

# Being Catholic in Croatia is more 'nationality' than religion

*(Part one of a three-part series)*

Teaching in Croatia for the past six years, I have developed friendships that allow for some very interesting discoveries about life, culture and religion in that part of the world (see photo). The following article is based on conversations with friends in Croatia, Bosnia and Serbia.



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Estimated at 90 percent Catholic, Croatia is one of the most Catholic nations in the world. But being Catholic in Croatia means something entirely different. In Croatia, as in Bosnia and Serbia, being Catholic is more of a "nationality" than a religion.

Understanding this distinction helps explain why churches in Croatia, as in most of Europe, are so empty. To be Catholic in Croatia does not necessarily mean you ascribe to a certain creed. It does not mean you practice a certain faith. It does not even mean you belong to a certain religion.

Croatia, Bosnia and

Serbia have been at the forefront of many wars and the target of numerous empires such as the Roman, Venetian, Turkish, Austro-Hungarian and Russian. To discuss this history with locals, you get the impression these events are current. The effects are current. Collectively, these empires still impact national boundaries, language, food, currency, culture and religion.

Each empire brought its own "religion" with it. Before the Turks conquered much of the area in the 16th century, most people were Roman Catholic. For the Croats, the important moment in history occurred when they stopped the Turks before they could reach Zagreb, their capital. But just to the south in Bosnia, the Turkish Empire brought a new religion. At that point, in order to work any job connected with the government, or start a new business or get any political favors, you had to become a Muslim.

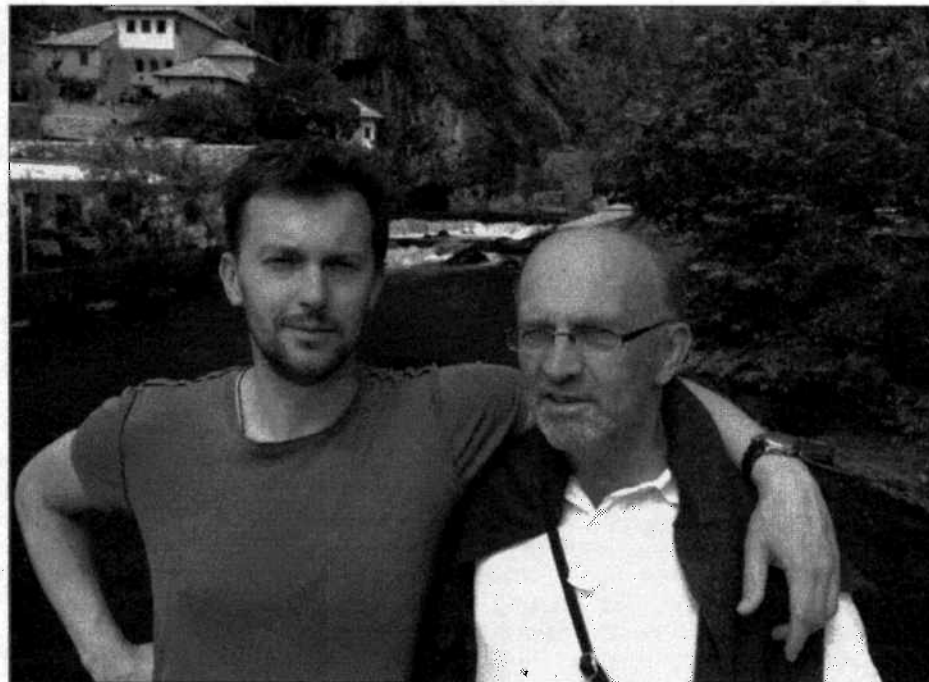
The Turkish conquest explains much of the division that remains in Bosnia to this day. But that division is not necessarily religious. During the Turkish reign, families were divided. In the same family,

## Dan Ebener

some brothers, sisters or cousins might convert to Islam while others remained Christian. They were still family to each other. They shared the same blood lines. To describe this division hundreds of years later as racial, ethnic or religious is misleading.

Fast forward to World War II when several countries, including Croatia, Bosnia and Serbia, became what was called Yugoslavia. In 1971, Josip Tito, as dictator of Yugoslavia, declared that the country had three "nationalities:" Croats (mostly Roman Catholic), Serbs (mostly Orthodox Christian) and Bosniaks (mostly Muslims). In the eyes of the locals, religion became a nationality. It had little to do with creed, faith or what we would call religion.

A philosophy professor at the college where I teach in Zagreb conveyed this story about his daughter, who asked her dad, "If we are atheists, why do I need to be confirmed Catholic?" He explained that "the only true atheist is a Catholic atheist." To him, being Catholic was a nationalist



Dan Ebener

## Rino Medic and his father Damir Medic visit a Muslim shrine in Mostar, Bosnia.

concept and to be naturalized as such, you went through the Catholic Church.

A Muslim professor agreed with this logic, explaining that he and his family have never practiced Islam. But being Muslim is a central factor in his identity. He described himself as a "Muslim atheist." He added, "I don't know the first thing about practicing

the Muslim faith but I would die for the right to be a Muslim."

Viewing "religion" in this way — as national self-identity, not a practice of faith — helps explain a lot about life, culture and religion in Croatia. It also explains why religions that profess to be about peace and love can be seen as the driving force for warfare.

In my next installment on this series, I will

describe the situation in Mostar, Bosnia, a place where Croat Catholics, Bosnian Muslims and Serbian Orthodox are trying to live in peace, 20 years after a bitter war that almost destroyed the city and the country.

*(Dan R. Ebener teaches at St. Ambrose University and serves as diocesan director of Stewardship and Parish Planning.)*

# Catholic in Croatia

(Part two of a three-part series)

Note: The following article is based on conversations with friends in Croatia, Bosnia and Serbia. Part I of this series described how the religious divides in Croatia had less to do with religious practices and more to do with national identity. This article looks at Mostar, a city of 100,000 that is historically Croat but currently a part of Bosnia.

The largest city in the Herzegovina section of what is now Bosnia, Mostar was at the forefront of what we called the Bosnian War in 1992. For three years, Croats, Bosnians and Serbs fought a bitter war over territorial divides that were usually described as religious.

Mostar provides a window in which we can view much of what is happening in this part of the world. Croat Catholics are a



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majority in their city but a minority in their country. In Mostar, Muslims are 35 percent of the population, Orthodox are 10 percent and Catholics are 55 percent. In Bosnia, the religious mix is 45 percent Muslim, 30 percent Orthodox and 25 percent Catholic.

Stumbling upon a tiny Mostar cemetery, I realized that every tombstone was marked during the same six-month period of 1992. My friends told me the cemetery was a park during the war, and that the tombs were originally dug at night by family members using silverware.

Twenty years after the Bosnian War, the signs of division are still evident in Mostar: shellacked buildings still bear the scars from the war. Many Muslims hold strictly to their side of town while Catholics do the same. Inter-religious friendships and partnerships are very awkward. Religious vandalism is common.

Dating and marrying

across religions is almost unthinkable. Yet facially, it is almost impossible to distinguish Muslims from Catholics. History teaches us that most are relatives to each other across these religious lines. Five centuries ago, when the Turks brought Islam to Bosnia, families were divided. Some converted and some remained Catholic.

But they were still brothers, sisters and cousins to each other. Distinctions cannot be made except occasionally for clothing, food or religious custom. Yet relatively few are practicing their religion. They look alike. The best way to know the "religious" identity is by last name.

Walking across the famous Stone Bridge of Mostar, I offered to take a picture for a Muslim family dressed in traditional garb. After pausing to take in the view at the very top of the bridge, the mom, dad and three children walked back to the Muslim side. Watching more closely, I noticed other people who entered from either the Catholic or the Muslim



**Dan Ebener**

## A Muslim Cemetery in Mostar, Bosnia.

side of the bridge walked to the top and then returned to the same side of the bridge. My friends said this was common. Crossing to the other side of town is unthinkable.

Croats in Bosnia identify more with Croatia than Bosnia. If you are a Croat football (soccer) player, good enough to play in the World Cup, you would play for Croatia, not Bosnia. Croat football (soccer) fans in Mostar root for Croatia, even

though they live in Bosnia. It's all about national identity, not the current national boundary lines.

Imagine fighting a bitter war waged on religious identity and now trying to live together in peace. Imagine trying to run a government with a religious mix like this. In Mostar, the mayor has a two-year term. The office has to be rotated every two years between a Bosnian Muslim and a Croat Catholic. Protections against religious discrimi-

nation have been written into many laws.

Yet the religious competition between Muslims and Catholics rages on in Mostar. In my next segment, I will describe how the divisions play out in the religious institutions. I will also provide a ray of hope for peace in the future of this part of the world.

(Dan Ebener teaches at St. Ambrose University and serves as diocesan director of Stewardship and Parish Planning.)

## Religious institutions offer a ray of hope to the future

*(This is part three of a three-part series.)*

*Note: The following article is based on conversations with friends in Croatia, Bosnia and Serbia. Part I of this series described the religious divide in Croatia. Part II focused on Mostar, a city that is historically Croat but currently a part of Bosnia. In this final segment, we will look at how the religious institutions are doing in Mostar and find a ray of hope for the future.*

Mostar sits at the intersection of past empires from the west (Roman), north (Austro-Hungarian), south

(Turkish Ottoman) and east (Russian). Each left its mark with its own customs, language, food, dress and religion. Territorial wars have often been misunderstood as religious or ethnic wars in this part of the world.

Since the Bosnia War of 1992-95, the competition between Muslims and Catholics has shifted from the battleground to the



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church grounds.

During what the locals call “the Communist period,” when Mostar was part of the former Yugoslavia, the political authorities built a Memorial Park to honor those who died in World War II. When the Catholic cathedral was rebuilt, the Communists would not allow the church tower to be higher than the Memorial Park tower.

The Communist period gave way to the Bosnian War, where Croat Catholics, Bosnian Muslims and Serbian Orthodox fought bitterly. In Mostar, it was a hometown war of neighbor against neighbor.

Now the height and number of church towers is grounds for hometown competition. Since the war, churches have built bigger church towers with bigger and louder church bells. The bell-ringing is unlike any place I have traveled. Church bells ring loudly, all over town, every 15 minutes. At 6 a.m., noon and 6 p.m., some church bells ring for 15-20 minutes, tuning into the Angelus as well as songs like, “Tis a gift to be simple.”



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**St. Francis Church Tower is highest point in Mostar, Bosnia, skyline. Old Stone Bridge is on the left.**

Local Catholics say this is in direct response to the Muslim strategy to build more, bigger and louder minarets (towers usually connected to mosques). Before the war, Mostar had three mosques. Muslim men would climb the stairs on the minarets and read the call to prayer five times per day. Since the war, Mostar has 33 mosques, some of which are free-standing minarets used

only as broadcast stations for the call to prayer, which is now transmitted electronically.

The result is a new competition for the airwaves of Mostar. The irony is that most people in Mostar, while holding tightly to their religious identity, do not practice their faith. The majority of both Muslims and Catholics are secular, not religious at all.

Nestled between buildings scarred by the Bosnian War, and the grand mountains surrounding Mostar, St. Francis Church has the highest church tower in this part of Europe. The tower was built precisely to be the highest point in Mostar. The ringing of its bells can be heard all the way up the mountain to the north and across the Old Stone Bridge to the west.

But something else was

happening at St. Francis Church. It was the activity inside the church that caught my attention. The energy I witnessed at the 6 p.m. Sunday Mass for young adults was unlike anything I have seen elsewhere in Europe — with the exception of about an hour’s drive up the road — at Medjugorje!

Young adults were singing and praying with enthusiasm, playing and swaying to contemporary church music, lining up for confession and fully participating in the liturgy. This was the greater cause for hope. The broadcasting of church bells versus the Muslim call to prayer seemed like a sideshow. This was a more genuine practice of the Catholic faith.

My hope and prayer for my friends in Mostar — Muslim, Orthodox and Catholic — is that the religious fervor of Medjugorje can catch hold. Given the bloody history of this part of the world, perhaps Our Lady, Queen of Peace can generate a ray of hope for peace.

*(Dan Ebener teaches at St. Ambrose University and serves as diocesan director of Stewardship and Parish Planning.)*