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Neven Duvnjak

Institute of Social Sciences Ivo Pilar - Center Split (Croatia)

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ATTITUDES OF CROATIAN CITIZENS TOWARDS THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH IN THE PUBLIC AND POLITICAL LIFE

by Neven Duvnjak

Neven Duvnjak (magister of science) is Assistant at the Institute of Social Sciences Ivo Pilar - Center Split (Croatia). Currently he is working on the project "Religious Communities in Croatia and its Role in Integrative Processes". He published several articles on sociology of religion in books and journals in Croatia, Poland, and USA. Mr. Duvnjak is a member of World Conference on Religion and Peace - Europe (Croatian Chapter), and Association for Religious Liberties in Croatia. His professional interests are Sociology of Religion, Religious Freedom and Human Rights, Religious Communities and Social Justice, Inter-religious relations, and Relations between Church and State.

1. Introduction

Croatia has been involved in comprehensive political and social changes in the last decade, since it gained its independence in 1991. Particularly grave consequences on all segments of social life were left by the war that had lasted almost five full years with enormous human and material sacrifices. The war had caused forced migrations of a large number of persons, thus leaving traces on the ethnic and confessional picture of Croatia. Parallel to war events there was (and still is) a process of transition, moving from a socialist to a modern democratic capitalist society. This process in itself is difficult, uncertain and traumatic for numerous layers of the population, as was witnessed in almost all other post-communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe. On one side, the war created numerous victims (invalids, traumatised people, destroyed families) and refugees, while on the other hand, the transition brought a great number of unemployed persons from bankrupt companies, a dramatic increase of the retired corpus and numerous young and educated persons with almost no chance of finding a job.

The main target of the paper is to show what the citizens think of the role of the Catholic Church in society as the largest and best-organized religious community in

Croatia.¹ I will not engage in analysis of the religious life of citizens here, but I will rather look for their attitudes, opinions and their "grading" of the role the Catholic Church plays in the public life of the country. I will consider several critical problems, for example those relating to the political institutions, economy, social welfare, education and upbringing.

2. The Relationship of the Catholic Church and the Croatian State after the Democratic Changes in 1990

Before analysing the empirical data, I will reflect upon the position of the Church in the society and its relationship with the state in the recent past. During the period of socialism, which lasted from 1945 to 1990, and during which Croatia was part of the Yugoslav Federation, the Catholic Church, like other religious communities, was marginalized and exposed to various pressures by the ruling Communist Party. In such conditions, the Catholic Church could not freely promote its learning and Christian values in public, but instead remained closed within church institutions and within the circle of its believers, especially those practising their religion. Regardless of the gradual improvement of the position of religious communities in the Yugoslav society (especially during the 1980s), the relationship with the authorities remained tense, sometimes hostile, but always with mutual mistrust present. It is important to remember that the Catholic Church had a special role in Croatian history. For centuries it took care of the religious and spiritual needs of the people and consistently fought for the preservation of the national awareness and the Croatian language. This became particularly evident during the socialist period, when the Church managed to resist the pressures of the authorities and remained tightly connected to the believers, providing sanctuary for the majority of those who did not agree with the undemocratic single-party regime.

The Catholic Church delightedly embraced the democratic changes that swept the whole of Central and Eastern Europe at the end of the 1980s. It strongly supported the Croatian step towards democracy, the introduction of a multi-party system, conducting

¹ According to the last population count from 1991 there were 76.6% Roman Catholics in Croatia, while new polls show that in the last ten years the Roman Catholic Church has over 80%.

free elections, and especially the struggle for the national independence of Croatia (Duvnjak, 2000:130). In other words, it was this religious and national value that became the basic fundamental value of changes in the majority of European post-communist countries including -- in a specific way -- Croatia as well (Cifrić, 2000:228).

In the early 1990s the Catholic Church almost unconditionally supported the authorities elected at the first free election². During that period, especially before the beginning of the Croatian War of Independence, it appeared as if an alliance of throne and altar was achieved and that there was an idyllic relationship of mutual support present.³ The war brought on new temptations and this is the period during which the Church spared no effort in supporting the liberation of the country from aggression and achieving a righteous peace. It continued promoting Christian and general human values (speaking against hate, pleading for forgiveness, respecting human rights etc.), but failed to speak out clearly and unquestionably and point out the negative things that appeared between 1991 and 1995 in the Croatian society. I am referring to certain tragic events that occurred during the War for Independence (civilian victims, destruction of private property etc.), as well as great injustice that followed the process of privatization of ownership that went on during the war and to a great degree proceeded outside the control and influence of the public.⁴ In such circumstances, the public expected that the Catholic Church, in accordance with the instruction of Catholic social teaching, would speak out more loudly and more courageously about the injustices and the negative things in Croatian society.

Still, the long expected reaction occurred with the arrival of the new Zagreb

² At the first multiple-party elections the victory was taken by the Croatian Democratic Community (Hrvatska demokratska zajednica), which had the majority vote in the Parliament and which formed a single-party government.

³ The major attributes of such a state in Croatia were this: the Church became the major spiritual support for the fighters of the national move and the symbol of the national identity; the identification of the national and the religious; an increase of manifested religiousness. See Cifrić, Ivan (2000) Percepcija nekih odnosa crkve i države i uloge crkve i religije u društvu. *Sociologija sela* (3)1-2:229.

⁴ The Croatian model of privatization had its positive sides too, but the fact remains that it allowed for a part of the national wealth to change hands and become the property of a few politically suitable tycoons, the ruin of a great number of companies, a dramatic increase of unemployment, the retired and socially threatened parts of the population

Archbishop Josip Bozanić which -- to a certain degree -- marks a new era in the relationship between the Catholic Church and the state. In his first Christmas message in 1996, the archbishop Bozanić stated that the sudden changes in the political and civil system enabled quick enrichment and a greater and greater impoverishment of numerous citizens. He claimed that the sin of the structures is at present made possible by laws and regulations not aimed at the welfare of person and the community. With this statement, but with his later actions as well, archbishop Bozanić clearly indicated the intent of the Church to distance itself from the authorities so that it could -- according to the principles of the free Church in a free state -- independently, freely, and from a necessary distance, fulfil its spiritual and worldly tasks.

3. Attitudes and Opinions of Croatian Citizens about the Role of the Catholic Church in the Public Life of Croatia

In the central part of my paper I am using the results of the latest socio-religious research conducted in Croatia towards the end of the 1990s. The first survey was done on a general sample of the Croatian citizens, and the second was done in the City of Zagreb and Zagreb County.

3.1 The Place and the Role of the Catholic Church in the Public Life of Croatia

From the research conducted at the end of 1997 and the beginning of 1998 for the whole area of Croatia on a sample of 1245 respondents⁵ I will extract data that speaks of the faith the Croat citizens have in several institutions. Of a total of 22 offered institutions, it is interesting to find that the greatest trust is given to the Catholic Church (44.3% respondents have "great faith", 40.8% have "sufficient faith"). This points to the fact that the Church, during a crisis and war social conditions managed to preserve a high respect in the society and uphold a moral credibility. All things considered, the Catholic Church has the trust of as much as 85.1% of the citizens of Croatia. For illustration purposes, the

⁵ Socio-religious survey "Faith and Morals in Croatia" conducted at the initiative of the Croatian Catholic Radio, in co-operation with the Catholic Theological faculty in Zagreb and other scientific institutions. Partial results were published in *Bogoslovska smotra* (1998), (68)4:461-700.

second place is held by the army (great faith -- 36.6% citizens), and the third position goes to schools (great faith -- 31.1% citizens). A far more unfavourable position went to two key state institutions: the Government as the executive power and the Parliament as the legislative authority. The Government holds the 11th place with great faith given to it by 13.1% respondents, while the Parliament holds the 16th place with only 7.5% citizens giving it great faith). Therefore, the citizens have little faith in two key levers of state power, which is indicative.

In the second survey conducted in 1999 on a sample of 705 adult respondents in the City of Zagreb and the Zagreb County, several problems were examined that directly or indirectly speak of the role of the Church in public life.⁶ The first problem I want to emphasize relates to the opinion of respondents concerning the relation between the Church and the state, or to be more precise, the possible mutual misuse of the Church and the state. The results are significant: 38.2% respondents think that the Church does not misuse politics, but only 17.9% thinks that the politicians do not misuse the Church. In other words, the common opinion is that it is the politicians who are trying to use the Church for its purposes. Every fifth respondent (20.4%) thinks that there are very many cases of abuse of the Church by politics, while 28.7% thinks that there is "quite a lot" of that. Therefore, almost half of the respondents think that politicians abuse the Church, which is unfavorable for both politics and the Church (Cifrić, 2000:240-241).

Beside this problem, the respondents from the Capital of Croatia and the Zagreb County graded the current and the desired influence of the Church in various aspects of social life: politics, economy, social welfare, education, and upbringing.

3.2 Church and Politics

As far as politics are concerned, an above-average majority of the respondents (59.7%) think that the influence of the Church is non-existent and small, 26.4% believe

⁶ The research "Religious changes and values in the Croatian society" was conducted by the Institute for Social Research in Zagreb and associates. The results used in my paper were published as an attachment in the article: Cifrić, Ivan. Percepcija nekih odnosa crkve i države i uloge crkve i religije u društvu, pages 227-268.

it is average, while minority of respondents (12.6%) claimed that the influence of the Church in politics is great. On the other hand, the majority of believers (41.1%) want the influence to remain as it is now, but there is a great number of those who want this influence to be reduced (38.4%). The number of citizens who want the political influence of the Church to increase is smallest (19.4%). Therefore, opinions about the role of the Church in politics are rather divided and uneven, the reason for this probably lay in the complex situation that Croatia was in, especially during the war. It appears that the citizens were prepared to tolerate the political engagement of the Church in the dramatic and uncertain historic circumstances. Yet, parallel to the stabilization of the political and social life, there is an appearance of the wish of the citizens for the reduction of influence of the Catholic Church on politics in Croatian society.

3.3 Church, Economy and Social Welfare

The greatest number of respondents thinks that the influence of the Church in the economy is non-existent and small (69.6%) or medium (23.0%). In this case the majority of citizens think that it should remain the same as now (49.1%), but -- as opposed to politics -- there is a significant number of those who think that the influence of the Church in the economy should increase (35.3%). Such results are not unexpected: as I mentioned earlier there is a difficult situation in the economy of Croatia and numerous cases of immoral and criminal activities that had occurred in the process of privatization. It is therefore hardly surprising to find significant number of citizens who wish the Church would take a more active role in the economy -- probably as a moral authority and an ethical remedy -- because the economy (in a narrow sense) is not a "natural" area of Church engagement with high priority. On the other hand, Catholic social teaching places great value on the right of a man to work, to get a fair pay, it supports the organization of unions, the participation of workers in the management of companies, and opposes the exploitation of workers, and yet these are the questions most closely tied to the economy so that the Church in Croatia should speak publicly about them more.

Opinions are slightly different when the Church and social welfare are concerned.

As I mentioned earlier, the war and process of transition caused great social problems such as refugees, disabled persons, and other victims of the war, a great number of unemployed and retired persons with small pensions, as well as numerous other socially threatened categories of population.⁷ Almost an equal number of citizens, as in the earlier case, think that the influence of the Church in the area of social welfare is non-existent and small (37.3%) or medium (35.9%). At the same time a great number of those who would like this influence to be greater in the future (64.8%) was recorded. This is a clear indication that the public expects much more from the Church in the area of social welfare, which fully corresponds to the social teaching of the Church, but with the tasks that are tightly connected to the social care for the threatened layers of the population as is done in more developed countries of West Europe and North America. Although during the war the Church was well organized and had provided (mainly through *Caritas*) great material aid to impoverished citizens and victims of the war, today, in peacetime, it has not managed to promote and organize contemporary social programs. Indeed, it appears that the Church is not capable of fulfilling its contemporary spiritual and social roles (Grubišić, 1998). There are certain activities and initiatives in existence,⁸ but they are insufficient and are not in accord with the actual needs and expectations of citizens. It is this care for the poor, the threatened and needy that should be the major task of the worldly mission of the Church in every society, therefore in the Croatian society as well, as is quoted in numerous encyclical letters and other Church documents and Papal speeches.

3.4 Church, Education and Upbringing

The respondents were of the opinion that the influence of the Church in education

⁷ The social picture of Croatia is as follows: the war resulted in 9,207 casualties and 28,309 wounded. Data on unemployment in August 2000 quote 349,871 unemployed persons with a tendency towards growth, there are 1.7 employees to one retired person, and this unfavourable relationship increases from day to day. 1:1 (Duvnjak, 2000:134).

⁸ The Church was able to organize public kitchens in numerous cities and settlements that hand out free meals to socially threatened citizens, it successfully gathers and distributes clothing and footwear, and so forth.

till now was medium (43.7%) or non-existent and small (33.6%), while a minority (21.6%) think that the influence was great. There is an equal number of respondents here who believe that the influence of the Church in education should be greater (46.7%) or remain the same as now (45.7%).⁹ Therefore, citizens do not object to the presence and influence of the Church in education, which is an interesting fact because for some time in Croatia recently, there has been a discussion going on regarding the position of religious teaching in elementary and secondary schools, with proposals for its elimination and transfer to the religious institutions.

As far as upbringing is concerned, the distribution is similar to the response on education, so that the greatest number of respondents think that the influence of the Church in upbringing is medium (46.2%), this is followed by those who think that it is non-existent or small (29.4%), while every fourth thinks that the influence of the Church on upbringing in Croatian society is great (24.3%). Still, as opposed to education, there is a greater number of citizens who think that the influence of the Church on the process of upbringing should be greater than it is now (56.0%). Therefore, the citizens of Zagreb and the Zagreb County have a positive opinion about the role of the Church in the upbringing of the young generations, thus imparting quite a great trust to this institution. Indirectly, this means that the Church has not lost its ethical and moral potential during the war and post-war period, as was confirmed by other findings as well. This poses new task for the Church, but also a great responsibility because in the past decade the citizens have lost faith in numerous other institutions of society that, under normal circumstances, should have been the ones caring for the social needs of the citizens.

⁹ If we look at the results of research conducted at the end of 1997 and the beginning of 1998, on the level of the general public they confirm the data from the survey conducted in 1999 (Hoblaj i Črpić, 2000:376-377). The survey showed that an above-average number of citizens had a positive attitude towards the introduction of religious teachings into Croatian schools. They consider this a legitimate right of the Church to promulgate faith to its followers (73.9%). 70.5% expect that religious teaching will provide the basis for the development of a child into a mature, responsible and normal person, and 65.5% believe that its introduction means returning to the tradition of Croatian education.

Conclusion

The results of the two recent socio-religious surveys show that the citizens of Croatia, the City of Zagreb and the Zagreb County have a positive opinion about the Catholic Church and it is to this institution, as opposed to other institutions, that they have imparted greatest trust. In this time of Croatian society in transition, where there is an equal presence of traditional, modern and partly post-modern values, the citizens still look upon the Church as the moral authority, which serves them as a basis and orientation in a situation when other institutions have failed to solve the acute social problems, first of all those connected with the transition and the privatization of ownership, enormous enrichment of a small number of persons, social disintegration, and the development of the civil society (Cifrić, 2000:250).

The surveys have shown that the citizens think that the Catholic Church should continue to be present in public life, but there is a pronounced interesting differentiation:

- First, the citizens want the influence of the Church to remain the same or to decrease in relation to politics;
- Second, the majority of respondents think the influence should remain the same in the sphere of the economy (*status quo* option);
- Third, the citizens have divided opinions about the role of the Church in education: there is an almost equal number of those who are satisfied and those who want greater influence of the Catholic Church in the field of education;
- Finally, the greatest consensus exists in the field of social welfare and upbringing, where the majority of respondents agree to greater influence of the Church. Consequently, social welfare and upbringing are seen as the most important fields of public activities of Church in Croatian society.

It is obvious that the general public expects new tasks of the Catholic Church in Croatia, tasks in accordance with further democratization of the society and the development of a modern civil society. In this respect, the Church should open up a process of internal change: open up more towards the society, show greater sensibility

towards the needs of the citizens, show specific activities in the social sphere, change stiff hierarchy relations within the Church, pay more attention to laymen and their organizing, and be more flexible and open towards modern values.

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