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80th anniversary

Široki Brijeg, the blood of Franciscan martyrs shaped Herzegovina's identity

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Guido Villa



Široki Brijeg, Mostar-Čekrk, Mostarski Gradac, Ljubuški, Zagvozd, Kočerin, Izbično, Čitluk, Čapljina, Macelj. These are just some of the stations of the so called 'Way of the Cross' where numerous members of the Franciscan Order of the Herzegovinian Province suffered martyrdom exactly eighty years ago, in February 1945.

Twelve friars of the Franciscan monastery of Široki Brijeg were slaughtered on 7 February, 1945, by soldiers of the infamous Eleventh Dalmatian Brigade of Tito's Army. The next day, nine more monks were captured, who, together with almost a hundred civilians, had taken refuge in the Franciscan hydroelectric power station on the Lištica River, not far from the monastery. These friars suffered no better fate than their brothers; they were taken to Dalmatia and slaughtered at unknown places.

On the night of 6-7 February, in Mostarski Gradac, five friars, professors and students of the Franciscan seminary, who had taken refuge in this mountain parish in order to continue their theological studies away from the bombing and fighting on the plain,

were executed for no apparent reason.

A week later, on 14 February 1945, it was the turn of seven more friars, including the provincial, Leo Petrović, of Mostar. After the conquest of Mostar, the partisans took them from the convent, chained them up and took them to the village of Čekrk, where they were stripped of their Franciscan habit, killed and their lifeless bodies thrown into the Neretva. At the same time other massacres of friars were taking place in Ljubuški, Izbično, Čitluk, Čapljina, Zagvozd and Vrgorac.

In May, two friars were killed in the parish house in Kočerin, while three others lost their lives in distant Macelj, not far from Slovenia and Austria, returning from Bleiburg along [the Croatian Way of the Cross](#). At the end of the war, the friars of the Franciscan Province mourned the death of sixty-six friars.

Even after the war, the 'Way of the Cross' continued for the remaining friars.

The communist regime organised mock trials and, in the absence of any serious evidence of guilt, [91 friars were sentenced to prison](#), often to hard labour, for a total of 348 years, of which 225 were served. In the 1950s, the House of Penitentiary in Zenica was at one time the largest Franciscan community in Herzegovina, since about [30 friars were imprisoned there](#) at the same time - a real collective persecution.

[According to Fr Anto Baković](#), the total number of victims was 663, including four bishops, 506 priests, 50 major seminarians, 38 minor seminarians, 17 lay people, 31 nuns and 17 priests who died of typhus as a result of their imprisonment.

The plan to eliminate the Catholic Church from Tito's Yugoslavia by persecuting the shepherds was particularly virulent in Herzegovina, the homeland of Poglavnik (Duce) Ante Pavelić and three ministers of the government of the Independent State of Croatia. A region that the Communists considered to be the original nucleus of Croatian "nationalism" and "chauvinism" that would give rise to the Ustashi movement, and for which the Franciscans were considered to be the main culprits, since they enjoyed religious and cultural hegemony in that region.

Beyond the ideological ravings typical of communist ideology, the attack on the Franciscans was in fact intended to condemn and destroy Catholicism itself, since the Franciscans were loyal both to the Catholic faith and to the Holy See and represented an obstacle to the creation of a 'national' Catholic Church, detached from Rome and susceptible to the interests of the regime.

In order to eradicate the Catholic faith, identity and culture from the population of

Herzegovina, it was necessary to destroy the producers of this culture, the Franciscans, and the Catholic culture itself that revolved around them. The centre of influence was Široki Brijeg, near Medjugorje, its Franciscan monastery and college.

In the specific context of western Herzegovina, the Franciscans of Široki Brijeg were therefore an irreplaceable cultural hegemony. In order for other pretenders to succeed in this area, it was necessary to provoke the disruption of the status quo and the elimination, including the physical elimination, of rivals - with disastrous results, for although the communists took possession of the college facilities, they were never able to rebuild it and restore its former cultural splendour.

Tito's partisans, on the other hand, wanted to kill the people right to their souls, to make them culturally backward and thus receptive to their empty slogans, and to this end, in addition to killing the monks, they carried out a veritable attack to destroy the prevailing culture. In Široki Brijeg, the partisans destroyed everything they could find, not only in the monastery and the church - which they turned into horse stables temporarily - but also in the college, where they destroyed the entire library, the laboratories and the extremely rich museum.

Founded in 1889 and becoming a public school in 1918, just before the outbreak of the Second World War, the Franciscan College had about four hundred pupils, two thirds of whom were the sons of farmers, external pupils who were not preparing for priestly or religious life. The idea of the Franciscans was to educate and train not only their own pupils but also the peasants' children, to free them from ignorance and make them producers of culture and conscious citizens of the society in which they lived, to educate them socially so that they would no longer be victims of the tyranny of the time.

The teaching staff of the college, who were all Franciscans, were of a very high cultural level - as many as fifteen of the professors had a doctorate in their subject. Apart from their love for their Croatian homeland, the Franciscans, with a few rare exceptions, were anything but inclined towards the Ustashi ideology; on the contrary, having almost all been educated abroad, they preferred the democratic forms of government typical of Western countries.

As Fr. Andrija Nikić writes in *Na stopama pobijenih*, a bulletin of the postulancy for the beatification of the Servant of God Fr. Leo Petrović and sixty-five companions, the communist authorities closed all the educational institutions of the Franciscan Order and forbade their reopening: the college in Široki Brijeg, the novitiate in Humac and the Franciscan seminary in Mostar. The regime occupied all or most of the Franciscan monasteries in Herzegovina, numerous residences and parish houses, and obstructed

even the simplest construction work on the surviving Franciscan buildings, which needed to be extended and renovated. The regime had also prepared a decree for the abolition of the Franciscan Province of Herzegovina, and the Franciscans were ordered to completely abandon the central monastery in Mostar. The Province survived only because the Provincial, Br. Mile Leko, one day went to Belgrade to see Tito, in the same spirit, the Brother told the dictator, that the Friars, at the time of the Turkish occupation, went directly to the Sultan to resolve the most burning issues. In the end, Tito gave in and the province was saved.

But, the blood of the Franciscan martyrs was the seed of new vocations, even in an environment that remained very hostile to the Catholic faith and the Seraphic Order - in 1971 the Province had 25 new novices and a total of 271 members.

And above all, thirty-six years later, at a time when most of the murderers and persecutors of the Franciscans of the war years were still alive, in the land of Herzegovina, soaked in the blood of so many Franciscan martyrs, in the Franciscan parish of Medjugorje "between the mountains", that "dawn of peace" was born which, according to God's plan, should bring healing, conversion and salvation to the whole world.

Indeed, it is a fundamental spiritual principle of the Catholic faith that the Cross is always an anticipator of graces and that there is no grace that is not prepared first by the Cross.

An on-going ocean of grace irradiating from Medjugorje that has endured forty-four years could only have been prepared by the offering of the very heavy cross of persecution that the Franciscans and the people of Herzegovina have suffered since 1945.