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SPIRITUAL UNITY MAKES PEACE IN SARAJEVO

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Sarajevo, Bosnia, was the center of fierce fighting between the Croats and the Serbs in the early 1990s. Some religious leaders fueled the hate and made religion part of the problem. Now, in December 2000, I had to meet with some of these same leaders and get their cooperation for an important initiative for peace.

My mission, as part of the US European Command, was to negotiate with and invite each segment of Bosnia's religious population to send a representative to an important NATO chaplains' conference on the free exercise of religion and religious tolerance.

It was a foggy day in the old market neighborhood of Sarajevo as I walked to the site for the afternoon meeting. I was thinking, praying and listening for God's guidance. Previous efforts over the past three years to bring these groups together for discussion had been unsuccessful.

On the sidewalk, almost every few feet were the "Sarajevo roses," red painted markers where people fell wounded or slain during the bloodshed of civil war. Many of the buildings still bore the signs of heavy weapons fire. My US military guide pointed out a church steeple used for directing sniper fire. One of the men I was soon to meet with was the leader of that church.

The neighborhood's small side streets got me to thinking about what it is to be a neighbor. I remembered the question asked of Christ Jesus, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus answered with the well-known parable about the Good Samaritan. (See link below.) In this parable, Jesus defined 'neighbor' as anyone and everyone—but especially those in need.

I have often thought how much more honest the robbers who beat the man and stole his possessions were than the church officials who passed him by. The robbers were at least doing what their profession told them to do; the church officials were not. Yet the robbers merely stole the man's material goods. The others who passed him by would have robbed him of the dignity of God that resides in everyone. Then the Samaritan, as an agent of God's grace, arrived and helped the man.

It is human nature, especially when there's conflict, to dehumanize others and shout slogans that attempt to rob others of their dignity. The dignity we see in others is a recognition that the spark of God lives within them. In her landmark book, *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures*, Mary Baker Eddy writes, "One infinite God, good, unifies men and nations; constitutes the brotherhood of man; ends wars; fulfills the Scripture, 'Love thy neighbor as

thyselves'..." I made that passage my watchword that day. I was spiritually trying to see that all were neighbors and all could see the dignity of God in themselves and others.

The appointment time arrived. I kept praying with these ideas about neighbor and the power of knowing, "One infinite God, good..." The first agenda item was to invite all three representatives—one Eastern Orthodox, one Roman Catholic, and one Muslim—to attend the NATO conference. Then I made the firm statement: "Either all three of you agree to go, or none of you are invited."

The surprise on their faces told me that in all the negotiations in the past, no one had ever been that direct with them. I told them, "For this conference to be of any value, the entirety of the people of Sarajevo must be represented and all their voices heard."

Before they gave their answer, though, I asked them all to pray silently. This was viewed with some suspicion. Yet I urged, "We are all religious leaders. It is important to pray when making these types of decisions." I asked them to pray in the spirit of faithful sons of Abraham who ventured out from Ur to a distant and strange land, where he found and worshipped the one true God.

I left the room and walked the hall for a few moments. When I returned, they were all smiles! The entire demeanor of dark-suited, iconoclast bureaucrats had changed in a feeling of warm collegiality. They had come to a mutual agreement. Soon refreshments arrived, including Balkan bakery goods and other tasty treats. Each had sent one of their aides out to bring something into the meeting to celebrate.

Some months later, it was a joy to see those three at the conference. Each spoke to the assembly about the power of peace.

The world is an ever-smaller place. Let us pray and spiritually care for the neighborhoods where we find ourselves by recognizing who is our neighbor and the dignity of God that dwells within each one.

http://www.spirituality.com/tte/spirituality_article.jhtml?ElementId=%2Frepositories%2Fshcomarticle%2FOct2002%2F1034089990.xml&ElementName=Spiritual+unity+makes+peace+in+Sarajevo

Editorial note:

This is a clear example of how it is possible to bring together warring parties to begin a peaceful dialog through shared personal experiences.

These principles are discussed in greater detail in a book review in the September issue of IJHC.

Raymond G. Helmick, SJ and Rodney L Petersen (eds), *Forgiveness and Reconciliation: Religion, Public Policy, and Conflict Transformation*, Philadelphia/London: Templeton Foundation Press 2001

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