

Pope in Zagreb on mission of peace

by Klaus Fimmen

The visit of Pope John Paul II to the Croatian capital of Zagreb on Sept. 10-11, timed with the 900th anniversary of the Zagreb bishopric, had enormous meaning both in the pastoral and political senses for the people and government of this war-torn nation. In just 24 hours, the pope completed a program which will leave its traces in the history of the Balkans.

Over and over again the pope stressed the peace mission which must emanate from the Christian church. Thus, in his speech in the cathedral to priests and members of religious orders, he said: "Before you stands the heavy task of reconciling men with God and men with men. This is your most pressing duty, especially in this present, extremely difficult historical moment, for this absurd and brutal war has torn open an abyss of hatred, which can only be bridged by the Gospel. You priests, who relive and represent the sacrifice of Golgotha during the Holy Mass *in persona Christi*, are called, to be the convinced witness to Him who did not hesitate to say while dying, 'Father, forgive them!' May your people, in looking at you and especially by following your courageous example, find the strength to forgive and—where necessary—also the strength to ask for forgiveness."

All of Croatia had "pope fever" for weeks before this visit. Pictures and posters of the Holy Father went up in the store windows and on billboards with the message "*Pap je s vama*," or, "The pope is with you." Hundreds of thousands thronged the streets and gave the pope an enthusiastic reception on late Saturday afternoon, and about 1 million people (nearly one-quarter of the population of Croatia) attended the Mass celebrated Sunday morning at the Hippodrome, among them numerous refugees from the Serbian-occupied regions of Croatia and from Bosnia-Herzegovina, and also many members of non-Catholic faith communities.

Here, too, he directed an urgent plea for peace to all the peoples of the Balkans: "The present tragic divisions and tensions must not let us forget that there are many elements which bind together the peoples who are now fighting one another. It is urgent and imperative to gather together all that which unifies—and it is not a little—and thereby to open up new prospects for fraternal solidarity. Peace in the Balkans is no utopia! Yes, it is imposed on us as the perspective of historical realism!"

Rivers of unity

The pope expressed the reconciliation of peoples through images: "In these regions, which today are enduring so much suffering, faith must become a renewed force for unity and comfort, like the rivers which flow through them. I think of your River Sava, which originates in Slovenia, courses through your homeland, flows along the border between Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, and then in Serbian territory pours into the Danube, another river which joins the Croatian and the Serbian lands with other great countries of eastern, central, and western Europe. These are two rivers, which come together, just as the peoples which they join are called upon to do this. Especially the two manifestations of Christianity, the western and the eastern, which have lived together in these countries from time immemorial, must both work for this.

"It is a pathway of unity and of peace, which no one may refuse. Reason, even before faith, demands this. Already the geographical situation, which makes the countries of the Balkans into an obligatory transit route between the Near East and the central European region, demands peace. Precisely because of this, during the course of centuries flourishing commercial, financial, and economic relations developed which assured the prosperity of all. The future of the Balkan peninsula also lies along these lines. In the framework of collaboration and solidarity, many problems which today are gripping the peoples of the Balkans can be solved. The progress and the well-being of the nations of the Balkans have one and only one name: Peace!"

These last words would have reminded many listeners of a leaflet of the Schiller Institute, which was distributed that morning in large quantities. The leaflet quoted the words of Pope Paul VI's encyclical *Populorum Progressio*, "The name for peace is development," and pointed to the necessity of large-scale development projects as the prerequisite for a just peace for the region.

John Paul II's speech was interrupted over and over by applause, including when he came to speak about the courageous attitude of Cardinal Aloysius Stepinac, who was not ready to sacrifice his Christian convictions to communist atheism and who died after 15 years in prison in 1960 without regaining his freedom. Clearly, the beatification of the cardinal was being prepared, much to the annoyance of the old Serbian communists and their British comrades.

Finally the pontiff turned to the youth: "Peace is a great gift of God. In order to receive it, it is necessary to convert one's own heart and to place God in the first place in one's own life. If one rejects God or shunts Him aside, one is almost doomed to worship vain idols. One can even go so far as make one's own nation, race, or party into the object of idolatry, justifying in their name hatred, discrimination, and violence. Only God is a sure foundation for the value of life and for the inalienable dignity of every human being."