
Msgr. Dr. Pero Sudar

Bosnia-Hercegovina is a viable nation

Monsignor Dr. Pero Sudar, the auxiliary bishop of Sarajevo, is responsible for Roman Catholic educational work in the whole of Bosnia-Hercegovina. The text of this discussion, conducted in Italian with translation by Paolo Raimondi, has been abridged.

Sudar: The most urgent request and demand from here comes from the children and from the schools here in Sarajevo and Bosnia. Due to the fact that you are supporting Bosnia-Hercegovina, I conclude that you are aware of the situation here. I believe that only those who know, are able to act beneficially. I will concentrate on the Catholic school question.

This war was a war for territory, but then it turned into a war against different communities living together. Bosnia can survive as a territory, as a nation, if it is able to maintain the characteristic of these communities living together. This is the essence of Bosnia-Hercegovina. What we have here is a meeting-place for different cultures, people, and religions. And, we believe that Bosnia-Hercegovina can have a future, if it remains a place where all live together and does not rather become the place of clashes. Unfortunately, when there are too many differences, you can also have various problems arising from this.

The aggression today is still trying to separate, to break up Bosnia-Hercegovina, to divide the different ethnic and religious groups. This problem came again from the Serbs, but, unfortunately, was then accepted by all sides. I will not go into now, why the others, the Muslims and the Catholics, accepted this dynamic. With great pain, I can again only reiterate that it is accepted by all sides, and you have a situation where minorities no longer feel secure.

Tolerance in the schools

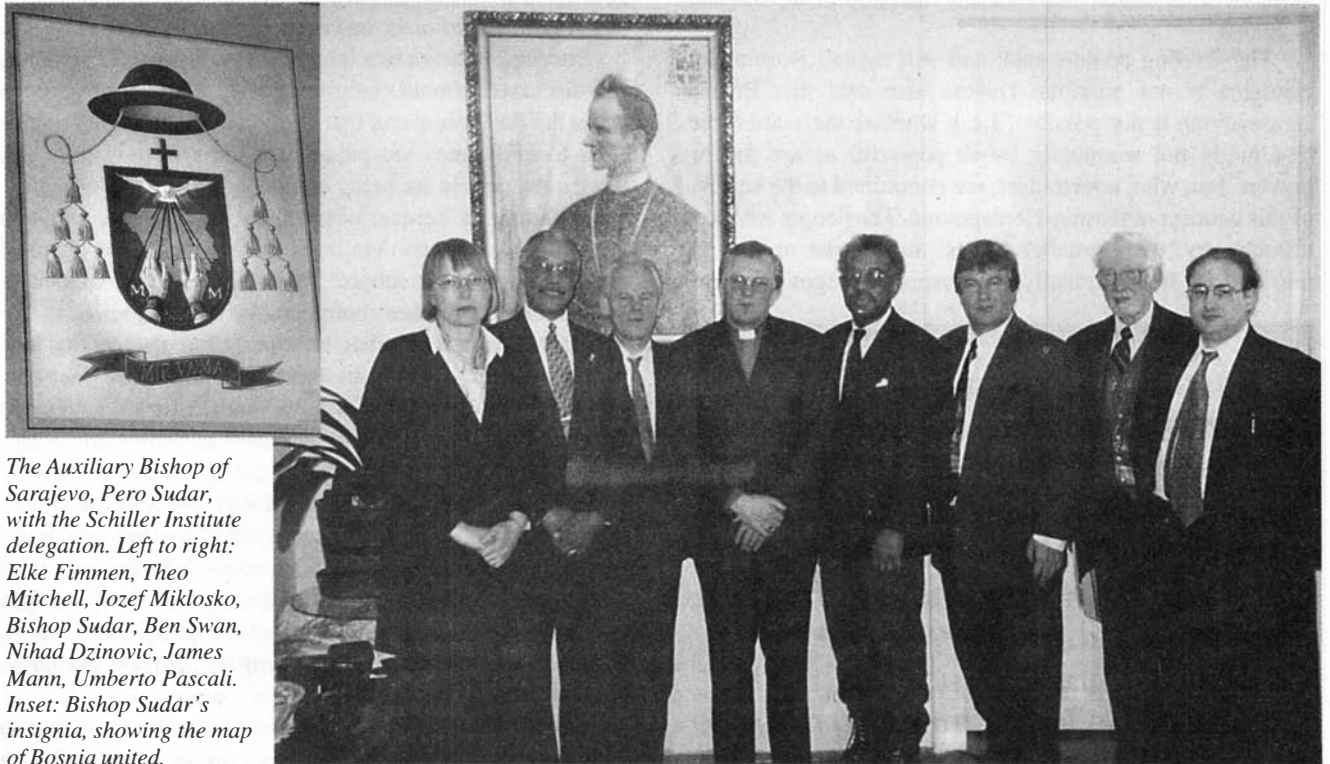
Because of the fact that from here, from Sarajevo, we cover all of the territory, all the villages of the Federation, we know very well what the situation is all over the countryside. Since we knew what was occurring, that was the reason that two years ago, we decided to send a signal of protest and a signal of hope. There is nothing so disturbing as to listen to parents describing how their children are put in a corner and are laughed at, simply because they belong to another group. This creates a situation, in which the parents some-

times will abandon their homes and go to areas where they are the majority. This is why we decided to confront this problem. We decided to create a school, paid for by the Catholic diocese here, but open to all people who feel that they are not fully accepted in their schools. Here, they should find a better place.

This school, and schools—because there should be many of them—are intended to be a proof, that there are people in Bosnia-Hercegovina who still want to live together with others. This was also a very big risk in the beginning, even for us; it could have been a moment, when, instead of demonstrating the ability of people to live together, it might have been a failure. You can imagine the problem faced by Muslim families, particularly during the period of the war between Muslims and Croats, in sending their children to a Catholic school in Sarajevo. But right now, because we do not even have enough space, we have to reject one-third of the children who wish to come to our school.

With this school, we wanted to give a sign of hope, while at the same time, one of protest, against what had been done to the children. And further, that it should become a sign that we wish to say that we want to become a part of Europe, that this *is* a part of Europe. Perhaps we are idealistic, but for us, Europe is a place of tolerance. We want to be a place of tolerance, in which people accept each other. We are trying, in our school, to explain, that to be different, is not something negative. In this school, which is a Catholic school, the religious teaching is open. Children who are of the Islamic religion have their own religious teaching; or, if they do not want to have any, they do not. The same is also true for both of the other communities. It is not allowed for a Catholic child to have Islamic teaching, or vice versa, to avoid any suspicion of proselytizing. For the Orthodox children, there is also a religious teacher appointed. The same is true for the other religions. The school does not appoint the religious teachers: They are appointed by the different communities. In this way, we seek to promote respect for the identity of, and openness to the tolerance of, others.

We wanted to be open to Europe; there are three aspects important in this respect: 1) the Classical languages Latin and Greek; 2) modern European languages: From the first grade, all the children learn English, and after the fifth year, they can elect to learn French and German; 3) exposure to computer technology. We intend to prepare the children, so that they can later be integrated into standard European schools. This is why our school is called, "School for Europe." Why for Europe? We wish to be integrated into Europe, while also making a contribution from our side, because there are two alternatives: Either we become a part of Europe, and we show that by this integration, these communities can work together; or else it is Europe that is going to lose and will not be fit for the future.



The Auxiliary Bishop of Sarajevo, Pero Sudar, with the Schiller Institute delegation. Left to right: Elke Fimmen, Theo Mitchell, Jozef Miklosko, Bishop Sudar, Ben Swan, Nihad Dzinovic, James Mann, Umberto Pascali. Inset: Bishop Sudar's insignia, showing the map of Bosnia united.

We now have three centers—in Sarajevo, Tuzla, and Zenica—and we intend to open three more centers. As bishop, I am responsible for all the education in the territory of Bosnia-Herzegovina. I have already spoken to and convinced the bishop of Mostar to open a school like this in Mostar; the bishop of Banja Luka will open a similar center in Bihac. And we want to be part of the educational system of the Catholic schools in Europe, and put all the schools under the same regulations.

Political, economic problems

I also have to admit that we have many difficulties with this project. The money that we did not use immediately for humanitarian aid, was not used for the churches or for anything else, but was invested in this school. Many people like this idea very much, but are not ready to financially support it.

We have much bigger problems from politics than from economics. This type of project upsets those who are against Bosnia being a place of integration. Here in Sarajevo, for example, we could not get back those properties of the Catholic Church that could be used for this project. We do not want to stop our struggle and our project; unfortunately, the opening of the three additional centers that we wanted to open this year, will probably have to be postponed until next year. For example, those who are against the idea that the Croats can go back to the city of Travnik, are also against relinquishing or returning the buildings to the Catholic Church that it intends to

use for the school. The same is true in Mostar and Banja Luka.

So it is difficult to face all these problems together. One has to send ten letters, for instance, from the little town of Travnik to President Izetbegovic; but, if there is no response after ten letters, then one loses faith that it be possible to find a solution. The problem is, that, on the one side, we are not seen very favorably by the government here, because they see us, this project, as a disturbance. But this is not the only problem. An even bigger problem comes from the Croats, themselves, insofar as they are telling us: "Why don't you call the school a Croatian school? You are traitors, you are abandoning us." Then we answer: "We want a school for living together, for working together." So there are problems from all sides. However, we are convinced that we will win; for, those who promote mankind without other attributions, shall win.

Unfortunately, out of 528,000 Catholics in the diocese, only 170,000 are left here. There was a mass emigration. Many say there is no future for Catholics here. Many say to us, that the school is an illusion. But we want to work for the good, even though we might not succeed. I think that men of good will, who are struggling for the good in our world, should learn what is going on here.

Two and a half years ago, in the middle of the most dramatic battles between Muslims and Croats, I chose this symbol as the bishop's insignia, the map of Bosnia-Herzegovina (see photo). You all see that on the walls here, are

pictures of Orthodox churches and mosques of Bosnia-Herzegovina.

The warring powers said, and still repeat: Bosnia-Herzegovina is not possible. Dayton also said that Bosnia-Herzegovina is not possible. I ask whether there are forces that might not eventually be as powerful as are the big powers, but, who, nonetheless, are committed to the survival of this concept of Bosnia-Herzegovina. The people who love this country, these smaller forces, must wake up and get into action, internationally. If Bosnia-Herzegovina is not

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We, as the Catholic Church, do not wish to be made into an instrument by anyone for this purpose. During and despite the entire war, we have extended an open hand to our brothers, Muslim and Orthodox. Unfortunately, we are fewer in numbers, but we hope to resist.

James Mann: Can you tell me about the facilities for medical care and orphanages built for the children?

Sudar: We have a social center, called St. Vincent. It was open to everybody during the entire war. We also have a home for the elderly. This is one of the biggest problems in Sarajevo and Bosnia-Herzegovina, because very many elderly and sick people have been abandoned. The children, their families, moved away, and only the elderly stayed behind. They can no longer take care of themselves, they cannot go out of their homes. We have a team of volunteers that travels around the city, from house to house, to help them. So, we wanted to open a home for the elderly, so that they would no longer be abandoned. Thirdly, the sisters want to open an orphanage as soon as possible. The only problem is financial. There is not enough financial support to do everything. And the space, buildings, are lacking.

Theo Mitchell: Prior to the war, were you working on

getting your buildings back? What are the prospects now, that a new government has been in place?

Sudar: There are two things. One is the way these things are discussed abroad, internationally. There is discussion about the Federation and that everyone has the right to come back to his home—on paper. But the reality is different. Even now, people are being compelled to leave their homes. One example is Zenica, where there was a better situation one or two years ago than now, insofar as we had obtained one building for the school. Now the building is too small, and there are two other church properties right beside it. We asked, “Give us the other building,” but the person who turned over the building in that municipality one year ago, told us: “You do not know how much criticism I received for what I did. If you did not get these buildings one or two years ago, you are not going to get them now.” Another example is in the city of Tuzla. Before the war, the church had a building, completely destroyed in the Second World War; but, the land is there. So I spoke with the mayor of Tuzla, who was here, and asked him for the land to begin to build the school. The mayor said: “I would like to do it, but the other politicians do not want to.” He was put under pressure not to do it.

Ben Swan: I appreciate your receiving us, providing us with the information that you have. Some of us will take that message back to America and spread it, because we are attempting to do some of the same things, relative to multiculturalism. We think that America must integrate all the cultures, just as you say about your country. The message that you offer, is of benefit and could be beneficial to America, both from the standpoint of learning from your experience, and understanding better your situation here. It would be great, if some delegation from the church here would be able to come to America for the purpose of meeting with groups, and help us to mobilize greater support against the opposition to what you are trying to do, maybe to help with some of the political problems. I would like to extend an invitation for you to come.

Sudar: First of all, I want to thank you very much. Maybe America is very far away. I know that it is very difficult to send soldiers here to establish peace. I would like to say that here, thanks to God, and also thanks to the American initiative, people are not being killed these days. If we want this peace agreement, which is not right and is not just, to become better and just; if we want this process to perhaps develop in this direction, I believe strongly, that the U.S. troops should stay not only one year, but longer. If the troops were to leave in December, unfortunately, my prediction is that the troops will have to come back later. We are not yet able to accept the idea of peace. When I say “we,” I mean all the people living in Bosnia. The second point is that if there is thinking about investing in this country, I pray people to first carefully look at which investments they make. What do really you want to do as priorities?