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Fra Filip Lastrić and The Good Spirit of Bosnia

Bosnia has always had a special place in the heart of Bosnian Franciscans through the centuries of their activities. They felt it deeply as their homeland and their home, and they have never questioned it or abandoned it. They enshrine it as their native land and love it as the country of their fathers. They have lived for Bosnia, loved it, and when necessary died for it. When confronted with the mighty Ottoman Empire in 1463, the Franciscans had two possibilities: either leave the country or stay in their homeland, find a *modus vivendi* in the new environment, and maintain it for themselves and their Catholic community. Of course, there were also those who believed in the alternative—leaving the country and settling in those regions that were under the authority of a Christian ruler; they looked on the possible stay in Bosnia as an act of betrayal, collaboration with barbaric rule.

Nevertheless, the Franciscans decided to stay in their country of Bosnia and fight for their life conditions in their native land. They decided to continue to live in a new environment, although aware that they would not have a determining role in the shaping of the new system. In addition to their love and affection for their hearths and their homeland, for their life in Bosnia, they needed good diplomatic skills, savvy in their contacts with the Ottoman rulers and, especially important, courage.

As young aspirants for the Franciscan Order, Bosnian Franciscans studied in glittering European metropolises, where they could feel and experience directly the freedom and glitter of a different life. However, they did not stay there because they believed that they would then **lose** a part of themselves if they abandoned their country and their people. That is why they returned dutifully to their Bosnia, with the aim to serve their people who were poor, which was the basic purpose of their vocation – to serve those from whom they originated. That fact arouses admiration even today, and scholars on the cultural and spiritual history of Bosnia and Herzegovina never fail to emphasize it.

Bosnian Franciscans returned from their studies theologically and philosophically educated and intellectually enriched with experiences from different places. They brought with them new books on theology, philosophy, history, and medicine. They wrote books as well, and in spite of all the hardships, carried them to Italian printers; later, with saddlebags full of books, they would return to their homeland, making those books available to the entire Franciscan community and its people, who at that time were almost completely illiterate. The Franciscans deeply believed in the power of the written word.

That is the environment in which Fra Filip Lastrić (1700 - 1783), one of the most prominent Franciscans during the 400-year-long rule of the Ottoman Empire, grew up and was spiritually formed. He was born in Očevija near Vares in 1700. He finished elementary school in Kraljeva Sutjeska and studied philosophy and theology in Italy. He was a professor of philosophy and a teacher for neophytes; he also served as a Provincial of the Franciscan province of Bosnae Argentinae (Bosna Srebrena). He wrote many philosophical and theological essays, several books of sermons as well as the first work of historiography, on Bosnian-Herzegovinian soil, regarding the Bosnian Franciscan Province. He died in Kraljeva Sutjeska in 1783.

Fra Lastrić began his life journey in the moment when only about 25,000 Catholics stayed in Bosnia, and it is calculated that approximately 100,000 emigrated from the country, mostly to Prekosavlje [the region north of the Sava River] as a consequence of the Austro-Turkish war (1683 - 1699). In a Bosnia devastated to such a degree, fewer than thirty Franciscans stayed and only three Franciscan monasteries remained (Kraljeva Sutjeska, Fojnica, Kresevo), while all the others were destroyed or burned down.

It was already evident that in his student days Fra Lastrić was willing to give up personal advancement (like becoming a professor at some foreign university, for which he had great promise as a gifted and hard-working student) for the demands of the Franciscan community and Catholics in Bosnia.

A life in enslaved Bosnia, which he sometimes simply called Bosna Argentina, was hard and full of uncertainty for Catholics, culminating in some periods in banishments and iniquities. Fra Lastrić kept record of such moments of anarchy, when nobody's life or property was safe, and when even the members of the privileged confession were killing one another.

Fra Lastrić was a spiritually strong person, with great intellectual and moral authority; as such, he enjoyed a strong reputation among Franciscans in Bosnia and Herzegovina. This is proved by the fact that Franciscans always consulted him about every important issue before making decisions concerning for the community.

Fra Lastrić insisted on the fact that the matrix and the center of the Province of Bosna Argentina was indeed in Bosnia itself, from which other provinces separated in time as its daughters.

In 1757, Bosna Argentina was abolished and degraded to a lower level within the framework of the Franciscan Order. That hurt the pride of the Bosnian Franciscans, and they decided to address their grievances in writing to Rome and demand a correction to the injustice that had been done to them. Not being satisfied with that alone, they sent Fra Filip Lastrić to Rome obtain, with his skills and authority, a reinstatement of their ancient Province's lost rights and privileges. Fra Lastrić did that obtaining a special Papal decree confirming the demands in 1758.

Those events relating to the status of the Franciscans in Bosnia and Herzegovina, after the Province's division, influenced Filip Lastrić to write a work about the history of Bosnia. A Survey of Antiques of the Bosnian Province (Epitome velustatum

Bosnensis Provinciae), written in the Latin language, was printed in Italy (the third extended edition published in Ancona 1776.)

When in his Survey of Antiques of the Bosnian Province Fra Lastrić writes “about secular and civic Bosnia.” He also reveals an additional motive for writing this work—to give encouragement to future generations to explore their past and promote historical scholarship.

With this work, Fra Lastrić showed his loyalty to Bosnia as his homeland and to the Franciscan province Bosna Argentina, for whose defense he made a great effort, and for which he was willing to sacrifice himself, and even “vanish in dust with it,” as he said. The origin of this work can thus be explained by his desire to defend Bosna Argentina. Lastrić’s writing his history in Latin made it accessible to other readers far away from Bosnia.

Fra Filip Lastrić is one of the most important figures in the cultural heritage of Bosnia and Herzegovina. He remains a great champion of Bosnia and his people, for whom the idea of the Bosnian Kingdom always revived the hope in freedom and independence. That’s how he was, Fra Filip Lastrić – a man of Bosnia, its good spirit!

Translated by Amila Čelebić - © 2007 Amila Čelebić

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