Open wounds: Healing is slow in the Balkans

by Noreen Herzfeld in the July 26, 2003 issue

Speaking to a crowd assembled outside of the Croatian town of Osijek on June 4, Pope John Paul II noted that “the trying times of the war” had left “deep wounds not yet completely healed.” A “commitment to reconciliation is needed.”

The depth of those wounds and the difficulty of reconciliation were abundantly clear in my recent conversations in the Balkans. In Zagreb, Croatia, Father Boze Vuleta, O.F.M., director of the Franciscan Institute for the Culture of Peace, feels that everything—religion, sports, the media, culture and even efforts at reconciliation—have been swallowed by the Moloch of politics.

“Peace initiatives, especially those organized by international factors, can make people feel as if they have been tricked, for some of these seminars have turned out to be a cover-up for another agenda. Talking of forgiveness and reconciliation can be experienced as an additional burden. Many experience the call to forgive as a call to give up their basic rights.”

“We cannot command anyone to forgive or to reconcile or to forgive on behalf of someone else,” notes Vuleta. Indeed, forgiveness looks all but impossible to him at times, considering “the closeness of the repercussions of war—the large number of those killed, invalids, those who went missing in the war, irreparable material damages and a deteriorating economy.”

On the other hand, Vuleta also laments the damage that a victim mentality inflicts. “At times it almost appears to be a privilege to be a victim—on a daily political and spiritual level. That must have its price, however. We need to exit from the status of victim to be fully mature.” Vuleta notes that the Croatian word meaning “forgive me” is *oprostite*. “The root of this word, *pros*, means free. To forgive is to be made free.”

In Bosnia, everyone is a victim. Vrbanjci and Vecici lie in the part of Bosnia that is under ethnic Serbian control, a part that calls itself “Republika Srpska.” Republika Srpska is not an official entity, but try telling that to the border guards, as they check your passport for the third time (first on leaving Croatia, next on entering Bosnia, and then on entering Republika Srpska).

I sat outside the newly constructed Serbian Orthodox church in Vrbanjci and spoke with Father Predrag Jeftimer. Jeftimer noted that there have been tense incidents between Serbs and the Muslims who are beginning to return to neighboring Vecici. “I was spit on by some of them, which means they were spitting on our church. I did not tell my community, so as not to provoke an incident. And this action was also judged harshly by the Muslim community themselves.” He worries, however, that such incidents may not be in the past.

Jeftimer complains that the Muslim call to prayer at 5 a.m. and 10 p.m. disturbs hours meant for sleep. “Before the war there were no loudspeakers on the mosques. How do the people feel to hear this sound every night, and even during a funeral? Yes, we ring bells for prayer, but it only happens once a day. Those who are rich and abroad are financing things, like loudspeakers, that are bad for the local community. I speak not against my local colleague, the imam, but against those on the outside.”

Though Jeftimer does not criticize his imam colleague, who teaches in the same school he does, he admits that the two of them have yet to speak to each other.

Being a victim can make one prey to selective remembrance. Jeftimer states that he will never forget the day in 1992 when 18 members of his family, including his grandparents, were killed in a nearby village. “You ask me about forgiveness and I can only say that I hope you never experience something like this.” At the same time, he dislikes the attention that the leveling of Vecici, where scores of Muslims died, has received from the press. “Like Auschwitz, Vecici shouldn’t be mentioned so much. Emphasize the good, not the bad. Why don’t you go to places where people live together in peace?” He’s not sure Vrbanjci and Vecici are such places yet. As we ended our conversation the sky broke open with sheets of rain.

The well-paved road from Vrbanjci turns to a dirt track as you cross the river to where the Muslims of Vecici struggle to rebuild the town. A plaque in front of the still-ruined mosque lists more than 100 names of the dead and missing. Saed Botic, the caretaker of the mosque, states that while many Muslims have returned, there

are few jobs; a center was built for widows and orphans, and they were promised training on computers, but the computers never arrived. All the village's tractors were destroyed or stolen.

Women bend with hand tools over small garden plots eked out of the corners of once-large fields. The caretaker is extremely proud of the fact that he has a cow. One cow. The pride of the village. He farms his 50 acres alone now. His son is missing. Can he forgive? Not while he still searches for the bones of his son.

Klisura Elzedin, imam of the mosque in the town of Vares, believes that Muslims are offering the hand of reconciliation. "The Muslims lost the most in this war. Everybody knows that. But everyone thinks his group lost the most. We need to know each other better and respect each other."

Can he forgive? "I'm not the Creator, so it's not for me to forgive. I'm only leading the people here. But I tell my people to forgive. Perhaps after another 15 years we will begin to live normally, to learn to work together."

In Bosnia, building a church is like planting the flag—a claim to territory. This is nowhere more evident than in the once-beautiful town of Mostar. Throughout Bosnia new mosques dot the landscape, most of them constructed with Saudi funds. One sees numerous new and reconstructed churches as well. As one drives the mountainous road from Sarajevo, the first glimpse of Mostar is a large cross newly erected on the hillside above the Croat side of town. Twin spires that look oddly elongated hover above the squat Catholic church. Amir Pasic, head architect of the project to reconstruct the famous bridge that once linked the Christian and Muslim sides of town, notes that these towers are no architectural blunder; they were built to be higher than any minaret on the Muslim side of town. Not to be outdone, the mosques boast taller and taller minarets—and louder loudspeakers.

Omer Spahic, the first Muslim to return to the town of Srebrenica after the massacre that left over 8,000 Muslims dead, finds this frenzy of construction ironic. "People turned to religion [after the war], but it was an illusion. Now the mosques and churches are empty. Religion is not that important." A religion that amounts to little more than an assertion of national or ethnic identity cannot hold the hearts and minds of a people. There is no salvation in love of country.

Yet love of country has become one of the cornerstones of the Serbian Orthodox Church. According to Sonia Biserko, head of the Helsinki Committee for Human

Rights in Belgrade, an atmosphere of intolerance has been promoted by the Serbian Orthodox Church, which sees itself as the main guardian of Serbian culture and national space. “The church is telling us that everything that comes from the West is bad. Life after Yugoslavia turned out to be hell. Our standard of living and cultural space changed. We needed someone to blame for that.”

Biserko sees a dual process of vilifying the West while continuing to remind the Serbs of their suffering. An example is the speech given by Metropolitan Amfilohije Radovic at the funeral of assassinated Prime Minister Zoran Djindjic in March. In reference to the West, the metropolitan referred to the ongoing Hague tribunals as “the sword of Pilate’s justice.” He also used the occasion to probe old wounds, drawing a comparison between Djindjic and Vozd Karadjordje, a Serbian martyr slain by Muslims 200 years ago, then calling to mind the various sufferings of Serbs in the recent war: “We don’t know which wound is deeper—this last wound inflicted by brotherly hatred, the one of Milica Rakic, killed during the 1999 bombardment, or the one of Marica Milic, slaughtered in Bijelo Polje near Pec . . . And there are countless wounds opened in our territories during the folly of the last civil war and bombardment. The fire engulfing hundreds of our torched Kosovo-Metohija sacred monasteries and temples heats all those wounds.”

According to Biserko, Radovic’s speech “ominously indicated that the Serbian Orthodox Church cannot or will not make a break with extremist policy and distance itself from some political dignitaries. The words uttered by the metropolitan are in reverse proportion to Serbia’s interest in getting its relations with neighbors in the region harmonized.”

Obrad Savic describes himself as an “ex-professor from an ex-country.” He is a member of the Belgrade Circle, a group of professors who lost their jobs in the academy when they refused to sign a loyalty oath to Slobodan Milosevic. Savic suggests that the nationalism of the Serbian Orthodox Church is a natural reaction to globalization. A call to return to one’s national origins and soil is basically the call to define oneself over and against American hegemony. Savic faults globalization for failing to take into account “cultural priorities, regional specificities and local limitations.”

However, he also notes that it is “precisely this discourse of ‘origin and soil’ which prepared the cover and the alibi for the collective practice of ethnic cleansing. It has aggressively infiltrated the whole apparatus of state, all the mechanisms of

authority, all the modes of power; imposing itself on an anachronistic society, it has brought it perilously close to collapse under the onslaught of unbridled nationalism. Used up and useless, this society is in vain attempting to renew itself through a militarist frenzy, to revitalize itself through the ‘speech of war.’”

So how many of the pope’s listeners will have ears to hear his message? Sonia Biserko remains optimistic: “The pope’s message is that we must all live together, and this is good. People of all faith traditions here are becoming more willing to acknowledge that crimes were committed under the name of nationalism. All sides will admit responsibility once those who organized it do.”

Still, the current calm in the Balkans is upheld primarily by the presence of international troops, including over 4,000 deployed to keep the peace during the pope’s visit to Bagna Luka. Plans to reduce and finally eliminate NATO’s military presence in Bosnia are greeted with relief on the part of some, abject fear on the part of others. One wonders if much more than a pause in the hostilities has been accomplished when the hearts and minds of so many of the people remain unchanged.