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Thousands of Catholics want to return

Aid to the Church in Need (04.06.2012) - In the past two months alone 800 Catholic refugee families living abroad have turned to Bishop Franjo Komarica of Banja Luka to obtain assistance for their return to Bosnia-Herzegovina. Thousands of refugees are likewise ready to come back.

Bishop Komarica, who is the chairman of the Bishops' Conference for Bosnia and Herzegovina, made this report to international Catholic pastoral charity Aid to the Church in Need (ACN).

Those willing to return expect assistance from the Church in rebuilding their houses and restoring infrastructure. "That is, in fact, the job of the government," he emphasized. However, Catholics received only a minimal fraction of the international aid.

The bishop complained about the lack of political will on the part of the Bosnian government and the international community to enable Catholics to return to Bosnia-Herzegovina.

In this context he referred to a "well-formulated strategy" aimed at eradicating the Catholic presence in the country. Individual politicians openly admitted in personal conversations, he said, that they felt Catholics had "no business being in Bosnia."

Komarica stated that he has been struggling for many years to "create a state founded on the rule of law."

The Catholic Church simply wants to have the same rights as other sections of the population and "meet its obligation to work together for a better future for the country," he said.

It is "not good for Bosnia to exclude an entire ethnic group," he added. In his view the Catholics of Croatian origin are "not guests, but the oldest ethnic group."

Close to 40 percent of the population is Islamic and around 31 percent belongs to the Serbian Orthodox Church. The rest belongs to other religious communities.

Catholics still make up around 10 percent of the population.

Of the 835,000 Catholics who lived in Bosnia-Herzegovina before the war between 1992 and 1995, only 450,000 have remained.

Discrimination against Catholics

Even 20 years after the outbreak of the war in the Balkans, there is discrimination against Catholics in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Aid to the Church in Need (01.02.2012) - Anton Maric, a priest and the Diocesan Financial Director in Banja Luka, drew attention to this in a visit to international Catholic pastoral charity Aid to the Church in Need (ACN).

Real estate that was confiscated from the Church has not been returned. In addition, in some parishes, Catholic families must wait for years to be connected to the main electricity supply, while others are given preferential treatment.

Priests also receive no medical care, even though the Vatican and Bosnia-Herzegovina have signed an accord providing for this.

According to the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 835,170 Catholics lived in Bosnia-Herzegovina before the outbreak of fighting in the former Yugoslavia.

In 2010, the number of the faithful was only 441,301.

Pastor Anton Maric explained, "In my parish in Simici, north-east of Banja Luka, there were three to four thousand Catholics in those days; today there are two hundred."

Thousands died during the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina, while the majority fled to escape the fighting.

They have not yet returned, even today, because they cannot see any future for their families.

Nuns report increased verbal abuse and discrimination in Bosnia

Nuns wearing habits are being subjected to verbal abuse in public more and more frequently in Bosnia-Herzegovina, according local Franciscan Sisters.

Aid to the Church in Need Monday (23.01.2012) - Ivanka Mihaljevic, Bosnian Provincial Superior of the Franciscan Sisters of Christ the King, made the claim during a visit to the international headquarters of Catholic pastoral charity Aid to the Church in Need (ACN) in Königstein.

The nuns now only leave the convent in pairs if at all possible, out of fear of abuse.

Everyday life is becoming increasingly difficult in general, according to Sister Ivanka, especially as more and more Muslim extremists are immigrating from Saudi Arabia and opening businesses.

The nuns often have no other choice but to buy from them, but in doing so are also subjected to discrimination and humiliations.

A recent example occurred when one of the Sisters wanted to buy bread.

“Although the loaves were in plain sight, the proprietor claimed he was out of bread,” Sister Ivanka said. “But he simply did not want to sell it to a Catholic nun.”

“Again and again, we are made to feel unwelcome, even though this is our home.”

By contrast, Sister Ivanka emphasized, native Bosnian Muslims are “peaceable,” and are often ashamed of the behavior of their extremist co-religionists who are migrating to the country.

The Franciscan Sisters of Christ the King in Sarajevo are particularly committed to promoting the peaceful coexistence of all religions. They have launched a three-year program entitled, “I extend to you my hand for peaceful coexistence.”

In this initiative, Catholics, Muslims and Serbian Orthodox Christians are jointly working to promote tolerance, non-violence and mutual respect.

This year, the Province Superior explained, the joint effort against verbal abuse tops the agenda.

“These are small steps of peace and goodwill, but we want to imbue the people with courage.”

The Bosnian Province of the Franciscan Sisters of Christ the King comprises 260 nuns, of whom 15 live in Sarajevo.
