pass judgements on what happened, is happening and is about to happen. The real subject of philosophical thinking, imagining, expressing these or those views, in the context of wars, at least in the area that we can say something about, either directly or indirectly, after so many atrocities, is that it comes down to countless moves that have led to a conclusion of there being something truly wicked in the human nature. In that sense, it is only understandable to be considering history, somewhat dualistically, as a fight between a good God and an evil God. Certainly, it is one thing to remain on an individual level, and ask questions of interiority, like St. Augustine, and another to think about phenomena on a sort of global level. That same Augustine thought about history as such in the perspective of the opposition between the divine and the earthly state. What we as Dominicans and people can be tormented by is memory. Our brother, the late Georges Cottier, wrote some interesting reflections on this and other issues.² They remain at the level of a man who could have tried, as it were, from the prism of an intellectual, to shed light on certain events from the history of the Church and what did not serve to its honour in the collective consciousness.³ Without being in the least presumptuous, in an inevitably fragmentary and emphatically subjective way, based both on what happened, and what is happening, one can dare to bring up a few things that, unfortunately, seem to be a certain constant in history as such. Here we point out the communist crimes in the Republic of Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Slovenia some 70 years ago. Although the numbers of victims cannot be discussed with absolute precision and reliability, it is certain that there are more than a thousand mass and other known

¹ The visitation of the Croatian Dominican Province of the Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin Mary took place from May 28 to June 8, 2023.

² Cf. Georges Cottier, *Remembrance and Repentance, Why the Church Seeks Forgiveness*, Zagreb, 2006.

³ We cite the highly notable activity of the Franciscan Institute for the Culture of Peace in Croatia, which through the Institute organized numerous symposia, published anthologies in Croatian and other languages, and published numerous books the purpose of which was to promote the preventive avoidance of all violence and war, whether at the local or global level. Unfortunately, it seems that over time, people turn a deaf ear to such and similar warnings. It is difficult to evaluate the results of such action, but, in any case, they represent a model of action in a period of relatively stable peace and security.

and unknown pits and excavations into which the victims were thrown.⁴ This topic comes to light, drop by drop a little at a time, only after the establishment and blood-won independence of the Republic of Croatia. Research in this direction is slow and it is made impossible, precisely because numerous witnesses and their descendants are still today the ones who create a »correct view of the past«, denouncing all Croats as criminals, demons and those who one is allowed to label as such. This is, of course, difficult to understand, but it is true. So many people lost their heads because of the choices they had made. Some, forcefully, and some willingly took the easy way out by wearing the only and exclusively acceptable clothes in the existing ideological and other regime. Therefore, it is not surprising that the Master of the Order, brother Gerard, and his first associates see that there is a certain closed-mindedness in expressing views, because this is, as it were, characteristic of any totalitarian context, in which the communist reign of terror predominates. All of this is to serve as an introduction to the topic. Whereas, one ought to be short and instructive. In addition, we try to serve as a kind of model. Asking that your patience be long enough, due to numerous events, important global geopolitical events, we dare to bring forth a few random thoughts and ideas, which are the result of personal and theoretical assumptions.

The first thought that occurs in the human spirit when writing and documenting a certain time is the multitude of obstacles. These difficulties arise primarily from the fact that we somehow naturally tend to compare ourselves to others who have already embarked on this endeavour and left future generations with some valuable and generally accepted testimony. This comparison goes as far as elevating others to undisputable heights, while accusing ourselves of various limitations and the inability to convey faithfully and authentically certain events in which we directly participated. Certainly, all of this would have remained a dead letter, if it had not been for those who encouraged us, one way or another, to finally bring to light, with joint efforts, what remained deeply buried in the private archives.⁵ There are multiple reasons for this. Regardless of how much we observe other participants of the same or

⁴ Here I cite Ivan Kozlića's book, *Markovićeve jama*, Partisan crime in Aržan and Podi in 1944. Zagreb, 2014. A huge contribution to this kind of research was particularly given by Roman Leljak, along with a whole series of other historians and publicists.

⁵ Quite by chance, during my novitiate in Dubrovnik in 1991, I was writing some short reflections and reviews for several months. The fact that the attack of the Chetniks and the Yugoslav Army (JNA) on Dubrovnik began at that time is another pair of sleeves. The text was published in the book *Days of Trials in Dubrovnik 1991*, Zagreb, 2018.

similar events with a certain amount of envy, it seems to us that they did not see things completely and in an entirely objective way, that they deliberately kept silent, overlooked or presented too subjectively. In this context, we were quite surprised at how our recent history is also subject to all kinds of interpretations and manipulations. Things probably would not be boiling as much within us, if it did appear to us that we too can openly and judiciously present, explain, comment and analyse some events, because over a certain period of time we have invested an almost immeasurable spiritual and intellectual effort to face certain questions that left a deep and ineradicable mark on us.⁶ We are of the opinion that »time« was also our ally, since by collecting and completing both various and numerous documents, we were able to approach, from a critical distance, some sensitive issues that concern not only the theoretical level but also what is specific, historical, practical and human, that is to say, non-human. Therefore, all this, sometimes seemingly endless material, presents a kind of guide through an extremely tense and challenging period of our life, for instance, time of preparing, carrying out, unblocking of real borders for the passage of aid convoys for »Usora«, of fears, war, behaviour of the Church, of political and military »authorities« in those times, that in fact gave birth to an encounter with harsh reality.

Borderline situations

A special place in our memory is taken by precisely such, let us call them borderline situations, which we consider a privilege because they do not represent usual and often superficial experiences of everyday life. What further encourages us in the undertaking is also the very fact that we »made it out alive« despite various war casualties and threats, so it would be a shame, at least personally, not to allow »all that« to be presented in a suitable and adequate form to potential readers and to the witnesses not only of that time. The first thing to emphasize is that in those wartime movements we could not and did not have time for any deeper reflections on certain events and time. Namely, it is completely understandable for people to react this way in some extraordinary situations. When there is a war, in the face of an earthquake, a flood, some old or new diseases of our time, thinking comes afterwards, when

⁶ As for the authors who dealt with issues from the Homeland War, we refer to the works of Mr. Ante Nazor, director of the Croatian Homeland War Memorial and Documentation Center from September 22, 2005 to the present, and Davor Marijan, Croatian military historian and author of several books on the Homeland War.

everything has taken place, and when, in fact, we become aware of what happened, and even more of what could have happened with a tragic outcome for numerous people, that is, our contemporaries. Now, as then, we are trying to view all these events as Catholics from a divine perspective, so to speak. It also presents us with the task of emphasizing the wise aspect of history that has the force of principles. Human history as such is guided by divine providence and thus endowed with meaning.⁷ In other words, its duration is not a mere repetitive sequence of events, like a void in which the fate of people is being written. Each period of human history has a separate meaning. This history is not something that takes place solely and exclusively on the surface, in what can be observed with bodily eyes, but it refers to a deep fabric that is originally a spiritual category. Naturally, we remain humble and honest in admitting that the meaning of certain events and the entire history remains largely inaccessible to us, because it remains hidden in the secrets of divine wisdom. God's angels certainly have a clearer understanding of this. Therefore, our basic intention is not to fully understand and interpret isolated events such as the horrors of war, but to briefly describe and present what really happened in those years in this area. This methodology helps us to search for and find some meaningful elements for a certain understanding of a period of human history. In the war, it is particularly visible that the unfolding of historical time is by no means a projection of some logical discourse, although a certain logic can be recognized and distinguished in all of this. There were sudden turns, tension of negotiations, slowdown and stagnation, resignation and exhilaration. There have also been mistakes and misjudgements, and laziness and routine. The fact is that history has been, in a certain sense, the teacher of life, because it is necessary for humanity to acquire knowledge with difficulty, starting from fortunate and unfortunate experiences, sublime creativity and painful mistakes.⁸ And it is exactly what the war was like. It showcased the face of man in all its complexity. It is, therefore, important to distinguish the elements that are predominant and truly defining. In case we wanted to reduce everything to uniqueness, we would not be respecting the true human reality. We are aware of the fact that no matter how deep the wounds of

⁷ On the theodicy issue, compare two books with a series of articles, *God and evil, Theodicy fragments* (Bog i zlo, Teodicejski ulomci) Zadar, 2008, edited by Ante Vučković, and *Landscape of cries, On the drama of the theodicy issue* (Krajolik od krikova, O dramatici teodicejskog pitanja), edited by Johann Baptist Metz, Rijeka 2011.

⁸ The recent events in Ukraine, the Middle East and elsewhere, seem to be denying us again and again.

sin may be, they are not capable of destroying nature and its active sources of truth, goodness, and beauty, all the more since grace is always at work.⁹ In this way, severe depravities coexist with credible human inquiry, just as the correctness of basic orientations never cancels out certain defects, for what is in time is subject to the law of corruption. Our method was a critical diagnosis that relies on the certainty that the spirit was created for the truth, and for that reason we have made an effort to liberate the truth and place it on its credible coordinates. We have tried to apply this direction in everything and everywhere in our thinking.

History as a *magistra vitae*

The word fate is often used in regular speech. This word is also used for history itself, that is, for past events, because with it, in a way, we stand powerless before its power and inexorability. However, it seems to us that we are making a mistake if we take that word in its strict meaning. It actually means denying the »life of the spirit« in its power of discovery and renewal. A certain taste of the tragedy of a certain nation, such as the Croats in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as our sense of complicity in our tormented period of thirty years ago in this region, leads us to believe that people and events are governed by some »fate«. When things go downhill, when it seems that there is no escape, we are forced to think that it is a matter of an irreversible decadence from which no one and nothing can tear us apart or pull us out. We are being left without courage and confidence that the »endangered« can be helped in every way, because there are insurmountable and impenetrable boundaries in front of us. It is not surprising, though, that many have succumbed to the temptation of viewing history through the process of decadence and corruption. However, in those unfortunate events of war, we ourselves testify to the fact that the negative side of death, fear and human corruption hide from us what shows the strength of the spirit, its creativity, sources of answers to challenges. Had we not believed in it, even though we were young and, one would say, inexperienced, things would never have happened that way, for we had refused to accept the apparent hopelessness and apathy. Despite the disruptions and breakdowns of current history, we had not stopped believing that certain values would rise to the surface and that,

⁹ Every challenging period, even in seemingly hopeless situations, gives rise to some persons who present themselves to people and to those who have truly believed in the only Savior of the world.

however insignificant and small it may have seemed in the eyes of many who were not even interested in the convoy to Usora¹⁰ to succeed, for instance, we were able to share in the joy of those who received »help«. Not only on a symbolic level, but also on a level of reality, which means a kind of victory of goodness, of the primordial desire to make something just, humane and directed towards another human being happen through our hands. Therefore, we foster an entirely opposite attitude towards the past from those who want to break free from the past as a corrupt thing. They are those who think that in order to build something, it is necessary to destroy, reject and condemn the first. That is why we are asked a serious question, what will become of the man who manages to undo the past? He will simply destroy himself as a cultural person because there is no culture without maturation in time, that is, without memory, without integrating the past into the present, without the blossoming of what was originally given in the state of seed and promise. Only a permanent connection with the past enables openness to findings and discoveries that our future requires. What is questionable is not that we unwisely accept what we were conveyed by the past, because it cannot be denied that a multitude of daydreams and prejudices disappear, but that our mind receives the historical heritage vitally, thus performing its critical function. With this, we have wanted to present war events objectively, starting from personal experience, and thereby show a sense of tradition, because a man without it is at the same time a man without a future. Nowadays, it is important to understand that closure into the present actually means a ban on living. The present of life extends its roots into the past while offering its promises, expectations and courage to the future. Only there where the three dimensions of time are organically connected does history exist and man can live in history, without which there is no creative culture. In this perspective, we will understand the thoughts that follow.

¹⁰ In the second part of this joint reflection of ours, about this almost spectacular undertaking, which can serve as the basis for a film adaptation, speaking is the witness of those events and the main organizer of the convoy to Usora, Mr. Miljenko Bošnjak, and Dr Mihovil Biočić who speaks about the work of the Split hospital during the war. Hereby I would like to thank them both for agreeing to contribute their experiences to these thoughts of mine. Mr. Mihovil Biočić is currently preparing a book about the role and dedication of doctors, workers and people who, in those years, worked and helped people regardless of religion, nationality or any other label that a person may be given. With it, we will be given the opportunity to take a closer look and see precisely the kind of activities it involved and then, to determine our values accordingly.

The war in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina

The first topic is war. In today's context, it prompts a number of questions. Just as the theodicy questions will be the only and crucial ones in the future, so will those, at least on the theoretical level, concerning war, require full attention.¹¹ And war is anything but good. Like all evils, it indicates the necessity of good. In order to avoid speculative reflections, which are necessary, given the opportunity of distance, we have only mentioned the negative and especially tragic consequences for those who were directly confronted with the events of the war. In borderline situations, not only during the war, but also after it, people are not able to endure. Regardless of how comforting the Biblical sentences are that the Lord will not tempt us beyond our strength, we seem to fail in carrying the burden, something overflows the glass, and we seek help wherein help cannot be given. It may be too simplistic an interpretation, but the fact cannot be denied that every year, a considerable number of Croatian veterans commit suicide, who were direct participants in those events some 30 years ago.¹² Here in Croatia we first and foremost talk about a defensive war that has all the characteristics of a just war. »War under the title of legitimate defence is imposed and defensive, and for this reason we believe that it would be more appropriate to avoid the word war in naming such a conflict and prefer to use the word defence. The difference is a value one, and it is not derived from the nature of war, but from the moral justification of legitimate defence against imposed and inevitable war aggression«. ¹³ It should be pointed out that this thinking, like other reflections, is a kind of privilege because we can, at least at the moment, express our views from the period of distance, when it seems that peace and democracy have a »boundless career«. ¹⁴ Sometimes even that seems like an illusion, especially within the area of the »European Union« because we delude ourselves to have achieved standards that will drive away any threat or danger of war. At least, that is what was thought until recently,

¹¹ Cf. Tonči Matulić, *Reflections on some old and new emphases in the Catholic evaluation of just war*, *Bogoslovska smotra*, 93 (2023) 2, 309-331.

¹² The topic of suicide is a particularly sensitive one. It will certainly represent a huge problem in Ukraine, but also elsewhere, I assume on a much more intense and wider scale. In the last 30 years, from 1991 to March 31, 2021, 3444 people committed suicide in Croatia. Fortunately, the tendency to commit suicide has been on the decline in recent years among both the general population and veterans.

¹³ Cf. Tonči Matulić, *Ibid*, p.317.

¹⁴ The time has not yet come for such things to surface, especially in Ukraine and Russia, and for us to become aware of the extent of the victims, especially of those who are direct witnesses of these events, as well as of the incurable scars of war horrors.

so the emphasis was placed on environmental protection, »green issues«, reductions in the armaments budget and similar initiatives. That practice and theory often go against reality is precisely what the times we live in bear witness to. On the one hand, reality and, on the other, an attempt to theologically and philosophically resist the very same reality, trying yet to blunt its deadly and apocalyptic sting. As Dominican Tihomir Zovko would say, nevertheless, there is no situation in human life where the gospel can be suspended.

Here we stand in front of what, in our own way, we can emphasize as a certain response to these terrible and deeply burdened historical situations. Firstly, there is the issue of humanity, which is born almost spontaneously in such a given context. Here we cite the text of Prof. Dr Mihovil Biočić, director of the Split Clinical Hospital Centre during and after the Homeland War, in an interview with *Hrvatski tjednik*, which can serve as a kind of framework for thinking about what to do in turbulent times.¹⁵ We are consciously quoting Professor Biočić's entire answer, because he precisely and clearly presents the facts that can be observed and interpreted in different ways.

»The war in BiH cannot be separated from the war in southern Croatia. It was a unique so-called Southern Front. Split was not defending itself at Klis because it would have been difficult to hold out, therefore, central and southern Dalmatia had to be defended deep in the hinterland. Compared to the entire war in Croatia and BiH, the hospital in Split gave the greatest contribution in Croatia in the treatment of the wounded and sick, exiles and refugees. We were not the ones to »invite« those sick and wounded from Bosnia and Herzegovina, that was simply their only way out to freedom and treatment, towards the south, towards Split, and Split's hospital was the only one on the Dalmatian coast that was not shelled and had large capacities, both in terms of space and manpower. Since Bloody Easter, i.e. from April 1, 1991, when we started preparing for war, the doors of KBC Firule were wide open for the wounded, sick, exiles, refugees and all victims of war, regardless of nationality, political and military affiliation. During 1992, we had 150 to 170 wounded people from Bosnia and Herzegovina in the hospital every day. Split hospital organizes eight war hospitals in BiH: Livno, Tomislavgrad, Prozor (Rama), Grude, Mostar, Žepče, Kiseljak, Neum and Nova Bila. KBC Split supplies medicines, medical supplies, equipment, hygiene supplies, food, blood doses, etc. to 80 places in Bosnia and Herzegovina, from Tomislavgrad and Livno, through Vitez, Sarajevo to Brčko, to Žepče, Tuzla, Živinice, etc. We transported

¹⁵ Dr Mihovil Biočić, Croatian Weekly, December 27, 2023 (No. 1005, p. 19-26).

about 7,000 wounded and sick people from BiH to our hospital by helicopter, 700 wounded and sick people were transported from Split to thirty countries around the world, 800 wounded and sick people from Split were transported to Zagreb hospitals. Up to 200 wounded people used to be admitted via the heliport from Bosnia and Herzegovina in a day. In 1993, we received about 500 to 700 wounded men from Bosnia and Herzegovina every month. In September 1993, in the Split area alone (Split, Kaštela, Solin), there were about 180 000 refugees from Bosnia and Herzegovina, with about 300 000 exiles, who we also took care of. KB Split is a state hospital where state policy was implemented, where all citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina were treated and cared for at the expense of the poor budget of the war-torn one-third of the Republic of Croatia. In the war hospitals of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 15 754 wounded were surgically treated, along with a small number of patients, while 316 health workers worked for 7 648 days. A total of 261 435 patients and wounded were hospitalized in KBC Split from 1991 to 1996, of which 31 086 were citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina, about 30 percent of whom were Muslims. We drew such conclusion from the characteristic names, because there was no »nationality« section in our medical documentation.

During the conflict between Croats and Muslims in the Lašva Valley, around 70 thousand Croats were in the area and a huge humanitarian disaster threatened. In order to save the besieged Croats and to inform the world public about the tragic situation of the Croatian people, a group of intellectuals from Zagreb organized a convoy called the White Road to Nova Bila and Bosna Srebrena, which, after preparations, set off on December 10, 1993. The convoy was led by prof. Dr sc. Slobodan Lang and Herman Vukušić and numerous others, under the auspices of the President of the Republic of Croatia Dr sc. Franjo Tuđman. This year, December 20 will mark the 30th anniversary of the »White Road«. The hospital in Split, along with a number of other Croatian institutions, contributed a large donation of medicines, medical supplies, clothes, and food to the »White Road«. So, we prepared two tons of supplies in 91 cardboard boxes for the needs of the Franciscan Hospital and the people. Following numerous difficulties on the way back, Ante Vlajić, the driver of one of the trucks, was killed. This may be an opportunity, thirty years later, to remember our 145 doctors and six transfusion and radiology engineers, who voluntarily worked for 4 283 days in the Nova Bila War Hospital from the beginning of 1994 to the end of 1998. After the end of the Croat-Muslim conflict, on June 14, 1994, the President of the Republic of Croatia Dr sc. Franjo Tuđman came to central Bosnia and thanked the people for the sacrifice they had made

and promised to build a new hospital in Nova Bila, as a gift of the Croatian state to the Croatian people of central Bosnia, but also to all the needy. He founded the committee for the construction of the Croatian Hospital Dr Mato Nikolić in Nova Bila, under the chairmanship of Dr Slobodan Lang. Along with several other members, I was also a member of that committee. A new hospital bearing that name was built later and has been functioning today to the joy of all the citizens of central Bosnia and beyond.¹⁶

In a further interview, Josip Jović states that it is a rare case in the history of warfare that a warring party treats the enemy wounded in its rear, but also their families and takes care of them in every way.

In the following text, Dr. Mihovil Biočić notes:

»We received numerous letters of thanks from Muslim civilian and military units during the very conflict because we were helping them at that time as well. After the treatment of Ejup Ganić, BiH President Alija Izetbegović sent a letter of thanks to President Tuđman and to me as the director, in which, among other things, he wrote: That will never be forgotten here. Personally, I think they forgot about that a long time ago. At this point, I must mention the »historic« visit of the Croatian President Ivo Josipović to the BiH Parliament on April 14, 2010, on which occasion he accused his country, the Republic of Croatia, and its policies in the 1990s for numerous evils in BiH. Apart from the untruths he uttered, he did not even mention all the good things we had given to the citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina. It is equally regrettable that even the hosts did not remember all the huge contribution on the Croatian part, above all to the health of the citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina, despite the fact that their president Alija Izetbegović declared that it would never be forgotten there.«¹⁷

To support these words, I mention an experience from my immediate family during the war years. During the bloody war between Croats and Muslims in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1993, a huge number of refugees came to the Republic of Croatia. The same 1993, my father, who passed away in 2008, met a large Muslim family in Split at the bus station. He asked them if they had a place to stay, their reply was negative. He invited them to our home in Split at the time, and they stayed there for several months until the end of the conflict. Many years later, that family contacted my family as a sign of gratitude for the charity. During those times of war, I heard objections from

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 23.

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 24.

both members of our family and acquaintances, how we could have welcomed Muslims into our house, while they had been at war with the Croats in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

In this context, I mention the humanitarian aid convoy to Usora, which was organized and carried out by our then Dominican seminarian and now a permanent deacon, Miljenko Bošnjak, together with his colleagues. Here I outline the details of that event, which represented a kind of turning point between the warring parties.

»Convoy to Usora« and the action »White Road to Nova Bila and Bosna Srebrena« by Leader of the »Convoy for Usora« Miljenko Bošnjak, permanent deacon

When the war between Muslims and Croats in Bosnia and Herzegovina broke out, Usora remained under a complete Serbian blockade. Thanks to the sensibility of the political, military and religious leadership of Muslims and Croats in the area, there was no mutual conflict, but the situation in Usora was becoming increasingly difficult every day. For that reason, we, who since the beginning of the war had most often helped it through the Croatian Community of Usora – Zagreb and Caritas¹⁸, started organizing the »Convoy for Usora« in Zagreb. We first started lobbying and collecting humanitarian aid for Usora.¹⁹ We soon encountered numerous organizational difficulties due to the fact that Usora was little known to the public. That is why, in mid-December 1993, we asked for help from the Action »White Road to Nova Bila and Bosna Srebrena«, which also was organizing a convoy to Nova Bila at that time. They immediately took an interest in the humanitarian issue of Usora, so we started cooperating with their members: Dr Miro Jakovljević, Dr Filip Čulo, Juraj Bokunić, Herman Vukušić, Dr Slobodan Lang, Fra Ivan Blažević and Fra Stipo Karajica. Following frequent meetings until the end of the year, as early as the beginning of January 1994, the first results were achieved, of which I point out three essential forms of their help:

¹⁸ REPORT on the work of The Croatian Community of Usora – Zagreb from its foundation to December 31, 1994, Zagreb, April 1995; p. 6-15; 505; 508; 512-513; 515-517 + link – Material issue notes of Caritas BK : 1/55/92; 2/56/92; 2/57/92; 566-568; Caritas of the Parish of the Queen of the Holy Rosary, Zagreb, letter, 6 July 1992; Caritas BK, letter, October 2, 1992; RC Parish Office Jelah, Ivan Bošnjak, parish priest, letter, Jelah, October 18, 1992; RC Parish Office Jelah, Caritas of Jelah Parish, No. 2/1992 Jelah, December 5, 1992.

¹⁹ REPORT on the work of The Croatian Community of Usora – Zagreb from its foundation to December 31, 1994, Zagreb, April, 1995, p. 226; 232; 236; 237; 238-239; 255; 241; 260; 268; 292; 293-295; 306-307; 309-312; 384-387; 402-425; DHH – German Humanitarian Aid, QUESTIONNAIRE, Zagreb, December 20, 1993; (Archives of the Croatian Dominican Province of the Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin Mary – Zagreb).

- Their warehouse at the Western Railway Station in Zagreb the warehouse was put at our disposal.
- We were helped in increasing the media coverage of the agony and suffering in Usora, thus putting it among the priorities in humanitarian activities.²⁰
- We were helped to participate in the drafting of the Agreement »Humanitarian Paths of Peace and Love for Aid to BiH« and in taking part in delegations to political and religious leaders in the Republic of Croatia, without whose support the »Convoy for Usora« could not have started.²¹

Although we were all putting a lot of effort into getting the convoy to Usora to leave as soon as possible, and Dr. Miro Jakovljević announced its departure several times in the media, unfortunately, we could not leave. However, on March 15, 1994, in the afternoon, the inner circle of us organizers of the »Convoy for Usora«: Messrs. Petar Matić, Ivan Blažević, Tomo Ružić and the Dominican Fra Miljenko Bošnjak, met with General Slobodan Praljak, the head of the military cabinet of the President of the Republic of Croatia. At that meeting, he encouraged us to start the »Convoy for Usora« as soon as tomorrow. On telling him that we had humanitarian aid ready, but that we had neither trucks nor people, it was agreed to leave on March 18, 1994. Thus, we only had two days to collect trucks and people and organize a convoy, but we succeeded. What helped us a lot was that around 250 tons of humanitarian aid that we had collected for Usora had been stored in the Action's warehouse ever since mid-January.²²

On March 18, 1994, in the afternoon, when I led the »Convoy to Usora« from the Western Railway Station in Zagreb, with us there was also Mr. Juraj

²⁰ »The Cry of Usora and Žepče«, »A Thousand of Aid Trucks« VECERNJI LIST, January 7, 1994 p. 17 »Usora's Croats are treated at home«, Vjesnik, January 19, 1994, p. 5.

²¹ »AGREEMENT«, Zagreb, January 22, 1994; (Archives of the Croatian Dominican Province of the Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin Mary – Zagreb); »Agreement on assistance to the population of BiH«, Vjesnik, January 23, 1994 p. 2; »Open ways of helping your neighbours«, Slobodna Dalmacija; January 23, 1994 p. 3; HR Herceg Bosna, The Office for Displaced Persons and Refugees; Reg. no. 17-095-II/94; Široki Brijeg, January 24, 1994 »The common good«, Večernji list, February 13, 1994 p. 2; »Help for the Croats in Sarajevo«, Vjesnik, February 13, 1994 p. 2; »Help to all those in danger«, Slobodna Dalmacija, February 13, 1994 p. 5; »Cardinal Kuharić received humanitarians«, Vjesnik, February 13, 1994 p. 2; The first convoy »Humanitarian routes of peace and love to help Bosnia and Herzegovina«, IKA, Zagreb, February 12, 1994 IKA V-8932/2 + PHOTOGRAPHY; (Archives of the Croatian Dominican Province of the Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin Mary – Zagreb).

²² The condition of the goods in the warehouse at the Western Station – White Road to Usora – March 15, 1994.

Bokunić, a member of the Action »The White Road for Nova Bila and Bosna Srebrena«. Dr Slobodan Lang supported us and saw us off on our departure.²³

Returning from Usora, on March 28, 1994, we pulled out with trucks thirty wounded men of the 110th Croatian Defence Council (HVO)²⁴ brigade and about twenty civilians. On the way back, the Serbs saw us off the same way they had welcomed us – with artillery shells. Thank God that despite the material damage to the trucks, no one was hurt. The following day we arrived in Split, from where we quickly transferred the wounded by helicopter to the New Hospital in Zagreb.²⁵ As all the collected aid could not have been taken in the first »Convoy for Usora«, due to the lack of trucks, the Akcija was keeping the rest for us in its warehouse at the Western Railway Station until the mid-1994, when we sent it to Usora with the Croatian Defence Council (HVO) trucks.²⁶

This did not end our cooperation with the Action »White Road for Nova Bila and Bosna Srebrena«. It continued during the summer of 1994,²⁷ however, after the Washington Agreement between Muslims and Croats, humanitarian action was made easier for us, so we continued to help Usora independently through The Croatian Community of Usora – Zagreb and Caritas.

Finally, we sincerely thank everyone who helped in any way in organizing the »Convoy for Usora«, which was the first to arrive in Usora after months of blockade.²⁸ May the Lord repay them a hundredfold!

The meaning of the aid convoy

The privileged work of the Church is evangelization. It consists not only in the theoretical proclamation of salvation, but also in the realization of the Gospel

²³ IKA-V-8979/3, March 18, 1994 FOTO NO. 154; »Convoy for Usora«, Slobodna Dalmacija, March 19, 1994 p. 56; photo no. 138.

²⁴ REPORT on the work of The Croatian Community of Usora – Zagreb from its foundation to December 31, 1994, Zagreb, April, 1995; p. 108-109.

²⁵ REPORT on the work of The Croatian Community of Usora – Zagreb from its foundation to December 31, 1994, Zagreb, April, 1995; p. 281-282.

²⁶ REPORT on the work of The Croatian Community of Usora – Zagreb from its foundation to December 31, 1994, Zagreb, April, 1995; p. 607-619.

²⁷ REPORT on the work of The Croatian Community of Usora – Zagreb from its foundation to December 31, 1994, Zagreb, April, 1995; p. 289-290; 313-314; 287-288; 256-258.

²⁸ Pero Radeljak: »How Usora Defended itself«, photo monograph, p. 104, Usora 1999; RC Parish Office Jelah, Caritas of Jelah Parish, no. 442/1994, Jelah, November 16, 1994 »A report for donors of hygiene packages to Caritas Zagreb; USORA, Newspaper of The Croatian Defence Council (HVO), no. 18, May 12, 1994. p. 3; USORA, Newspaper of the Municipal Council of Usora, selected texts and photographs Municipal Council of the Municipality of Usora, Grafotisak – Grude, March, 1995 p. 254-256.

message. This proclamation has the effect of already throwing the seeds of the Kingdom of God into our world. The Gospel message of love and peace is directed to the free consent of persons. The Church is aware, as well as its Lord, that in proclaiming this message, it will be encountering resistance and rejection. When bringing to people the light of revelation that illuminates the fact that of them being children of God, it is also aware of the hostility of the combined forces of darkness.²⁹ In its heart, the Church sees the gospel beatitudes and at the same time directs its gaze towards history governed by the prophetic warnings from the Book of Revelation. The Church of peace and love is also the Church of the martyrs who knew the price of the religious struggle. The Christian necessity of brotherhood does not happen by itself, it always encounters adversaries, starting with the sin that is within us. The forces of evil seem to be provoked in contact with the gospel message. It is where we encounter tares and wheat, heroes and tragedians, love and hate, openness and fanaticism. Evil and cruelty are not absent but they have an air of stiffness and discomfort that goes along with our restlessness. As if the determinants about man that we read in Psalm 36 (35) prevail:

»I have a message from God in my heart concerning the sinfulness of the wicked: There is no fear of God before their eyes. In their own eyes they flatter themselves too much to detect or hate their sin. The words of their mouths are wicked and deceitful; they fail to act wisely or do good. Even on their beds they plot evil; they commit themselves to a sinful course and do not reject what is wrong.«

After all that we have seen and experienced, we too have become »anthropological realists« because people know how to use other people's trouble and suffering for their own benefit and interest. Such actions make us, so to speak, not to rely too much on the good intentions of our neighbours, friends or people we meet. However, we cannot deviate or give up the fact that as persons we find our highest fulfilment in the divinity. Man, despite all his activities and limitations, is created in the image and likeness of God. God calls everyone by his name in his free initiative of love. This shows the uniqueness of every human being. Since everyone is called to enter a relationship of covenant with God or with own his conversion, man can become aware of the depths of his subjectivity and freedom. This shows a glimpse of what is fundamental to Christianity, which is the teaching of love. In practice, such

²⁹ Cf. for example, the work BENOÎT XVI, *L'Europe, ses fondements, aujourd'hui et demain*, 2005 and Jean DELUMEAU, *Un christianisme pour demain. Guetter l'aurore. Le christianisme va-t-il mourir?* Paris, 2003.

a commandment recapitulates the entire law and resists all the urges of egoism. Has the Christian West not known the fanaticism of religious wars? Were not the rights of the human person severely violated in a practice such as the Inquisition, in the name of the revealed truth about the God of love? Did not terrible crimes, abuses and atrocities take place during the war in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, which testify to the victory of the demonic in man? It is not a question of denying it. It should be understood that we have been given time precisely to gradually become aware of all the implications and needs of the Gospel. In addition, »the boundary between the Church and the world happens in the middle of our hearts« (Charles Journet), and Christians are not exempt from sin. Where they do it, their responsibility is heavier and the scandal is greater. These observations show that the Gospel is not fulfilled by itself and that there will always be some to refute or reject its importance. However, without Christianity, what will our societies look like in terms of customs and institutions, sense of service, refuge for the poor and solidarity? And when some great souls do appear, dedicated to the service of helping the saddest, the common consciousness in them recognizes the essential value of their own heritage. In order to present a fair judgment, we should not only take into account betrayals, nor the mediocre behaviour of the majority, but also heroes and saints.

Conclusion

Ultimately, within us there is a feeling of a certain nihilism, in which the vitality of God and, consequently, of man is denied. It seems that in this area we have not taken on all the consequences of that negation. On the current battlefields, they will gradually become aware of this. If we have really abandoned all traditional moral values, somehow the most terrible thing is to forget the absolute need for truth. It is true that the spread of disbelief and atheism is one of the most difficult phenomena of our time. However, it is not general, nor fatal and irreversible. God is the truth itself. This claim, which is at the heart of Revelation and the Church, has decisive cultural consequences. It teaches us that we were created for the truth and that the truth makes us free. It expands our dimensions of thirst for the truth and the need to research the truth. If the truth makes us free, that liberation which fulfils the spirit by possessing the truth must guide its search, and no human authority in particular has the right to prevent the independence of its walk. It is precisely the price that justifies it, because the spirit takes the most beautiful risks for it. In the above examples,

and there are thousands of them in individual situations and experiences, so much has been summed up of what reminds us, time and time again, to seek and live the truth. If God is the truth, it means that even the humblest part of the truth is a reflection of that first truth deserving, in that sense, our attention and respect. Man, himself must be truthful in his actions and attitudes. Hence the importance of virtues such as loyalty, nobility, truthfulness, sincerity, humility. From there also comes hatred towards lies, hypocrisy, failure to keep one's word. We hope that in these reflections we can find some ideas and thoughts to guide and encourage us in the future regardless of the »heaven« which is often covered with dark and gloomy clouds. We have tried to highlight and mark some ideas, hinting at the credible humanism towards which our anxious period aspires.