

December 19, 1997

His Eminence
Franjo Cardinal Kuharic
Archbishop of Zagreb
Nadbispupski Duhovni Stol
Kaptol 31, p.p. 553
10000 Zagreb, CROATIA

Your Eminence,

Christ's Peace!

As we celebrate this year the birth of Christ, the Prince of Peace, the war, only partially quieted, approaches a new defining moment as, on January 15th, Eastern Slavonia returns from Serbian control to that of Croatia.

I know how terribly your people suffered as, throughout the years of tragedy for Croats and Bosnians, Serbian forces pursued the policy of "ethnic cleansing." Many of us hoped, from the time the tide of war changed in 1995, that Catholic Croatia would not simply repeat that cruel behavior, turning it now against the Serbian population of Western Slavonia and the Krajina. But that is what was done: the Serbs whose ancestors had long lived in those areas were driven out just as their forces had earlier done to Croats. An opportunity for the Catholics of Croatia to make it safe for their ethnic Serbian neighbors to live with them in peace was lost.

Now, as the date for the return of Eastern Slavonia comes near, Serbs, both those whose ancestors have lived for many generations in this part of Croatia, and those who were planted there as colonists after 1991, flee for their lives from Croatian vengeance. It would still change the entire climate of this conflict, making peace among all three major population groups, Serbs, Croats and Muslims, far more possible, if Croatia's Catholics now turned, in the spirit of Christ, to forgiveness and reconciliation, becoming protectors of their Serbian neighbors. The Orthodox Christians of Serbia and the Muslims of Bosnia might well respond in kind.

I fervently beg Your Eminence, and your colleagues of the Catholic hierarchy and clergy of Croatia, to make this your appeal at Christmas. I have written in like manner to His Holiness, Pope John Paul II, as I did in August 1995 to Cardinal Sodano. Every blessing of Christmas be with Your Eminence and all your much-persecuted people.

In Christ,

Raymond G. Helmick, S.J.