

Bosnian bishop says U.S. policy fueling Catholic exodus

John L. Allen Jr. | Feb. 10, 2013 NCR Today

Voice of Bosnian church appeals for help from American Catholics to change course

The 67 million Catholics in the United States represent a theoretically powerful political bloc, though their impact is often splintered by internal divisions. If anything could elicit a unified front, however, perhaps it might be the realization that American foreign policy has effectively imposed a death sentence on the Catholic church in a small but symbolically important country, one that functions as a bellwether for the possibility of peaceful coexistence everywhere.

That, at least, is the dream of Auxiliary Bishop Pero Sudar of Sarajevo, a 61-year-old prelate who's become the leading public voice of Bosnia and Herzegovina's beleaguered Catholic minority.

The 1992-1995 Bosnian War that followed the breakup of the old Yugoslavia was one of the most shocking and symbolically charged conflicts of the post-Cold War era. A country long seen as a model for inter-religious harmony, where Muslims, Orthodox and Catholics lived side by side in peace, suddenly exploded into sectarian bloodshed. The 1995 Srebrenica massacre offered a new metaphor for genocide, and the upheaval in Bosnia reintroduced the concepts of "ethnic cleansing," "war crimes" and "humanitarian intervention" into popular consciousness.

Today, the fate of Bosnia and Herzegovina is widely seen as a litmus test not only for the stability the Balkans and southeastern Europe, but any region where people of differing religious and ethnic backgrounds share the same real estate.

In that context, Sudar charges that the United States has put the survival of Bosnia's Catholic community at risk, and thus the vision of Bosnia as a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society.

In a Feb. 9 interview with *NCR*, Sudar appealed to American Catholics to demand that the U.S. government rethink the framework imposed by the 1995 Dayton Accords. In effect, the Dayton agreement sanctioned the division of Bosnia into two separate entities: the Republika Srpska, dominated by the Serbian Orthodox, and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, now largely under the control of Bosnian Muslims.

Sudar says Dayton's basic message is that "there's room in the country only for two peoples, not for three?" with the odd man out being the Catholics.

The impact has been dramatic. In 1992, there were almost a million Catholics in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the vast majority ethnic Croats, representing almost 20 percent of the country's population. Today Sudar says there are only 460,000 left, meaning the Catholic presence has been cut in half, and most of those who remain are considering exit strategies. Sudar predicted that Croatia's entry into the European Union, set for this July, will further exacerbate the exodus.

Church leaders, Sudar said, are trying to resist this tide.

"We have to make our contribution to the healing of society," Sudar said. "Catholics have a mission and a vocation in Bosnia and Herzegovina."

Realistically, however, he predicted that unless the situation changes on the ground, it's likely to be a losing argument.

"Without a real sense of coexistence, Bosnia and Herzegovina will remain a very serious threat to global security," he said, adding that he believes the key decisions about Bosnia's future aren't made by its own leaders but by the American ambassador. (Since 2010, the U.S. ambassador to Bosnia and Herzegovina has been Patrick S. Moon, a career foreign service professional originally from Oklahoma City.)

"We need a change in the political attitude of the United States," Sudar said. "If the Catholic church in America can give voice to that need, it would truly be an enormous help."

Sudar, 61, was born in a small Bosnian village during the Communist era that was roughly half Catholic and half Muslim, and he says there were few religious tensions because Muslims and Catholics found themselves in the same boat vis-à-vis an oppressive regime. Up until the war, he said, that spirit still prevailed, with Muslim and Catholic seminaries exchanging faculty to teach courses in each other's creeds.

Today, however, Sudar soberly charged that religious and ethnic tensions in Bosnia are, if anything, "more intense than immediately after the war" — a result, he charged, of the "unjust" situation imposed by Dayton, along with a dysfunction economy and general stagnation.

Sudar was named auxiliary bishop of Sarajevo in May 1993, at the peak of what's believed to be the longest siege of a capital city in the history of warfare. In that environment, Sudar emerged not only as a beacon of hope for the Catholic minority, but a leading force for national reconciliation. He pioneered the creation of a series of "Schools for Europe," bringing together Catholic, Orthodox and Muslim students. It's one of the few venues where members of those groups mix freely.

"Our hope is that after attending one of our schools, the Muslims become better Muslims, the Catholics better Catholics, the Orthodox better Orthodox, and so on," Sudar said. "If so, they'll also be better citizens who can help construct a multi-ethnic, multi-religious, and multi-cultural country."

Sudar was in Rome Feb. 9 for a conference on the future of Europe sponsored by the Catholic Action movement, which has long supported his inter-ethnic schools project. The conference was held at Rome's Domus Mariae hotel, and Sudar sat down for an interview with *NCR* on the margins of the event.

The interview was conducted in Italian; the following is an English translation.

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Interview with Auxiliary Bishop Pero Sudar

February 9, 2013

What's the situation for the church today in Bosnia and Herzegovina?

Right now, just as it has been for a while, the church is in a very difficult situation. In some ways, it's the same situation in which all citizens of Bosnia-Herzegovina find themselves. It began with the war and everything that happened as it unfolded, and then by a political and economic situation imposed by the Dayton Accords to end the war. Unfortunately, they didn't succeed in making our country work. Politically and economically we're in a disastrous situation, so much so that many of those who really know what's going on believe that our political and ethnic tensions, and as a consequence our religious tensions too, are stronger now than immediately after the war.

The Catholic church is a minority. Before the war, we were around 18 or 19 percent of the population, while today we're maybe ten or fifteen percent. There aren't any exact counts, but basically we've been cut in half. We went from around 900,000 people to roughly 460,000. All the rest were expelled. The half that remains is also at risk, because today they know the political situation is worse for the Croats than for the majority, and especially the young tend to go somewhere else.

Do they go primarily to Croatia?

Some go to Croatia, but they also leave for many other places. I'm responsible for the overseas Croats in the name of the two bishops' conferences, both Bosnia-Herzegovina and also Croatia, and I know where the Croat Catholics end up. Unfortunately, they're pretty much everywhere.

This is why I say the situation for Catholics is very precarious, very difficult. Unfortunately, we're afraid that those who have stayed, above all the young, sooner or later will leave too. They don't see a future, either politically or economically.

Does the church face violent persecution?

Yes, there are acts of violence, but there's violence against almost all the religions in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Unfortunately, the boundaries that divide peoples also automatically divide the religions. For example, all the Serbs who are believers are Orthodox. All the Croats who declare themselves believers are Catholics. All the Bosniacs are Muslims, of the Islamic faith. Of course, the target isn't always something religious, meaning that people are attacked for the fact of belonging to a certain church or religious community. Usually, the target is simply 'the other,' someone different.

Sadly, the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina was unjustly divided as a result of the war. This territorial struggle still goes on, at times through attacks on churches, mosques, and cemeteries, insults at religious leaders, and so on. There's an Interreligious Council in Bosnia and Herzegovina that keeps track of all these incidents, and unfortunately there's a lot of them. It's a way of demonstrating that there's no room for the other in a given place. That's the message the perpetrators want to send. In some way, the logic of the war lives on through these attacks – the logic of ethnic cleansing, of intolerance. This is our deepest problem, and it arises from the popular conviction that if the other were no longer here, our situation would be better. It's a very serious problem, and because Catholics are the minority, they tend to feel it even more. That's why they leave, which is the most serious threat the church faces.

How is the church trying to cope?

Above all, we're trying to convince our own members that Bosnia and Herzegovina is our country, that we have an obligation – which I would say is basically a humanitarian obligation – to stay. Bosnia and Herzegovina needs a commitment, one that's both humanitarian and religious, to healing. We have to heal the human spirit in the country. It needs this commitment not just from bishops and priests, but all Catholics. The church can't say that this need doesn't have anything to do with us. If we believe in the Gospel, if we believe in Jesus Christ, we have to see this effort at healing, reconciliation and forgiveness as our responsibility. It's not enough for us just to survive. We have to make our contribution to the healing of a society that's badly polluted, and that simply can't live like this. Yes, Catholics can move on to a country like Croatia where they're a majority, but they shouldn't do it, because we have a mission and a vocation in Bosnia and Herzegovina. That's the first thing we struggle, with great difficulty, to make our Catholic people understand.

Secondly, we're also trying to make the people who control the future of Bosnia and Herzegovina understand that we have the right to stay there. We have the right to be treated equally, just like everybody else. Unfortunately, that's not what has happened, either under the Dayton Accords or afterwards. In reality, the Dayton Accords already have been annulled. The powers that be always say, especially representatives of the United States, that the Dayton Accords are beyond discussion. The truth is that they've already been transformed from within, in favor of the two majority peoples – the Bosniac Muslims and the Serbs. The Croatians aren't taken into consideration.

How so?

For example, Bosnia and Herzegovina is divided into two entities. One is the Republika Srpska, from which the Serbs have driven out all the non-Serbs, including 220,000 Catholics. Unfortunately, right now there aren't even the minimum conditions inside the Republika Srpska right now for the return of those refugees. The second part is the Bosniac/Croat Federation. After Dayton the conditions on the ground changed, and today it's clear this entity belongs to the Bosnia Muslims. Our basic problem is that the common perception today is that there's room in the country only for two peoples, not for three.

Bosnia and Herzegovina can't survive as a multi-ethnic, multi-religious country, a country of coexistence, if only these two groups are left and they're forever competing with each other. We have to make the representatives of the international community understand that, because they're the ones who decide everything. We're a country that's basically governed by representatives of the United Nations and the European Community, although everyone knows that the one who really decides is the American ambassador. We have to be clear about that, and be able to say it with clarity. Unfortunately, right now these representatives don't seem to understand that Bosnia and Herzegovina has to be restructured if it's to survive. In my opinion, the country isn't viable if the Dayton Accords aren't revised. Unfortunately, right now there doesn't seem to be the will to do it.

The status quo represents an imminent threat to the Croat Catholics, especially because Croatia is entering the European Union, which means that the borders of the Schengen Agreement (which provides for free movement within EU nations) are being moved from Slovenia to Croatia. Many of our Catholics, especially the young, see this as the final chance to get out. If we're going to save the Catholic presence, the country has to do something, has to take some step, to say that you too belong to Bosnia and Herzegovina, you too have a future here.

Your signature project is the inter-ethnic schools in Bosnia and Herzegovina, open to Muslims, Orthodox and Catholics alike. How many do you have now?

There are fourteen, with roughly 5,000 students. They've been around for twenty years, because they were opened during the war. The number of students is still growing, which means there's an interest not just among Catholics but also the others. For instance, we have the children of Orthodox bishops and clergy, and also the children of Muslim imams. That means this concept works. Luckily we're recognized by the state and the state offers tremendous support, including financial support, because many bureaucrats also send their children to these schools. Unfortunately, that's the way it is in Bosnia and Herzegovina – nothing is decided by law, but by those who supposedly represent the law!

The schools still have a very good reputation, and they seem to work well. We're committed to ensuring that they're serious in a scientific and academic sense too, because these are regular schools, not religious. Believers of all creeds are accepted and respected. For example, there's instruction in the Muslim religion and in Orthodoxy, as well as Catholic. We want to show that we respect differences. Students and their parents freely choose if they want to attend classes in the religion to which they belong; even the Catholics aren't required to do it, because we want to respect individual freedom. However, everyone is required to take courses in the history of religions, where we help them understand what religion has been throughout history, what role it's played, and so on.

We've tried to organize these schools to contribute to building up the identity of the people who live in Bosnia and Herzegovina, including their identity as Muslims, Orthodox, Catholics, Jews, non-believers, or whatever. They're all accepted. Our hope is that after attending one of our schools, the Muslims become better Muslims, the Catholics better Catholics, the Orthodox better Orthodox, and so on. If so, they'll also be better citizens, who remain what they are but who can also help construct a multi-ethnic, multi-religious, and multi-cultural country. We want them to learn to accept one another and to work together, to see one another not as enemies but friends who can collaborate. That's what we're after, and I think it's the deep sense of the Gospel. It's not that we're betraying the Gospel by doing things this way; on the contrary, we're convinced that we're putting it into practice.

Let's talk about Islam in Bosnia and Herzegovina. From the outside, we hear that there's an extremist current in the country that's growing with support from overseas. How do you see it?

First of all, you have to understand what's going on among our Muslims. During the war, they felt they were under assault because they're Muslims. As a result, they called on their friends in the Arab nations for help. They came and helped them with arms, and unfortunately they also committed war crimes that nobody wants to talk about. However, they didn't just come to fight a war. They also brought another Islam with them, which is not native to Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Before the war, the Muslims of this country were extremely tolerant. They were very open to cooperation and dialogue. I was rector of our theological faculty, and I know very well how open my friends on the Islamic faculty were. Actually, one of these Muslim professors taught Islam to our students, and one of our professors taught Christianity for theirs. It was a very close relationship. Unfortunately this became much more difficult during the war, with the rise of this new radical current that has created many problems – not just in relations

with Christians, but also within the Islamic community. My impression is that the majority of our Muslims don't accept this radical current. As you know, however, this majority doesn't often speak up, especially in a situation like the one we're in now. They keep quiet. Meanwhile, the minority makes a lot of noise.

Anyway, I don't see this [radical Islam] as the most serious threat facing Bosnia and Herzegovina. The great threat is the lack of a just political system, of an economy that works, and a situation in which people can live from their labor. If we had those things, I think that these extremist tendencies, whether religious or nationalistic, would disappear on their own. What we need is stronger support and a more visible sense of hope from the European community, because with that our internal differences would be less significant. In reality, all of southeastern Europe needs that help.

How can Catholics in the United States be of help to you?

Above all, I think you could have a little more sympathy for our struggle to survive. Secondly, I think not just the Catholic church in America, but all those who love democracy and profess themselves to believe in democracy, could help your government to see the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina a little more objectively. You shouldn't support and encourage just those who have power, but also the little people. Without a real sense of coexistence, Bosnia and Herzegovina will remain a very serious threat to global security. That's true not just of Bosnia and Herzegovina but of the entire Balkans region, because we're the Balkans in miniature. We need a change in the political attitude of the United States regarding Bosnia and Herzegovina, just like the Balkans in general. If the Catholic church in America can give voice to that need, it would truly be an enormous help to us.

What about something more concrete? For example, do your schools need support?

Right now that's not urgent, because we're recognized by the state. I should say that the Papal Foundation in America helped us to get the schools off the ground, when they were born and when we were trying to rebuild after the war, and we're very grateful. For the moment, we don't need immediate material help. If there's not a serious political commitment to change the situation, however, even our schools won't have a future.

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