

Interfaith Choir Builds 'Spiritual Bridges' to Heal Divisions of War

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SARAJEVO, Bosnia-Herzegovina --The 50-plus voices of the choir billowed through the low-ceilinged rehearsal room. Song sheets in Serbian Cyrillic lettering guided them through two traditional Serbian Orthodox songs as they prepared for a Jan. 9 concert with a choir from Belgrade to mark Orthodox Christmas and the 100th anniversary of a Serbian cultural society.

But first, the group took time after rehearsal to celebrate another holiday—the end of Islam's Ramadan.

In Bosnia, just seven years after a war in which leaders from three major ethnic groups and religions pitted their people against each other, this kind of juxtaposition is still mind-bending. More than 230,000 people died, including about 10,000 in Sarajevo while it was under siege by Bosnian Serbs, armed by Belgrade. Most of the institutions that brought people of different religious groups together before the war—workplaces, schools, neighborhoods—were destroyed or divided.

But this interreligious choir, called Pontanima—Latin for “spiritual bridge”—has set as its mission the task of healing such divisions. A project of the nonprofit organization Face to Face, the choir began in spring 1996 in St. Anthony's Catholic Church in Sarajevo and soon branched out, one religion at a time.

Today, it takes in music from Bosnia's four historically significant faiths—Orthodoxy, Catholicism, Islam and Judaism. Its membership is a mix of religions and ethnic groups.

“What we do here is encourage people that it is an advantage to communicate; that it doesn't mean we lose our identity but that we all win. We have a new mirror,” said Ivo Markovic, the Franciscan friar who started the choir with professional conductor Josip Katavic.

The choir has performed throughout Bosnia as well as in neighboring Croatia and Western Europe. In April 2000, Pontanima toured the United States.

“Given the myriad ways in which religion has been divisive in Bosnia, I think they have a rather unique way of highlighting some of the positives in these different religions and affirming that these religions can acknowledge each other,” said Randy Puljek-Shank, regional representative for southeastern Europe of the Mennonites' relief and development agency, which provides an American volunteer to work with Face to Face. “Peace-building happens by developing relationships.”

The choir is among many projects in Bosnia that brave the rough waters of post-war reconciliation. As such, the choir's evolution hasn't always been welcomed.

The official Christian and Muslim hierarchies, whose relations are icy despite their membership in an interreligious council, have declined to conduct joint projects with Pontanima or to invite the group to perform. Even the founding church's own gift shop rarely stocks their CDs.

So the choir goes around them—to ethnically based but progressive cultural societies, to individual churches or to other organizations and individuals.

Some people who lost family, friends and their homes during the war think singing the songs of “the other” religion equals honoring a group responsible for their losses, said Mato Covkic, vicar general of the Catholic Archdiocese of Sarajevo and a representative of Sarajevo Archbishop Cardinal Vinko Puljic at interreligious meetings. Others are offended that someone from another religion would sing “their” songs, he said.

“This is a pioneering project, and as with any pioneering moment, it has its supporters and detractors,” Covkic said.

The 52-year-old Markovic isn't afraid to be an idea maverick. A Franciscan friar born in a village in central Bosnia, he lost his father during the war and his mother just returned to her home this summer. But he scolds his hometown parish about its ethnically divided public schools and he rails about what he sees as the corruption of the mainstream religious institutions.

In a brief written history of the choir, Markovic recounts his return to Sarajevo after the war.

“I had returned from exile in Zagreb with faith in the possibility of healing and reconciling devastated Bosnia,” he wrote. “Sarajevo was wounded and sad, with many scars; homes were destroyed, streets were dirty and pockmarked by mortar shells, nights were dark, people were worn out, unhappy, mistrustful, walking slowly and bent over.”

But in addition to his more altruistic motivations, the idea for the choir grew as much from a common practical problem—a shortage of people with the best skills and talents because so many had fled Bosnia. Conductor Katavic, whose day job is assistant conductor of the bare-bones Sarajevo Opera, asked Markovic whether they could add non-Catholics.

“Together, we who are different could sing the songs that belong to all of us,” Markovic wrote.

At the beginning, the most they managed was to create a program of songs that was more generically Christian than nationalist Croat. The choir then ventured into Serbian Orthodox music because its Christian roots were more familiar. Then came Judaism and finally Islam, the most difficult adaptation because of its different approach to the role of words and music in worship.

Each addition strained the convictions of the choir members as they dealt with the idea of singing the songs of their former enemies' religions.

But the mix of traditions isn't such a departure for most members of the choir, who range in age from their late teens to their 60s. Before the war, most Yugoslavs understood that all four religions believe in the same God and only the way they practiced that faith differed, Markovic said. “In our experience of faith, we are very close,” he added.

Choirs were mixed, people of different ethnicities worked and went to school together and most ordinary people paid little attention to ethnicity, choir members say.

“The wars in the former Yugoslavia had more to do with party elites in all the republics seizing power and privatizing industries than it did with religion or ethnicity,” said Jacques Paul Klein, the United Nations' special representative to Bosnia-Herzegovina. Pontanima performed in a special concert Klein's office organized for a recent visit to Sarajevo by U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan.

Whether the choir's message of reconciliation will prevail over the din of division is unclear. Choir member Nada Bojanic, a 60-year-old university professor of Arabic, is angry at politicians she feels are blocking progress and unification.

“We traveled all over Bosnia-Herzegovina and sometimes I was afraid whether people would want to listen to us,” she said. “But ordinary people listened to us very carefully.”