

Healing Wounds and Memories of War : Serbia Facing the Present and the Past

Declaration of Justice and Peace Europe

On the invitation of the Catholic Church of Serbia representatives of the 31 national commissions of the Conference of European Justice and Peace Commissions (Justice and Peace Europe) gathered in Belgrade for its international workshop and general assembly 26 -30 September 2008. The theme for our international workshop for this year was 'Healing Wounds and Memories of Wars: Serbia Facing the Present and the Past'. During the workshop we went out to meet with representatives of the different parties to the conflict. Our aim was to learn more about the situation here from the stories of those who have been affected. Our representatives traveled to Pristina, Kosovska Mitrovica, Hrtkovci and Vukovar where we met members of the various communities living there – Serb, Croat and Albanian – who told us of their experiences.

In reflecting on what we have learned, we must first acknowledge that the situation here is extremely complex. Despite the limited time at our disposal however, we were still able to gain some important insights into the ways in which the conflict has been experienced by the different communities living in these regions.

We saw evidence of real suffering in every community that we visited. This suffering took many forms: death and loss of loved ones, economic insecurity, the legacy of the past. A common theme in all our discussions with the victims of the conflict was the call for justice and for the truth of their situation to be recognized. Unsurprisingly, as in any post-conflict situation, one person's version of the truth contradicts another, and the calls for justice are in conflict with each other. One of the most significant challenges for the future will be to find a way of dialogue and reconciliation of these competing claims.

For us, one of the most encouraging aspects of this experience has been to hear all the victims we met, in spite of the suffering they had experienced, express a genuine longing for peace. There was also, both at community and official level, a practical recognition that reconciliation represents the only way forward. The task of building a new and reconciled future, both within Serbia itself and between Serbia and her neighbours, will present considerable challenges for all involved. However, what we have experienced over the last few days leads us to believe that there is widespread willingness to engage and participate in these processes. We have seen examples of work in this area already underway, which have effectively demonstrated the positive value of cooperation and the contribution the victims of violence can make to peace-building.

We were moved by the desire of the different communities to arrive at a situation of stable and lasting peace. There is a widespread conviction that what happened here must not be allowed to happen again. Furthermore, there is a recognition that peace, in the long-term, can only be achieved in a situation that guarantees respect and equitable justice for all.

The role of leaders, both political and in civil society, is of crucial importance here. As representatives of the Catholic Church we were particularly interested in the contribution that religious leaders can make to this process. A particularly strong message transmitted by the representatives of the various groups that we met was that this is not in itself a conflict that is religious in its origins although the different religions became involved. Indeed, our experiences of inter-religious cooperation here have been very positive. We were warmly welcomed by representatives the Islamic and Orthodox faiths, with whom we shared many fruitful discussions. One of the high points of the workshop was a round table with religious leaders from the Islamic,

Orthodox and Catholic faiths. At this round table we saw that the faith communities can be a driving force in the reconciliation process, setting the example for others to follow.

The contribution of young people, who will be the leaders of the future, must not be forgotten. Across the different regions we visited we learned that large numbers of children have been seriously affected by this conflict, for instance through loss of family members or disruption of their education. Their particular needs must be seen to and special attention must be given to their education and training. Extremely valuable peace-building work is being done through initiatives that support and bring together the children and young people from the different communities and traditions living in these areas.

Despite all the pain and suffering that we have witnessed here, the impression we take away is not one of despair, but rather of inspiring hope. The time we have spent here has been truly valuable. We have gained insights that go further than what is usually transmitted by international media. These we will communicate when we return to our home countries. We are also ready to continue to support efforts for reconciliation in this region, and to pray for them as for all the people living there.

We are grateful to our hosts who have shared their lives and their stories with us. They have allowed us to get close to them and they have taught us that hope is possible in spite of a painful past.