

From the interview of Msgr. Ratko Perić, Bishop of Mostar-Duvno, released to the “Crkva na kamenu” /The Church on the Rock/, monthly pastoral bulletin of the Dioceses of Mostar-Duvno and Trebinje-Mrkan, nr. 4/2006, pp. 22-24, after his “visitatio Ad Limina” from 23 to 28 February 2006.

Cnak: *What were your impressions after your first meeting with the Pope?*

Bishop Peric: - It was my first encounter with him as Pope but not the first with Joseph Ratzinger who previously was the Cardinal Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. There were many previous such encounters, especially alongside Bishop Žanić regarding the problems which are still burdening this diocese. One of the Prelates of the Pontifical Anti-Chamber or Assistants for the Pope’s private audiences is our priest Msgr. Petar Rajič, whose parents are originally from Doljani, the parish of Dračevo, in the diocese of Trebinje-Mrkan. He guides visitors through the entire protocol: entry, greeting, photographs, conclusion and departure. Each bishop is given about 15 minutes for his personal encounter. I personally handed over to the Holy Father a written “pro memoria” on a single page which contained 3 joyful and 3 less joyful to sad events and occurrences. He read the original text and referred to certain points by asking questions and making comments as well.

Cnak: *What did you mention amongst the joyful events?*

Bishop: The joyful events are *firstly* the pastoral and liturgical life in the dioceses of Herzegovina, especially the participation in Holy Mass, sacramental Confession and Holy Communion, particularly amongst young people. Though we are sinners we certainly do repent!

*Secondly*, the number of those who participate in catechism classes in schools and parishes. Catechism is taught in schools by 45 Diocesan priests, 53 Franciscan priests, 53 religious sisters and 58 lay people, which results in an impressive number of over 200 catechism teachers for about 30,000 pupils.

*Thirdly*, diocesan and both male and female religious vocations. There are 105 Diocesan priests in our dioceses, of which 30 are in service outside Herzegovina. There are also about 115 religious priests and 160 religious sisters within the territory of the dioceses. For the time being we are not experiencing a lack of personnel for our ecclesiastical assignments, offices or parish duties. We also have some candidates (15 Diocesan and 20 Franciscan) in preparation (certainly not the numbers we had in the past) but for the time being and the near future we need not worry.

*Fourthly*, restructuring and construction of new church buildings. Assistance received from our benefactors both locally and abroad creates true joy and gratitude. One could also see joy on the Pope’s face for this flourishing Church.

Cnak: *And what did you mention amongst the less joyful events?*

Bishop: Here too, there were a few points to mention. Since we are going through many tribulations, our crosses are flourishing as well. First of all we still have the painful Herzegovinian affair, though diminished compared to the past situation. I mentioned to the Holy Father, the Secretariat of State and the Congregations (for Bishops, for the

Clergy, for the Evangelization of Peoples, for Catholic Education...) that we have three categories of "Fratres minores": the first are those valid, legal, regular and cooperative religious who have the full consent and canonical faculties in order to serve pastorally in the territory of the Diocese of Mostar-Duvno. Thank God, over ninety fall into this category. The second category is that group which refused to sign the "Declaration of obedience" which was written up by the General Curia of the Franciscan OFM (Ordo Fratrum Minorum) in Rome and the Diocesan Chancery of Mostar, and approved of by the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples. There are 25 within the territory of Herzegovina who fall into this category and they do not have the faculties to confess nor teach, due to their own fault and responsibility. We hope that they will follow the example of the majority of their religious brothers and sign the Declaration. The third category corresponds to nine members who are not only disobedient, but who have also been expelled from the Franciscan Order and suspended from all liturgical activities, through their own fault and responsibility. They behave though, as if nothing has happened and have usurped five parishes and continue to create havoc and ecclesiastical chaos in some other parishes as well. Along with the adherents they have gathered for themselves, they have created a schism, a division, which is not so much a schism of intellectual as it is of an affective nature. These faithful for instance, do not accept "Don (father) Luke" but only "Fra Luke", no matter how much the General of the Franciscan Order declares that this Fra Luke is no longer a Catholic Franciscan and despite the fact that he has been expelled from the Order due to his obstinate disobedience and schismatic attitude towards the Pope, the General Curia of the Order and the local Church. Whatever these nine do is done illegally or against the Church, and therefore the sacraments of confession, confirmation and marriage they administer are invalid. All the Church documents they issue are illegal and invalid, since they are not authorized to do so. They have even established their own association, through which they aim to pressure those responsible in the Church to act according to their disobedience and schism.

*Cnak: How did they respond in the Vatican? How can one solve this crisis? There is talk of an Accord between the Holy See and Bosnia-Herzegovina. Will such an Accord help towards resolving these anomalies?*

Bishop: We believe that this anomaly will not last forever. A very big step towards resolving this has been the decisiveness of both the General and Provincial OFM Curias to publicly and declaratively "separate" themselves from these priests, who have been expelled from the Order, who they do not consider their members any more, nor belonging to the Order in any way, despite the fact that they wear a Franciscan habit and proclaim their adherence to the Franciscan movement, while taking advantage of usurped parish churches and church registers. The Law on liberty of religion and the juridical status of the Church and religious communities, as well as the future Accord with the Holy See, will certainly help in this matter, since nobody wants the living organism of the Church to be eaten away by a virus that should be healed and eliminated.

Cnak: *Some newspapers have written that this Pope visited Medjugorje incognito while he was a Cardinal and that he is preparing to recognize Medjugorje as a shrine, etc. Did you touch upon this topic?*

We did and I wrote to and spoke with the Holy Father on it. He only laughed surprisingly. Regarding the events of Medjugorje our position is well known: not a single proof exists that these events concern supernatural apparitions and revelations. Therefore from the Church's perspective no pilgrimages are allowed which would attribute any authenticity to these alleged apparitions. The Holy Father told me: we at the Congregation always asked ourselves how can any believer accept as authentic, apparitions that occur every day and for so many years? Are they still occurring every day? I responded: Every day, Holy Father, to one of them in Boston, to another near Milano and still another in Krehin Gradac (Herzegovina), and everything is done under the protocol of "apparitions of Medjugorje". Up till now there have been about 35,000 "apparitions" and there is no end in sight!

The Pope then continued: the previous Bishops' Conference of the former Yugoslavia issued a statement of "non constat de supernaturalitate" (though the BCY did not use this specific formula, still the phrase "According to investigations made thus far, it cannot be affirmed that these events concern supernatural apparitions or revelations", corresponds to the traditional formula in these matters). Has the current Bishops' Conference of Bosnia-Herzegovina or the Croatian Bishops' Conference reconfirmed the previous declaration?

I replied: There has been no joint reconfirmation, but each individual bishop when speaking on this issue refers to the Declaration. I added that I was sent to Mostar in 1992 and that I have been following the events from the beginning and that from the last declaration of the Bishops in 1991 up till now, nothing significant has changed, nothing new has happened, nor have any new elements occurred which would change the meaning of the events. In my opinion, from the numerous local facts, it is evident that these events can be defined not only by "non constat de supernaturalitate" ie: it is not certain that these events concern supernatural apparitions, but also by "constat de non supernaturalitate" ie: it is certain that these events do not concern supernatural apparitions. The numerous absurd messages, insincerities, falsehoods and disobedience associated with the events and "apparitions" of Medjugorje from the very outset, all disprove any claims of authenticity. Much pressure through appeals has been made to force the recognition of the authenticity of private revelations, yet not through convincing arguments based upon the truth, but through the self-praise of personal conversions and by statements such as one "feels good". How can this ever be taken as proof of the authenticity of apparitions?

Finally the Holy Father said: we at the Congregation felt that priests should be of service to those faithful who seek Confession and Holy Communion, "leaving out the question of the authenticity of the apparitions".

At the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, they are particularly concerned about the schism in our local Church. A local group of ex-Franciscans are presenting themselves as true Franciscans, misleading the faithful, instructing them in an un-ecclesiastical spirit, invalidly offering them the sacraments, and destroying the unity of teaching, sacraments and governance. And all of this serves towards a struggle for their

own rights against the generally acclaimed rights of the Church. It was suggested at the Congregation that the local bishop follow the events in Medjugorje and send in reports on occasion as has been done thus far. From my encounter, I had the impression that these “private apparitions” are considered a truly private matter and private business to merit greater consideration on the part of the Holy See, as desired by the persistent petitioners and sensational journalists.