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The Holy see and the crisis in Kosovo/Selia e Shenjte dhe Kriza ne Kosove (English/Albanian text) Pub. "L'Osservatore Romano," Vatican City 2002, Foreword by Bishop Mark Sopi, Bishop of Kosovo, reviewed by James Pettifer.

The political role of the Vatican in the Balkans has always been a matter of interest and quite often, controversy. The most obvious recent examples are connected with Croatian politics and history and the break-up of Yugoslavia, but there are other important aspects to the issue elsewhere, in both former Yugoslav Macedonia, where the church has been a quiet but ardent advocate of the Skopje interest in many places and, in Kosovo where traditionally about ten percent or so of the ethnic Albanian population has been Catholic.

The most popular and well-known work in the Serbian world on this subject has traditionally been Zutics Vatikan i Albanci (Vatican and the Albanians) which sees Vatican support for Albanian nationalist objectives as part of a wider scheme to extend Papal influence in the region, and to damage the Serbian and Greek Orthodox Churches. Whatever people might think of its general assumption, it does set out in some credible detail the ambition of the Vatican to convert Kosovo Albanians to Catholicism in the aftermath of the Versailles Treaty and the early years of Royalist Yugoslavia. It concludes, though, in 1941, and there has been little recent scholarly (or non-scholarly) work on

the regional role of the catholic Church and the Vatican in the communist or post-communist period.

This new book from the official Vatican press therefore enters something of a vacuum. It is not, in essence, much more than a compilation of the 1998-2000 activity of the senior Vatican diplomats and also the Pope himself, particularly in the NATO bombing period in 1999, with an introduction by Bishop Sopi of Prizren, who comments on "the immense care and achievements of results in co-ordinating relevant factors to preserve the peace in the region." There is no named author, but whoever wrote the main part of the book notes the various documents produced by the Vatican during the bloody break-up of "Crisis in Yugoslavia - Position and Actions of the Holy See," and as such it has some reference value.

It is, though, in almost every other respect, an evasive, irritating and basically useless work. The history of the conflict is dated from March 1998, and there is no material of any kind on the earlier period. Names such as Milosevic, Rugova, Thaci, the KLA, the Yugoslav police and army and political movements generally are almost totally absent. Instead there is endless reiterated concern about "violence" and an open nostalgia for the days of the 1974 autonomy arrangements. As such it is profoundly backward-looking. From the Albanian point of view, this means taht the Pope had nothing to say about the kind of regime in Kosovo run by Belgrade

from the time of the defeat of the Trepca miners strike up to March 1998. In fact a certain amount of material was produced, but the compilers of this book have not seen fit to include it. there was also a good deal of Catholic activity on the ground in Kosovo, which again is totally omitted.

There is a reason for this, in my opinion, connected with the difficult task the Catholic Church has in coming to terms with its League. Anyone who knows anything about Kosovo, from whatever point of view, knows that a) the most famous Albanian in the world in the time of the recent conflict was Mother Theresa, b) that Mother Theresa never lost her sense of Albanian identity and took considerable interest in the fate of her homeland after the end of communism, c) that her charity was for a long time the only INGO Slobodan Milosevic allowed to function in Kosovo in the early and mid- 1990's, d) that her charity was intimately linked with the Kosovo Democratic League of Ibrahim Rugova, both under Milosevic and afterwards. In most Kosovo localities, the leadership of the two organisations was and sometimes still is identical. This has remained the case in the post-1999 period. I remember, for instance, as an election observer in Prizren in November 2000 seeing Mother Theresa vehicles ferrying LDK voters to the polling station. In that election, in Dragash/Gora, the Mother Theresa organisation was LDK, to all intents and purposes. (The exact degree of influence and control over the

activities of the Mother Theresa organisation exercised by the international Mother Theresa guiding body is a matter of local controversy).

Other Catholic organisations were influential in the collaborationist dealings with Milosevic's government, such as the Rome-based front organisation, the San Egidio movement, which brokered the failed 1996 agreement to try get Kosovo schools reopened. Equally Dr Rugova retained his closest foreign links with Italy and many Italian Catholics politicians throughout the last fifteen years, as his "exile" in Italy during some of the NATO bombing campaign indicates.

"The Crisis in Kosovo" of the title is actually defined only as a military crisis, and so is only seen as suitable for the reproduction of documents after March 1998, the appearance of the Kosovo Liberation Army on the scene, and Milosevic's "First Offensive" against the KLA-held areas in Drenica. Consideration of the earlier human rights and general social crisis - affecting both Serbs and Albanians, is totally omitted. The picture the Vatican now presumably wishes to convey to the Kosovo Albanian community (I am not clear whether this book exists is a Serb language edition, or not) is one of general sympathy with ethnic Albanian aspirations, coupled with a strong dose of pacifism and a sense that perhaps there might have been alternatives to the NATO bombing campaign. In reality, Albanians in Kosovo know, and also foreign observers and

journalists who were there in the 1990's that the Vatican had quite regular relationships with the Milosevic government, as did leading Catholic politicians in the Italian government. In his recent biography of Milosevic, Adem Lebor notes that without the money in Belgrade to fund the Kosovo war.

The book seeks to give impression that the activity of the Holy See in the wartime period was generally representative of Catholic activity in Kosovo as a whole on the recent period, and that it was marked by a firm commitment to conflict resolution and human concern. This is balderdash. The real picture is much more complicated.

Some leading figures in Rome and in the Church in the region had strong private sympathies with Albanian independence aspirations, but the institutional Church in the early and mid 1990' had a position where anti-Muslim preoccupations were the main determinant of policy, and this interlocked with the Catholic lobby in many EU foreign ministries and governments where Roman Catholics are greatly over-represented in many countries. Others like Bishop Sopi were and are concerned about the possibility of Muslim fundamentalism appearing in Kosovo but take the view that independence is the best guarantee against it. If independence is refused there is a strong possibility, in the view of this group, that Albanian nationalist militants will turn in despair towards radical Islam. At the extremes, supporters of the Opus Dei

organisation were active in Kosovo with a strong anti-Muslim agenda which objectively was of considerable assistance to the Milosevic people in Belgrade. The uninitiated reader of this book would learn nothing whatsoever about any of these complex factors, nor the genuine difficulties the Church has had from disentangling itself from the background of Italian politics, as on many other world issues. Nor would anyone learn that many Catholics fought in the KLA on exactly the same basis as people of secular or Muslim views.

The real problems the Church has now in Kosovo are manifold, and not mentioned in this publication, starting with the growing secularisation of much Kosovo Albanian society, the emergence of new political leaders in the aftermath of 1999 who are not in the LDK and know something of the difficult history of the early 1990's, the diminished importance of a single politician (DR Rugova) in a politically pluralist society, and the reduced importance in post-1999 stronghold of middle-class Kosovo Catholicism.

There is no development of pluralism in NGO world, of the arrival of numerous competitors to Mother Theresa's organisation, some within the Catholic world like Catholic Relief Services and Caritas, some secular, like CARE and Oxfam, and some of them specifically Islamic, such as the Saudi Joint Relief Committee. The failure of the Pope to visit Kosovo, or Kosovo to have benefited from the

creation of the new Cardinals, has also not gone unnoticed.

This book seems to have been produced to try to show that the Pope was more or less on the Albanian side all along, and to give Bishop Sopi some assistance. Bishop Sopi is a good and decent man and it is to be hoped that he gets it but this publication is not the answer to the problems of his Church, and has massive lacunae in its portrayal of the recent past and the present. What is needed is a comprehensive scholarly study of the Catholic Church and the Kosovo/Balkan crisis since 1989, a difficult but necessary endeavour.