

The Topic of the Issue

ROM: INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL OF PEACE AND FORGIVENESS IN FUZINE

DE-ETHNIFICATION OF IDENTITY

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In the small town Fuzine in Gorski Kotar the Croats and the Serbs, as well as citizens from some twenty other countries, learn reconciliation from the Hutus and the Tutsis.

Amidst of so much grief which tortures our country, as well as many other people in the broader region who are waiting for some form of justice after the cruel war crimes which have taken away the people and friends they loved, and apart from shocking pictures that we see every day from Iraqi streets or knowing that every day hunger takes its toll of almost 30 thousand children throughout the planet - is it possible to stop for a moment in front of a relatively small miracle which is being repeated every year in Fuzine, yes, in Gorski Kotar? Of course that this is possible and that it is necessary. Are there not complaints that we, journalists, do not write enough about good things, about bright examples of kindness, that, well, I too, being theologically educated, should write more often on positive effects of the healthy lived faith?

Redesigning

Therefore, I want today to testify on an unusual undertaking which is now repeated for the seventh time. In the last days of July or the beginning of August (depending on whether we take into account the preparatory activities or the very beginning of the seminar) Fuzine is written down into the peace-building world map. The Hope House of the Life Center International hosts some sixty participants and also some 20 speakers who during three weeks will experience a unique experience of peace, forgiveness, compassion, hug, friendship, healing that this region has not yet seen, whether we speak in terms of the power and authenticity, or of efficiency and originality.

The project has the name ROM, an acronym of Renewing Our Minds, i.e. "renewing our conscience". It was established in 1999 as a result of the vision of a group of young people who wanted to establish a movement which will be founded upon the bare need to renew human integrity in the region which has so much suffered during wars. These were the real prophets who understood that it was necessary, first all, to link the hearts of those whom the wars placed on opposite sides. Since I was involved in the project from the very beginning, as a mentor and a speaker, I may say without fear that I will be accused of not being objective, that until now I have not seen in the world - and I traveled to many countries - such a powerful and efficient model of motivating young people to undertake a not exactly pleasant and easy job of redesigning their own lives and societies from which they come, if possible in accordance with principles by which Jesus from Nazareth lived and worked, but in such a manner as to experience unity in pluralism.

ROM is an international socializing of young people who have proven their leadership capabilities and are trying to overcome ethnic, religious, political, cultural as well as other barriers which emerge when the lack of conscience on universality, fear, various despises, confidence, blow up everywhere where painful personal or social experience have multiplied. The project makes it possible for the participants to hear in peace personal stories, no matter how painful or simple they might be. Then it confronts them with the need to learn to live with all that confuses us in our lives, disturbs us, angers us or makes us aggressive. I saw some big and self-conceived lads coming full with pride, most often dazed by nationalism, who very soon confess with tears in their eyes how strongly the experience of forgiveness and life together has effected them.

Fuzine, which in these seven years have shown a big heart and model hospitality, glare because of the powerful example of unity in difference. No, these are no supermen. These are persons just like you, who have given themselves to the power of Ghost which renews everybody who wants to experience the ability to be joyful when taking the person beside him, regardless of where this person comes from, like a brother, like a companion and like a gift.

Believe it or not, in the small town Fuzine in Gorski Kotar the Croats and Serbs, as well as participants from some twenty odd countries, learn reconciliation from the Hutus and the Tutsis, peoples who in 1994 committed unbelievable mutual genocide in Rwanda and the neighboring Burundi. They do this within the

project ROM, which emerged six years ago and has its roots in the humanitarian work of the members of the Baptist Church in Croatia during the war years in the Hope House in Crikvenica under the leadership of pastor Stevo Dereta.

The project is organized in the Hope House, a formerly completely ruined children's house in Fuzine, which these humanitarians got from the municipal authorities and renovated it with the support of volunteers from different Christian communities from Europe, Canada and the U.S.A. The present leader of the program ROM, the Christian theologian and journalist Tihomir Kukolj says that the program remains within its three-weeks structure.

"We gathered the young ones from some twenty countries. Certainly, we continue to be focused upon our region, but the expansion and interest in this project are visible, so that together with the representatives of Croatia, Serbia and Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, Albania and Romania we have also participants from Tanzania, Zambia, Rwanda, Burundi, Equator, Sweden, Norway, Finland, Great Britain, France, Germany, U.S.A and Belgium. The circle of people who show interest for us and with whom we cooperate is expanding. I think I can say that we are better known abroad than in Croatia" – says Kukolj.

Joseph and Fisnik

I saw pastor Joseph from Rwanda, member of the Hutu people, crying last year in front of all of us because at a certain point he had not the courage, in fear for his own life, to go to help an acquaintance from the Tutsi tribe and save her life, because soon afterwards this woman was in front of him cut in pieces with machetes. He got to know a young Muslim, Fisnik from Prizren, a wonderful man who exactly in Fuzine, although belonging to Islam, quite normally accepted the revolution of mercy initiated by Jesus from Nazareth, and he has been doing humanitarian work for years in Kosovo where, when the last escalation of ethnic violence occurred, he immediately ran to help the seminarians from the Serb Orthodox Church in his town, Prizren, because they were threatened, and although Albanian put his own life at risk in order to save the endangered Serb brothers. What I want to say is, that in Fuzine I saw a lot of what belongs to the category of wonders of love or, if you want, to the process of the construction of a civilization of love.



Country Of Suffering And Pain

During the first week we work to get to know ourselves, because this is the most important part of change, and the model for self-knowing is the image of Jesus, and not in the strictly religious sense, but first of all in general human ideas visible in every little part of the life of Jesus. From this work stems also getting closer and mutual understanding of the participants. The second week is devoted to themes of reconciliation, forgiveness and the creation of new relations after the conflict. During the third week we work with every participant with a view of implementing in their surroundings that what was learned, because the organizers actually do have as their essential aim to spread the knowledge acquired here and to

expand the number of people who are ready to renew their minds and change the narrow views of life.

This year great attention was given to five guests from Africa, among which the pastor Joseph Nyamutera from Rwanda, himself a member of Hutu, then Delphine Ndyikeze from Burundi, herself a Hutu, whose husband was killed two years ago exactly as the answer of the villains who are not happy with the reconciliation process. "In Rwanda I am active in a Christian organization and this is where I heard about Croatia and this project ROM" – says Joseph Nyamutera. I knew about the recent wars in this region, and since in Rwanda there were also similar horrors, I decided to come because I am interested in the question of forgiveness and reconciliation. After the genocide I lived for two years as a refugee in Congo in incredibly bad conditions. There I lost a few members of my family because of different diseases, among them my own son. Now I am living in Rwanda: there is peace and at first glance everything is normal. Through different programs and projects endeavors are made to bring again closer the people and make a common life possible. However, every person in Rwanda carries much pain and suffering, and I am trying to make this easier through my work. This is a very difficult task because the amount of pain, in view of the committed crimes, is huge – deep, and there is also a big feeling of guilt by those who committed the crimes. The entire country is involved this, and all people in it. All!

He is aware that he cannot help all of them, but his testimony moved and brought to tears all domestic participants of this year's ROM, particularly the Croats and the Serbs.

"In the beginning I and other Christians were helping first in regard to primary needs – shelter, food, water... now we are already in the phase when we try to reach the conscience of the people. We are trying to link members of the Hutu and the Tutsi through different workshops, encounters and seminars. To free them from negative feelings, hate, fear, guilt and teach them how to forgive and reconcile.

We shall need a lot of time for the healing. Our workshops and seminars last only for three days and during these 72 hours we certainly cannot heal so deep and painful wounds. Many people have lost almost all their relatives, some have witnessed the murder of their dearest, of burying alive..." – says Joseph.

Another guest from Africa, Emmanuel Kopwe from Tanzania says that what he saw in Fuzine is exceptional. "I liked it very much and I think that this is a right way to approach people who went through horrors and hate, because only through talk, tolerance, understanding and other learning founded on the image and work of Jesus can we restore peace for these people. Regardless of the part of world we live in, we all are humans, and whenever there is conflict among people it is caused because one side does not see in the other a human, a human being. Jesus teaches us exactly about this, that in every person we should see a human and therefore I think that the project ROM is excellent and that it should be organized in all parts of the world."

"In my country there were ethnic conflicts between the Hutu and the Tutsi peoples, and a few years ago we also had serious political conflicts in which there were victims and bloodshed, but now the situation is much more peaceful and stable" – says Delphine Ndyikeze from Burundi. "However, the differences are still there and we must fight them by understanding and talking. I think that the project ROM is very useful because it implies that the differences must be respected, and not used for conflict and hate. I am here as a lecturer, but I myself have also learned a lot. Much of that I will implement in my further work", says Delphine.

As the direct impact of ROM in the Croatian society there has been for a few years now the seminar for Croats and Serbs in Eastern Slavonia with the aim to overcome barriers in this part of the country which were erected by the war and the politicians who benefit from the state of segregation. One of the participants, Ena Sulc, says that apart from the issue of conflict and war between Croats and Serbs, they are now discussing also the other regions and are confirming the thesis that it is necessary to communicate, because only thus is it possible to accept and understand those who are not like ourselves, regardless of what this difference might be. "I think that learning and getting used to tolerance today, in a society which is increasingly multicultural, is essential for normal life", thinks Ena.