

KOSOVO: ORTHODOX PESSIMISTIC ABOUT FUTURE OF CHURCH LIFE

by Geraldine Fagan and Branko Bjelajac, Keston News Service, 27 November 2001

"Decani monastery is our island," Fr Sava (Janjic), assistant to Abbot Teodosije, joked to Keston News Service on 25 October. "The KFOR checkpoint at the gate is our port, from which we take our ferry - an armoured car - across a sea containing dangerous piranhas." Yet while he believes that such a restrictive environment is proving conducive to monastic life - "Our celibate community is the only Serb community growing in Kosovo!" - Fr Sava acknowledged that it is having a negative impact on church life in the province as a whole.

Sister Mikhaela of Pec-Patriarchate Convent agreed. It is essential for clergy and religious to be able to visit believers, she told Keston on 25 October: "Serbs need the access of the Church to continue their religious, spiritual, cultural life". Although Keston did see one nun being taken by an armoured vehicle from the convent to the Serb community in Osojane (Osojan) village near Istok (Istog) on the morning of 26 October, Sister Mikhaela said that such visits had recently been cut from four a week to two: "The Patriarchate couldn't get permanent access to Osojane - but elsewhere they envy the number of escorts we get in the Italian zone."

In Ljestar (Leshtar) near Strezovce (Strezofc), the other mixed Serb-Albanian village in Kosovo, according to Branislav Skrobonja, the editor of the weekly church bulletin "Herald of Kosovo and Metohia", the Serbs do not have their own church. Speaking to Keston at the Raska and Prizren diocesan offices in Belgrade on 23 October, Skrobonja said that parishioners have to be escorted to a church in nearby Ajnovce (Hajnoc). He commented that it was "completely unsafe for them to go to church."

At Pec-Patriarchate Convent, frequent interruptions to the water and electricity supply affect church life, according to Sister Mikhaela. Both occurred for almost the duration of Keston's stay at the convent on the night of 25 October, so that half of the morning service was held in darkness. The nuns believe such interruptions to be the deliberate action of local Albanians - and complain that while the UN authorities solve individual incidents, they never tackle the root cause. When, as a fluent English speaker, she has contacted United Nations Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) officers about such incidents, Sister Mikhaela told Keston, she has received responses ranging from a dismissive explanation that there are "ongoing problems for all" to an aggressive suggestion that the Patriarchate is seeking privileged status: "After the anti-Serb propaganda [during the civil war] there is unfortunately the view that we are all guilty and have to pay the price it permeates everything the internationals do."

What could be done to make Orthodox life in Kosovo freer? Sister Mikhaela thought that the secure future of all Orthodox sites depended upon discussions being held between the UNMIK authorities and the diocese as a whole. She voiced concern that Pec-Patriarchate Convent was being asked to liaise with the local municipality: "There are 25 such municipalities, we are afraid that they will try and separate church institutions and make differences."

Sister Mikhaela also suggested that one problem was that "western concepts are being imposed upon us." Concepts such as self-help groups were inappropriate, she explained since, for example, "Serbs are more group-aware than westerners." Speaking to Keston on 24 October in Belgrade, Mirjana Menkovic of the Mnemosyne Centre for the Protection of Cultural Heritage in Kosovo and Metohia agreed. "We are still in the process of making national states but we are expected to integrate and so skip levels of development. A solution cannot be imposed, it must be found here." Menkovic was pessimistic about the possibility of a free, multiethnic and multireligious Kosovo: "Give me one example of a successful Christian-Muslim state."

In the view of Skrobonja, the main way to improve the religious situation for Serbs in Kosovo would be to reconstruct churches. Fr Sava, however, pointed out that the Church had not received any funding to reconstruct churches because "they would be destroyed instantly".

Unlike Bosnia, according to Fr Sava, "Kosovo never was truly multiethnic, there were separate housing areas with a certain level of tolerance." Although the Church had proposed cantonisation on a linguistic basis (Serbs and Albanians speak unrelated languages), he now had doubts. "Cantonisation works in a civilised society, but this is a radicalised and relatively primitive society with sovereignty based upon nineteenth century ideals." Fr Sava was also sceptical about the contribution which interreligious dialogue could make, since "for most people it means nothing".

Praising the Catholic Christmas celebrations in Pec (Peja) as "open to any faith - not exclusive," however, UNMIK deputy head of Pec regional administration, Bob Charmbury, thought that some sort of joint interreligious forum could prove beneficial. Asked by Keston on 26 October why church representatives did not have free access to Serb areas, he explained that visits had to be organised and were "dependent upon logistic support." Interviewed by Keston, a KFOR officer who did not wish to be further identified thought that the main way of improving the situation would be to bring less extremist local Albanian politicians - "there are some moderates and I can believe in them" - together with church representatives, who were "open and friendly" towards them. "Nothing can be achieved in the short term," he told Keston, "we need more time - but it is possible." (END)