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NO COUNTRY FOR FOREIGNERS:

CHRISTIAN PRAXIS IN CROATIAN MIGRATION CRISIS

By Branko Sekulić

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Daring the Vicious Circles of Death

In *The Crucified God*, a brilliant book written more than forty years ago, Jürgen Moltmann wrote that in times of human crisis, it is not usually possible to speak about only one certain circle of death, but about many of them—that includes vicious circles of poverty, violence, racial and cultural alienation, the industrial pollution of nature, the feeling of senselessness and godforsakenness.¹ This brings us to the conclusion that liberation from those rings must also have many faces in order to cope with these wrongdoings properly. This means that a renewal process needs to be laid on different people immersed in various engagements, which are associated among themselves, because that provides the possibility by which a crisis can be most adequately resolved. That helps to localize problems, isolate them, and enables us to find a concrete cure. This is a kind of social surgery applied on the body of a certain context, in order to create a situation by which a concerned society can undertake steps toward recovery.

It is especially important to take this seriously in situations in which all these aforementioned deadlocks are present together, because “wherever the five vicious circles

¹ J. Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (Harper & Row, 1974), 329-35.

mentioned above work together, a general syndrome of decay develops.”² Unfortunately, there is no better example than the current migration crisis which flows among us as a river of human tragedy, reflecting on its surface both a helplessness and misery of humankind, an apathy which shows no end in sight. Just one look at it is quite enough to understand that here we are faced with an embodiment of all those vicious circles of death concurrently, to which many social actors, including the church, try to respond, hoping to find practical solutions despite the long odds. Namely, the biggest impediment lies in the fact that the structure of this problem isn't stable, but changes all the time, day by day, hour by hour, even minute by minute, multiplying a chaotic melting-pot and creating an unstable, fluid social context of people from different parts of the world with various cultural, religious, and ethnic backgrounds,. It is an occurrence for which no one knows where it begins, and no one knows how it will end. This is a kind of pyrotechnical work in which nobody feels secure, neither help-givers nor help-seekers. Caution and distrust mixed with despair and fear reign. Hosts fear foreigners, foreigners fear hosts, but small groups combined of some citizens, volunteers, and activists, tend to patch this gap. They are trying to find a firm ground in the quicksand of general political disorientation on the European level as well as on the local one, in the countries which have found themselves on the migration route. Croatia, a so-called transition land, is one such country.

Hoping Against Hope

This type of engagement is a kind of squaring the circle, because those people don't have almost any proof, except their beliefs that a solution is reachable. This is not to downplay the importance of their efforts; their hope is irresistibly reminiscent of St. Paul's maxim *hoping against all hope* (Romans 4:18). This especially comes to the fore when one sees how those people cope and talk about a current situation, strongly realistic about the

² Ibid., 332.

whole burden which they bear, but mostly deprived of cheap pathos and self-delusion to resolve this social aporia, which is nothing more and nothing less, than life-sized deadly circles from Moltmann's *The Crucified God*.³ Many of those people included in this engagement, whether they are officially a part of a religious community or not, have practically shown and still show through their unselfishness and their empathy— that God's spirit lives not only within the church's borders. Likewise, it brings us to the conclusion that humanity (*love thy neighbor*) is our lowest common denominator, and at the same time, one of the greatest values which human beings can have. Following this train of thought, it is possible to say that according to humanity, a solidarity through a real pathos of humanism has become a basis for a wider social dialogue, and in the Christian sense, the most obvious ecumenical connector. "Sympathy is the openness of a person to the presence of another. It has the structure of dialogue,"⁴ and through this structure, it is possible to see the real essence of Christian praxis, as one which is firstly, deeply rooted in the very heart of humanity, and only then, if at all, in one institution.⁵ Namely, a true *gift of grace* doesn't need cold buildings and bureaucratic agencies, but persons of flesh and blood, just as Jesus from Nazareth was an example *par excellence*, because only a person, through personal commitment (a *commitment of love*), can be a guarantee of concrete manifestation of grace in this world, and good deeds are a culmination of it, because "thus, by their fruit you will recognize them" (Matt. 7:20). Figuratively speaking, this transfer of holiness from the city of God to the city of man yearns for its earthly articulation through human beings, beings of practice, in order to be an inspiration for those who are marginalized, hopeless, and disempowered, because God

³ I base my conclusions on private correspondences with active actors in this crisis, who have worked or are still working directly in the field with immigrants and refugees, but, at the same time, it was also possible to see the same way of acting in the media.

⁴ Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*, p. 272.

⁵ If one sees here a kind of criticism directed to certain church hierarchies, one sees well, as for example, Bulgaria's Orthodox Church which has called on its government to prevent invasion of Muslim refugees into the country.

“[m]eets men in those who are in straits, in the lowly and the small. These accommodations of God to the limitations of human history at the same time contain anticipations of his future indwelling in his whole creation... ...He enters not only into the situation of the limited creature, but even into the situation of the guilty and suffering creature.”⁶

Accordingly, I will also use experiences of the small, but still significant Protestant circles in Croatia,⁷ through which it is possible to see how Christ’s praxis has gone out from the church’s institutional frameworks on the streets, by its *Sitz im Leben* to witness that concern for others, solidarity and dedication to the idea of a better world. At the same time, this current crisis has opened up a door of the church to the secular world, in order to emphasize that the values of diakonia, charity, and togetherness, in their essence, don’t recognize borders between the Christianity and civil society. On the contrary, the only borders to which we must pay attention to are those which try to thwart these values, and not only to pay attention, but to tear down those kinds of fences. The fences are inhuman and give to some a false sense of security, while to others a sense of inferiority, exactly as barbed wires with which those migration-routes are surrounded does. They are the most obvious symbol of a general political disorientation.

Breaking Through the Barbed Wire Circles of Inhumanity

It seems unquestionable that in the next few years in Europe, we will talk about the time before and after the migration crisis, but unfortunately, not so much because of this human tragedy, as because of the inability of the EU⁸ to respond to it in a proper way. At first glance, this seems similar, but it is not, since the people in need aren’t in the focus of this

⁶ Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*, 273.

⁷ According to Croatian Bureau of Statistics, "Census of Population, Households and Dwellings in 2011 (Statistical Report)," (Zagreb: Croatian Bureau of Statistics, 2013)., number of Protestant in Croatia is 14,653 or 0.34%.

⁸ It's worth mentioning that Europe and the European Union (EU) are two completely different terms and they aren't coincident, because the EU is a politico-economic union of about 28 member states, while Europe is a continent with its cultural, religious, social and other differences.

discussion; they are just collateral victims of current political concepts, which means that they are just indicators of our lack of readiness to adjust our so-called *democratic values* to the needs of the hour, and that is the very point of this issue. But at the same time, that doesn't stop many of our governments—mostly through participation in NATO missions—to try to export these same *values* in lands from which refugees or migrants try to escape. Obviously there are some problems with the democracy which flies on the wings of air forces, and that is the very point of this issue. So, *summa summarum*, the right question in this context would be: Are we really nothing more than the so-called *Fortress Europe*? That Europe in which, figuratively, *liberté, égalité, fraternité* don't go beyond slogans and that is the reason why we are forced to think about it. Christianity, specifically Christianity as one of the European moral strongholds, as we love to present it, must offer some useful answers against the walls of prejudice. Some Christian communities have understood this quite well, like churches in Greece and the community of Protestant Churches in Europe.

Which Side of the Wire is This?

These days, we are witnessing how the social strategies of many EU countries are falling apart and at times seem to be completely beheaded. This is always fertile ground for the rise of right-wing and radical ideas, which hold the aversion to strangers as a virtue. The present situation in many EU countries such as Slovakia, Poland, and Hungary⁹ are examples. We observe it through the percentage of right-wingers in general European political movements, who have taken part in parliaments of respective states, and who among other things, favor the idea of closing borders or openly confronting the EU's plan for refugee quotas. Those three countries may be viewed as exceptions, but the entire European political climate has drifted a little bit in the right-wing direction, even in Germany and France which

⁹ After the elections in November 2015, politically, Croatia belongs to this company also, but according to the unstable majority which right-wingers have in its parliament and certain internal problems, the Croatian government hasn't had a chance to occupy itself seriously with the migration crisis, therefore, it will be viewed, for the time being, as having played a relatively polite role.

are usually unquestionable examples of the positive socio-political tendencies and inclusiveness. Therefore, according to the latest trends on parliamentary elections in EU countries in some of the governments—in regards to the issue of the migrant crisis, one can notice a variety of behavior, from aforementioned lands and real border builders such as Austria, Slovenia, Macedonia, Bulgaria, and Turkey,¹⁰ to overly bureaucratic rigorous treatment for immigrants in Romania, the Czech Republic, and Denmark,¹¹ to the reserved and cautious policy in Croatia and Serbia.

Of course, this is not a hard and fast distinction; it merely describes the political wandering of EU states on the issue of migration. Namely, it would not be correct to claim that these countries have done absolutely nothing, because they have done something, some more than others, but it is hard to escape the impression that in all those decisions, a cold economical calculation dominates, and comes before any other motivation—a motivation which unfortunately, is nothing unusual for political institutions, but it should be for the religious institutions. So this critique is also directed to some of the European churches, which have played an infamous role during these turbulences, by giving open support to closed border policy (Bulgaria's Orthodox Church),¹² by remaining undefined (the Catholic Church in Poland),¹³ or by being absent from discussions (the Catholic Church in Hungary).¹⁴ But aside from this, by far the worst part of this story lies in the demand of some EU countries (Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Poland, Cyprus) that they prefer and practically want to accommodate only Christian refugees, with the pathetic explanation that their lands

¹⁰ To this company of barbed wire builders belongs Hungary, also.

¹¹ Malcolm Brabant, "Denmark Takes Action against Refugees," *Deutsche Welle*, September 9, 2015., accessed May 22, 2016, <http://www.dw.com/en/denmark-takes-action-against-refugees/a-18702816>.

¹² MEE, "Don't Let Muslim Refugees in, Says Bulgaria's Orthodox Church," *Middle East Eye*. September 26, 2015., accessed May 22, 2016, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/dont-let-muslim-refugees-says-bulgarias-orthodox-church-1024482681>.

¹³ Natalia Ojewski, "Why Is Catholic Poland So Reluctant to Help Muslim Refugees?," *Middle East Eye*. September 30, 2015., accessed May 22, 2016, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/catholic-poland-reluctant-help-muslim-refugees-2091168202>.

¹⁴ Lauren Frayer, "Hungary's Catholics Largely Absent from Refugee Drama," *NPR*, September 30, 2015., accessed May 22, 2016, <http://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2015/09/30/444660127/hungarys-catholics-are-largely-absent-from-refugee-drama>.

are predominantly Christian. “Human dignity is inviolable. It prohibits any denigration of people because of their culture, ethnicity, religion, language or skin color, and every attempt to misuse the Christian faith for nationalistic ends is a contradiction in terms.”¹⁵ Such statements are at the same time paradoxical and frightening; personally, I hope that some real Christians have come to those lands, because it is quite obvious that a certain kind of evangelization for some structures is needed. Also, one may notice a similar sort of rhetoric in the change of discourse trying to separate the so-called economic migrants from refugees. Manipulation of facts is an old diplomatic tactic, and the best way to neutralize the sense of urgency is to provide the opportunity for escape from responsibility.¹⁶ Of course, if we take a counter-argument in consideration and stand in EU politicians’ shoes, especially those in Germany—the country which is the final aim of almost all of the immigrants—this distinction can be a bit more understandable, because it is not so easy to handle such a challenge practically overnight.

But if we take into consideration that 86 percent of the refugees have remained in neighboring countries, that Africa participates in the total distribution of refugees with 45 percent, Asia with 30 percent, and Europe and Northern America with only four percent,¹⁷ and that Europe has accepted only something less than five percent of the total number of Syrian refugees,¹⁸ while millions of Euros go to the EU frontiers’ security system, then we must admit that there isn’t much place for a deep empathy with political structures. “Considerable financial and logistic means are invested in protection and control of the external borders of the Union, rather than, for example, in measures enabling access to the

¹⁵ Bishop Markus Dröge, “Three Thousand People Join Berlin Church’s March for Tolerance,” WCC, Press centre, May 11, 2016, accessed May 23, 2016, <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/press-centre/news/three-thousand-people-join-berlin-church2019s-march-for-tolerance>.

¹⁶ Preethi Nallu, “Migrant or Refugee? The Limits of Definitions,” *Refugees Deeply*, March 29, 2016., accessed May 23, 2016, <https://www.newsdeeply.com/refugees/articles/2016/03/29/migrant-or-refugee-the-limits-of-definitions>.

¹⁷ Between September 2015 and March 2016, approximately 700,000 migrants have entered in territories of Macedonia, Serbia, Croatia, and Slovenia.

¹⁸ UNHCR, “Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2014,” *Geneva: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees* (2015).

territory, access to the asylum system and integration instruments for citizens of third countries.”¹⁹ The current negotiations between the EU and Turkey speak for themselves, reflecting a sad bidding with humanity, which forces us, now when we are witnessing the emergence of barbed wire circles of death, to ask ourselves: “On which side of the wire are we really standing?”

And this exact question—aside from this contextual introduction which is a bit burdened with necessary political explanations in order to present the context of this problem—leads us to one very intriguing and extremely significant revelation: that ordinary citizens, volunteers, and activists of different civil associations and church communities have carried the largest burden of this crisis, working tirelessly in the field in various and often bad conditions, and soon “it has become obvious that the people are better than their governments, their politicians; it has become obvious that they can better recognize the difference between good and evil.”²⁰ And therefore, it has become obvious that here, it is the matter of discrepancy between institutions and people, between laws and needs, between theories and praxis, dilemmas which raise an intrinsic question: is the Sabbath made for a man, or a man for the Sabbath? (Mark 2:27) For most people in Croatia, according to their experience of the war in ex-Yugoslavia, this is not even a question, because they were there, in that position of *hunger*.²¹ Namely, for all people with that background it is absolutely clear that migrants, immigrants, or refugees are not a political but a human category. And practically, all of Christian praxis depends on the axiom to see in the marginalized one and

¹⁹ The Institute for Migration and Ethnic Studies, "Forced Migration Flows and the Humanitarian Crisis in Europe: Position Paper of the Institute for Migration and Ethnic Studies," *The Institute for Migration and Ethnic Studies in Zagreb* November (2015): p. 4.

²⁰ Boris Buden, "Eu Nije Rješenje Nego Naredni Problem," *NI* video, 26:10. September 29, 2015, accessed May 22, 2016, <http://ba.n1info.com/a62746/Vijesti/Vijesti/Boris-Buden-u-N1-na-1.html>.

²¹ According to M. Perković i V. Puljiz, "Ratne Štete, Izdaci Za Branitelje, Žrtve I Stradalnike Rata U Republici Hrvatskoj," *Revija za socijalnu politiku* Svezak 8, no. Br. 2 (2001)., at the beginning of war in Croatia in 1991, Croatia was home for 550,000 displaced persons and refugees.

the invisible one a neighbor instead of a stranger, a human being instead of a statistical fact, a possibility instead of an impediment.

From the Bottom of the Circle

The fact of barbed wires from the Croatian perspective isn't something that is new, that develops in front of us as a part of an uncertain future, but something that approaches us from behind, from our unhealed past. Those wounds in memory are so fresh that a certain level of identification with those who suffer today still exists, because a wire mustn't necessarily be visible in order to be tangible. Moreover, those that are invisible are the most dangerous ones. Exactly these should be a starting point, a preoccupation of Christian praxis, in order to prevent an impulse of repugnance and wrath, which makes us see a threat in others, because we are ailing from two things: fear of the unknown, considering we haven't yet confronted ourselves with our own past, and of the so-called *Stockholm syndrome*, considering we have unconsciously identified ourselves with violence.

And in the middle of being lost and these diffuse and unordered feelings, this migrant crisis arrived, and has come as a kind of mirror, through which we are able to see our own faces of 25 years ago (war time). This possibility has separated people: those who are against immigrants, because they cannot stand traces of their own unaccepted identities in them, to those who, exactly for the same reasons, have tried to help them. The Protestant initiative in Croatia, together with some other social and church actors, has taken the latter approach, and through these pretty rough months of crisis has shown that Christianity lives its fullness through the simple act of humanity, in a country that has been overloaded with the policy of the institutional church for years.²² So through Protestants efforts and the efforts of some Catholic organizations, Christ's praxis has drawn nearer to the ordinary people, because the

²² The Roman Catholic Church in Croatia, according to four contracts between the Republic of Croatia and the Holy See, has a kind of special social status, and sometimes its hierarchy misused that fact, which from day to day, becomes a bigger and bigger problem.

focus has been changed from Christianity *per se*, to those in need—“there is no authentic worship of God without solidarity with the poor.”²³ Christian practice which forgets this has a good chance of imploding, but we could say, that this also goes for a certain society. A not so negligible part of the people in Croatia have understood this well.

Unwinding of the Barbed Ball

Namely, from the very beginning, from September 16, 2015 to March 5, 2016, three days before the so-called *Balkan route* was officially closed, Croatia hosted 658,068 migrants—approximately 5,500 per day²⁴—a reality with which help-givers had to cope. “When people started to cross the Serbo-Croatian border in large numbers, and pass through Croatia, reaction, solidarity and rapid response to basic human needs by local communities were wonderful. People offered everything that they had—water, tea, bread, fruits, vegetables, they even opened the doors of their houses. . . It is very important that those anonymous people, helpers from the margins, be mentioned as Croatia also.”²⁵ Aside from those *little people*, in the times of great responsibility, there has been various activists and volunteers, who in addition to work in the field, have also been logistic advisers and professional helpers. Some of the most significant examples are: *Welcome Initiative* which have brought together more than 40 Croatian civil society organizations, including Center for Peace Studies, Are You Serious’ Initiative, Jesuit Refugee Service, Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA), REMAR (Christian Humanitarian Aid Organization, Croatia), Croatian Baptist Aid, International Organization for Migration (IOM) Croatia, Ministry of Health, Croatian Red Cross, Croatian Caritas, Samaritan's Purse, and Protestant Evangelical Alliance.

²³ Gustavo Gutierrez, *The Power of the Poor in History: Selected Writings* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1983), p. 51.

²⁴ Senada Šelo Šabić i Sonja Borić, "At the Gate of Europe: A Report on Refugees on the Western Balkan Route," *Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, Regional Office Zagreb for Croatia and Slovenia*, (2016): p. 11.

²⁵ From the private email correspondence with Julija Kranjec, organizational coordinator of the Center for Peace Studies in Zagreb.

As we can see from the official and publicly available documents of the aforementioned organizations, special attention were paid to issues regarding children, women, health, and asylum, which serve as focal matters. Namely, among the refugees, those under 15 years of age represents 14.9 percent and women represent 53.3 percent,²⁶ which account for the constant danger of human trafficking and abuse, and have been declared as two of the most threatened groups, together with vulnerable persons to whom necessary medical treatment—emergency medical interventions, general practice interventions, hospitalizations, and camp infirmary interventions—were provided. In regards to questions relating to asylum, it is a burning issue in many countries, including Croatia, especially because in these areas, the idea of ethnic purity, for a not so negligible part of its citizens, is considered as something good and desirable, and has been practically raised to the level of the sacred.

Asylum: Above-ground Catacombs.

The previous sentence must be on our minds when we think about the concept of asylum in Croatia, because in these ex-Yugoslavia regions, Croat, Serb, Gypsy, Albanian, Bosniak aren't just ethnic characteristics, but names which are colloquially used for decades, and still, as a kind of insult. In this type of context, Syrians, Afghans, Iraqis, and others come, and their labels, logically, are nearer to the status of insult than of ethnic identification, which puts a great burden on refugee activists. They must then find a way to humanize a picture of those people first, and only afterwards is it possible to speak about their integration in society—if at all. I say if at all, because in the last ten years, only 165 people have been granted asylum and almost all of them have already left Croatia,²⁷ because the social situation

²⁶ International Organization for Migration (IOM), accessed May 25, 2016, <https://www.iom.int/countries/croatia>

²⁷ Tea Vidović, "Očekujemo Dobrodošlicu Izbjeglicama (Intervju)," *Kulturpunkt*, August 31, 2015, accessed June 4, 2016, <http://www.kulturpunkt.hr/content/ocekujemo-dobrodoslicu-izbjeglicama>.

gives them very little opportunity for developing a normal life,²⁸ which is a reason why in this crisis, Croatia is considered only one more impediment on the *road to the better life* in Western Europe. So, integration into Croatia is still in its infancy.²⁹ That confirms the results of MIPEX (2015) where Croatian integration policy received an overall grade of 43/100, a result which places it in the 30th place of 38 countries encompassed by the research.³⁰ Namely, this policy mostly suffers from a poor cooperation between the competent institutions, local communities, academic community, and civil society organizations, and this disorganization, or amateurism, creates a lot of unanswered questions, which in a public space leaves a possibility to speculate about the meaning of this process—like preparation for terrorism and silent Islamist occupation, just to mention two most common current theories. These ambiguities in Croatia create fear of the *others* as potential destroyers of local European Christian culture, which is one of the best examples which clearly shows not only the shortcomings of the social policy, but also the lack of concrete theology.

Croatia currently deals with three very delicate issues—the economic situation, demographic change, and national identity—³¹issues which permeate its life, creating a tense atmosphere and existential insecurity in society. That is a concept that usually leads to the awakening of right-wing populists, who in this situation of crisis, see refugees as a threat to the survival of community. Those who help them aren't so well received either, and are sometimes considered as mercenaries of foreign interests, whatever that means. „Jede Nation hat ihre Anderen, im Inneren wie im Äußeren--und so entsteht eine ganze Reihe von imaginären und realen Demarkationslinien zwischen Uns und den Anderen, die den

²⁸ Moreover a significant number of Croatian citizens have also already left the country and that's still an ongoing process. According to Croatian demographer Stjepan Šterc, last year (2015) more than 50.000 Croatian citizens have moved only to Germany, and a year before (2014), around 44.000 did the same.

²⁹ See Sandra Benčić, "Azil U Hrvatskoj: Integracijske Politike," *Centar za mirovne studije* (2006).

³⁰ The Institute for Migration and Ethnic Studies, "Integration of Migrants in the European Union with Reference to Croatia: Position Paper of the Institute for Migration and Ethnic Studies," *The Institute for Migration and Ethnic Studies in Zagreb* February(2016): p. 10.

³¹ Ibid.

Nationalstaat konstituieren.”³² Obviously, one clever strategy is badly needed to clarify these artificial borders between us and them, because “when one disaster occurs, the first reaction of people is altruism, but empathy has its lifespan. Thus, the crisis needs to be managed by professionals, to let people know that it isn’t out of control. The key to success is well-informed citizens, and that should be a strategic decision of government.”³³ But the question is how to make a good strategy for the others in a country which doesn’t have any strategy for itself? Deeply immersed in economic crisis and under the burden of social divisions, Croatian society is not capable of finding a functional solution that encompasses the legal-political, socio-economic and cultural-religious,³⁴ the three unavoidable dimensions of immigrant integration, in a meaningful way. This causes asylum to sometimes look like above-ground catacombs: people are there, but they are practically invisible, they don’t exist in the eyes of those by whom they are surrounded, in the minds and lives of locals.³⁵ Refugees are placed between their fears and ignorance, and their own human rights. „Der Konflikt zwischen dem subjektiven Recht auf Zuflucht und den vermeintlich oder wirklich objektiven Erfordernissen öffentlicher Sicherheit und Ordnung ist es, der von Anfang an Bedenken gegen eine vorbehaltlose Gewährleistung des Asylrechts geweckt hat.“³⁶ This mess of fear and responsibility is solvable, but only through concrete institutional support, in order to decrease a level of intolerance and to be a guarantee for balance in a social life—a change from the above. On the other hand, Christian communities, together with civil social organizations, play one of the most useful roles, especially in Croatia, because here, almost

³² S. Benhabib, *Die Rechte Der Anderen: Ausländer, Migranten, Bürger* (Suhrkamp, 2008), p. 29. Translation: “Each nation has its Others, inside as well as outside—and thus arises an entire number of imaginary and real demarcations between Us and The Other, which establish the nation-state.”

³³ Dean Ajduković, "Strah Od Izbjeglica: Bojimo Se Da Će Promijeniti Našu Kulturu. Zaboravljamo Da Su, Prije Svega, Ljudi," *Globus*, December 29, 2015., accessed Juni 4, 2016, <http://www.jutarnji.hr/globus/strah-od-izbjeglica-bojimo-se-da-ce-promijeniti-nasu-kulturu.-zaboravljamo-da-su-prije-svega-ljudi/85219/>.

³⁴ See: Rinus Penninx, "Integration Processes of Migrants: Research Findings and Policy Challenges," *Migracijske i etničke teme* 23 (1-2)(2004): p. 7-32.

³⁵ Croatia has two centers for asylum seekers in Dugave (part of Zagreb) and in Kutina.

³⁶ W. Huber, *Gerechtigkeit Und Recht: Grundlinien Christlicher Rechtsethik* (Kaiser, Gütersloher Verlag-Haus, 1996), p. 467.

nobody has such influence on the wider masses of people as the church³⁷—a change from the bottom. Combination of those two changes—from above and the bottom—are the only true solution through which it is possible to fully reveal our obligation as human beings, whether one tries to realize it through purely humanistic values, or according to faith values. The concern for human integrity in both cases is the very essence of our dignity, dignity which is the base of a responsible and productive life, and which doesn't have any kind of alternative.

Humanity Does Not Have Two Sides: *Protestant Action*

“For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me (Matthew 25:35-36).” So, according to Christianity in the context of this paper, the message is completely clear—no one should be invisible to anyone—and this message needs to be heard by those who are blind despite healthy eyes, yet bear Christ's name. These New Testament verses are the quite plausible denial of that paradox, because one who keeps Christ in their own heart should share that fullness with others also, primarily with those little ones, with those most vulnerable ones (Luke 4:18). That is the sense of the above-mentioned fullness, a circulation of the ultimate freedom through the world, among the people, in order to confront them with their wrongdoings and to try to change their attitudes according to Jesus' praxis. The number of those who have taken God's name is not a measure of Christianity, but the number of those whose deeds show that they have answered his call (*sensus fidelis*), because God is not a measure of quantity, but of quality.

Precisely, this has been proven by Protestant circles in Croatia during the time of crisis, when they took responsibility for their own call and showed that words of living God dwell among them by becoming their *spiritus movens* through a significant social turmoil. Of

³⁷ Especially the Roman Catholic Church which has approximately 3.7 million members or 86,3% of the population according to the 2011 census.

course, as obvious from the beginning of this article, they weren't alone in their engagement, but in my opinion, they are an extraordinary example which I will use as the contextual paradigm of an effective Christian life. Namely, the Protestant community occupies only a small part of Croatian society, a society in which approximately 90 percent of Croats are almost 90 percent Catholics, there being very scarce information about other confessions or religions. In that context, believers within the Reformed tradition, experience themselves as being a minority, which has enabled them to develop a finely calibrated sense for those in need, because they themselves have never fully discovered the feeling of belonging to the aforementioned majority. Of course, it is not something without which it is impossible to live, and in this case, it gives even a certain advantage, because a Protestant perspective is a frontal close-up, which in this situation has been a badly needed skill. This has especially freed them from the feeling of a majority that feels itself threatened by a minority. A thesis which in Croatia is pretty alive, but statistics are relentless, almost no immigrant wants to stay in it, because it "remains a transit country, as more than 80 percent of asylum seekers leave the country before their applications are processed."³⁸

But despite the immediate need, the accent was not primarily on those who eventually want to stay, because the urgency of the situation hasn't left much place to constructively think about that. Namely, the day after Hungary sealed its border with Serbia on September 16, there have been approximately 5,500 daily arrivals and they were far, away from coping with that problem. The Baptist church in Osijek, was one of the first Protestant churches in the field, which is understandable because of its nearness to the border with Serbia and Hungary. Practically from the first minute of the crisis, places such as Berkasovo, Bapska, Tovarnik, Opatovac, and Slavonski Brod, were flooded by the river of refugees, by the river of desperate, tired, sick, bewildered people who came upon the practically empty land— in

³⁸ Borić, "At the Gate of Europe: A Report on Refugees on the Western Balkan Route," 11.

the sense that it wasn't ready for them—for such a large number of them, which caused a real chaos. “In that moment, the whole mobility potential of small communities as we are was shown in a situation, in which the lack of a major political strategy has been pretty obvious.”³⁹ And they have contributed, as a kind of logistics, to amortize problems in the first days of crisis, in the phase of construction of camps, with a selfless help of their Baptist partners from Hungary, whether in goods or with advice. In the field, Baptists and their volunteers cooperated with the Croatian Caritas, UNHC, Green Peace, Samaritan's Purse, and other civil associations and citizens in the preparation and serving of hot drinks, in providing clothes and blankets, and in providing children's food, energy bars, candy bars, bread, sardines, bananas, and small lunch packages, and hygiene items like diapers and disinfectant wipes, and other basic needs.⁴⁰ In that initial moment, they had a capacity to help around 10.000 refugees,⁴¹ but their initiative did not stop there. Namely, through their contacts, the very top of the Baptist organization organized a headquarters for collection and distribution of aid in Zagreb, the capital of Croatia, and made strides to conclude a contract with the Agrokor concern—the largest privately held company in Croatia and one of the strongest companies in southeastern Europe—in order to get a grace period of 20 days for supplied goods and with a seven percent discount.⁴² Very soon after these initial actions, the Protestant Evangelical Alliance also provided their support, and through it, 170 volunteers from 22 different countries (USA, UK, Germany, Spain, France, India, Saudi Arabia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Lithuania, etc.) came to work in the refugee camp in Croatia.⁴³

³⁹ From the private email correspondence with Dr. Ksenija Magda, president of the Baptist World Alliance Women's Department, member of Baptist Church in Osijek.

⁴⁰ Toma Magda, "1. Izvješće U Djelovanju Saveza U Izbjegličkoj Krizi U Hrvatskoj (Report of President of the Baptist Union of Croatia)," *Baptist.hr*, September 26, 2015, accessed Juni 6, 2016, <http://baptist.hr/iba-novosti/1081-odrzana-izborna-skupstina-sbc-a>.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Elvis Džafić, "Divided by Borders. United by Purpose (Report of Coordinator of Volunteers for the Croatian Baptist Aid)," *European Baptist Federation*, January 11, 2016, accessed Juni 6, 2016, <http://www.ebf.org/divided-by-borders-united-by-purpose>.

Also, it is worth mentioning that on August 31, 2015, in the seat of the Archdiocese of Zagreb, the so-called Appeals⁴⁴ was signed and presented. It intended both believers and the general public to help refugees, which absolutely trailed Pope Francis, who has equated a rejection of refugees with war crimes.⁴⁵ And it is extremely important to understand this connection, because avoiding responsibility for others by refusing them, suggests that we accept the conditions of war, that we see its victims as a kind of foreign body to this world, and finally, that we *volens nolens* approve the war. "A lot of people are claiming to be following Christ, but are spitting out xenophobic statements about people coming from war-stricken areas. Christians are filled with fear of potential terrorists, and some are claiming refugees need to be deported because they are not Christian. It is terrifying to hear."⁴⁶ This statement comes from one of the most important Protestant activists of that time, from which it is quite obvious, that the spirit of the Pope's words were captured because this point of view on the crisis is terribly urgent. And this approach in the Croatian case demonstrates for us one unpleasant thing: namely, the activists and volunteers had to cope with two dominant fears, those of refugees and those of locals, hugely sensitive issues on the edge of escalation of the conflict. If that isn't a point that is causing the Christian peace-building praxis, I don't know what is, especially after Pope Francis, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, and Archbishop Ieronymos of Athens and All Greece have shown us how, by visiting the Moria refugee camp (April 16, 2016). This was a pure breaking point through the barbed wire circles of inhumanity, just like what Protestant communities in cooperation with others have

⁴⁴ The signees of statement are: Msgr. Zelimir Puljić, Archbishop of Zadar and the president of the CCB; dr. Porfirije Perić, Metropolitan of Zagreb and Ljubljana; Giorgio Grlj, President of the Protestant Evangelical Council in Croatia; Luciano Moše Prelević, Chief Rabbi of Croatia; Ph.D. Kotel Da-Don, Chief Rabbi of the Jewish community Bet Israel in Croatia; Mufti Dr. Aziz ef. Hasanović, President of Meshihat of Islamic Community in Croatia.

⁴⁵ Pope Francis, "Urbi Et Orbi Message (Easter, Sunday, 27 March 2016)," *Libreria Editrice Vaticana*, accessed Juni 6, 2016, https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/urbi/documents/papa-francesco_20160327_urbi-et-orbi-pasqua.html.

⁴⁶ Elvis Džafić, "Giving Birth to the Future (Report of Coordinator of Volunteers for the Croatian Baptist Aid)," *European Baptist Federation*, February 11, 2016, accessed Juni 6, 2016, <http://www.ebf.org/giving-birth-to-the-future>.

done in Croatia. They were just been there for others to serve according to their need. So, it is always possible to speak about the significance of some events, but the strength of presence is simply irreplaceable, which at the same time is a stronghold of Christian values—make a place so that the Son of Man has a place to lay his head. That was all that these Protestant initiatives tried to do, make a place among locals for those who don't have anything any longer, in order to send a very clear message, that among the real human beings, there is no us and them, but just those in need, and those who can help. "In this way the members discover not only how to read the signs of the times and events according to the faith, but also how to react to them in a Christian way."⁴⁷

According to that, it will be very interesting to mention one anecdote, which proves that God works in mysterious ways. I found this story in one Baptist report "Two images from a refugee camp in Opatovac" written at the end of February 2016. Namely, a few days before this report, Slovenia had managed to deport a small group of migrants back to the countries they came from. At the same time, Croatian police hadn't allowed them to return through Croatia, and they were stuck in the middle of nowhere between two borders. Rain, darkness and cold was all around them, and no one had a chance to approach them. The police just stood there keeping watch, without any specific reaction. And then, suddenly and somehow, Gypsies from the nearby village Trnovac emerged, taking off their own clothes and giving them to the refugees. "Therefore in the situation of a 'disheartened society', Christian faith becomes 'counting on hope' and is demonstrated through freedom from panic and apathy, from escape and the death-wish. It then leads to courage to do what is necessary, resolutely and patiently, in the vicious circles mentioned above."⁴⁸ The marginalized ones were there for marginalized ones, those who had been rejected were there for others who were rejected, as a cry from the depths of hope. That was a true motivation for Baptist

⁴⁷ Jose Marins, Teolide Mari a Trevisan, and Carolee Chanona, *The Church from the Roots : Basic Ecclesial Communities*(London: CAFOD, 1989), 25.

⁴⁸ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 335.

volunteers who were in that moment there, and we can say, it was one of the most convincing, and at the same time most beautiful examples of Christian praxis which one could observe in that time of chaos and hopelessness. "Jesus appears in unexpected ways, right now and right here. But the question is: Can we see him?"⁴⁹

During these first days of crisis, an election campaign took place in Croatia, in which unfortunately, refugees became a kind of bargaining chip to gain political points. The government has tried to balance between leaving a positive impression in front of the world and to show themselves as guardians of national interests on one side, and the opposition that tried to show them incapable to cope with the ongoing crisis on the other side. All in all, it was a sad political masquerade of narrow-minded people, among whom, predominantly civil society organizations together with Protestant communities were coping with real human problems. "Our volunteers are still tirelessly working, trying to help meet the needs of these people. Our capacities are limited, but our faith and the desire to help these people are great. We are trying to meet the needs of thousands of people, the majority of whom are women and children."⁵⁰ In that context, their role was a kind of mediation between political parties in the middle of struggle for power, a buffer zone where humanity lived without any ulterior motives. It probably was not a coincidence that Protestant activists reported this case of Gypsies' identification with those who suffer, because as we know, the little ones can best understand little ones, invisible ones see invisible ones, silent ones hear silent ones... Just as one of the Baptist volunteers had said, himself a child of the war in former Yugoslavia: "I know how I felt, what I experienced, and what I needed. Now, I'm trying to provide it to those people who come to me."⁵¹ To give what they need—that is all. This *tête-à-tête*

⁴⁹ Nada Jović, "When Missions Come to Us (Report of Croatian Baptist Aid Coordinator)," *Baptist.hr*, January 22, 2016., accessed Juni 6, 2016, <http://ebf.org/when-missions-come-to-us>.

⁵⁰ CBA, "Wake up Europe," *European Baptist Federation*, March, 2016, accessed Juni 8, 2016, <http://www.ebf.org/failid/File/migration%20crisis/Croatia%20-%20Wake%20Up%20Europe%20-%20SBC.pdf>.

⁵¹ Toma Magda, "Internal communication letter to all the believers and churches of the Alliance of Baptist Churches in Croatia", on Reformation Day, 2015.

approach is the essence of Christian praxis, and one of the rare efforts able to break chains of prejudices, because when we are able to look others in the eyes, we are more likely to see a human being rather than a statistic,⁵² namely providing understanding of others outside of the clash of civilizations' theories. This has been proven in Slavonia, a part of Croatia where the crisis has been most intense, where the people, despite conservative local political and institutional Catholic Church policy, have shown that humanism is an unquestionable part of their lives, probably evoking in that way, their own memories from war times in ex-Yugoslavia.

It is always intriguing to see this collision between humanism and politics, between needs and rules, between real human beings and pure human functions. Moreover, it is quite interesting to see these challenges of the vicious circles of death, where fear is permeated with freedom, narrowness with openness, and avoiding problems with facing problems. These chaotic vicious circles of death also have a kind of rules—a normal answer to an abnormal situation—which pull us back into the insecurity of everyday life, always when we try to escape our responsibility to cope with some wrongdoings. Namely, they are a price which we pay in the name of our cowardice, and Christianity is everything rather than cowardice. The Crucified God is proof *par excellence* that in this life there is no place for hiding, because the only right answer to God's love is a courage to be. "Therefore he who has the courage to be as a part has the courage to affirm himself as a part of the community in which he participates. His self-affirmation is a part of the self-affirmation of the social groups which constitute the society to which he belongs."⁵³

So, Protestants in Croatia are not noticeable by their number, but their deeds have spoken for themselves, especially in the time of crisis, just as now in the case of refugees, as it was during the war of the 1990s. This clearly shows their complete affirmation in their

⁵² See the video „Look Beyond Borders“ of Amnesty International Poland and Polish ad agency DDB&Tribal. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f7XhrXUoD6U>

⁵³ Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (New Haven,: Yale University Press, 1975), p. 91.

society, in which they actively try to implement Christian values, constantly stressing, like in this migration crisis, that every community, just as every life, has its challenges, but that the accent is always on us. So, the ultimate question is about us as individuals, and what we will do in a certain situation, and it absolutely defines us, equally, before humans and before God. “Our voice may not put an end to this crisis, but it would raise awareness about the needs and the real situation. We remain hopeful that this will happen.”⁵⁴ We can conclude that crossroads between resignation and engagement is our permanent and natural environment, which repeatedly questions the quality of our faith. That means that our belief structure must not fall apart because it is one of the rare strongholds that one can have, when every other solution loses its sense, when the ground is beginning to slip beneath our feet, and we don't know what is happening, but still, we deeply believe that something better is possible. Exactly this, this *leap of faith* (Kierkegaard), in my personal opinion, is the only hope for humanity, because, as the Protestant initiative has shown, we do not hope for ourselves primarily, but for those who, at a certain moment, see no way out, and we must take on a role as their guide, to pull them out of that dead end. “Christians are called to action and sympathy not through their own firsthand experiences but by the immediate experience of their brothers, for whose sake Christ suffered.”⁵⁵ This is a real hermeneutical circle of Christianity, the only one in which its praxis can be completely authentic—there, where the possibility meets desperation through hope.

⁵⁴ Džafić, "Giving Birth to the Future (Report of Coordinator of Volunteers for the Croatian Baptist Aid)".

⁵⁵ D. Bonhoeffer, C. Gremmels, and J.W. De Gruchy, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (Fortress Press, 2010), 49.