

December 19, 1997

His Holiness
Pope John Paul II
Città del Vaticano
Rome, ITALY

Most Holy Father,

Christ's Peace!

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

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 a response of lived Christian faith by the Catholics of Croatia, making 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, reconciliation, and became protectors of their Serbian neighbors. The Orthodox Christians of Serbia and the Muslims of Bosnia might well respond in kind.

I reverently beg Your Holiness to make this your appeal at Christmas. I will write in like manner to Cardinal Kuharic, as I did in August 1995 to Cardinal Sodano. Every blessing of Christmas be with Your Holiness and all the Church committed to your care.

In Christ,

Raymond G. Helmick, S.J.