News
Ministry



Sr. Blanka Jeličić, right, a Croatian-Slavonian music teacher and member of the Sisters of Mercy of St. Vincent de Paul, with her Muslim friend and colleague in interfaith cooperation, Šejla Mujić Kevrić, in the city of Livno, Bosnia and Herzegovina. (GSR/Chris Herlinger)



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With its towering minaret and stately white exterior, the Esme Sultanija Mosque in the center of Jajce, Bosnia and Herzegovina, is a sacred edifice venerated by people of all faiths.

But the building's significance also has to do with healing — not just beauty. The original structure was fully destroyed in 1992 during the Bosnian war and its painstaking reconstruction, though largely finished by 2010, was not fully completed until last year.

"Sadly, in war, sacred objects should be exempt from destruction," Ramiz Kahrić, the mosque's imam said recently as he gave a tour to a group of Christian visitors. "But that's not the case."

The mosque is named after the wife of Bosnian Governor Mehmed Pasha Muhsinović, who ruled in the late 18th century, the time the original mosque was constructed. The structure is the only mosque in Bosnia and Herzegovina named after a woman.

The new structure is reason for rejoicing — a symbol that the war of three decades ago is largely, though perhaps not fully, behind Bosnia. "It's become a source of joy for everyone," he said.

One of those rejoicing is Sr. Iva Klarić, 51, a Croatian teacher of religion and a member of the School Franciscan Sisters of Christ the King, Bosnian-Croatian Province, who has resided in Jajce, located in central Bosnia and Herzegovina, for 15 years.



Ramiz Kahrić, the imam of the Esme Sultanija Mosque, left, and Sr. Iva Klarić, 51, a Croatian teacher of religion and a member of the School Franciscan Sisters of Christ the King, Bosnian-Croatian Province, who has resided in Jajce, Bosnia and Herzegovina, for 15 years. (GSR/Chris Herlinger)

She has worked with the Muslim community to promote dialogue and cooperation between Christians and Muslims in the small, picturesque city of about 26,000 — about half Croat Catholic and half Muslim.

Though Klarić's work and the efforts of other sisters in Bosnia are small in scale, and often involve those the sisters have befriended, they are helping mend wounds in a country where war fueled ethnic and religious animosity.

Their work also provides excellent examples of "what Pope Francis means by accompaniment for interfaith and ecumenical dialogue," John Borelli, a religion historian who serves as special assistant for Catholic identity and dialogue to the president of Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., said in an email to GSR.



The reconstructed Esme Sultanija Mosque is pictured. The original structure was fully destroyed in 1992 during the Bosnian war and its painstaking reconstruction was not fully completed until 2023. (GSR/Chris Herlinger)

"Everyday conversations among people of different faiths who are friends," he added, "are the bedrock for interfaith dialogue."

The war of the 1990s altered demographics dramatically — before the war, the inner city was twice its current size and had a sizable Serb Orthodox community.

But the ravages of war changed that. Though alliances shifted, at the beginning of the war, Muslims and Croats were allied against forces of the Yugoslav army, which were predominately Serb. Shelling from that army was responsible for the destruction of the mosque, as well as a neighboring Catholic Church and much of the city center.

"The city changed, and the war was the cause of that change," said Klarić, who studied theology in Sarajevo, the capital of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and taught for nearly 20 years in communities near Jajce.

In the wake of what she calls "a complicated history," it has been important, Klarić said in an interview in her congregational convent, for all peoples to come together — whether that means visiting each other's place of worship, which Klarić does easily, or being involved in community and social events for everyone.

"We are living this dialogue here," she said.

Klarić's congregational house, adjoining one of the city's Catholic churches, "is open to all religions and nationalities," she said. It is also the site for gatherings of people of all faiths — such as social events, poetry readings, prayer meetings or sessions of a local council for interreligious dialogue, for which Klarić serves as president.



Sr. Iva Klarić, a Croatian teacher of religion and a member of the School Franciscan Sisters of Christ the King, Bosnian-Croatian Province, who has resided in Jajce for 15 years, is seen outside the Esme Sultanija Mosque. (GSR/Chris Herlinger)

All of these gatherings are of interest to the public, said Klarić, noting that Jajce residents "express the need for such meetings."

Also important: public discussions and presentations of Pope Francis' 2015 environmental encyclical "*Laudato Si'*, on Care for Our Common Home."

Climate-related education has become part of Klarić's ministry, something she says comes naturally to a member of a Franciscan congregation but also stems from the global nature of the world's current climate crisis.

"It's everyone's task" to be climate conscious, she said, noting that her December calendar was filled with presentations on the pope's encyclical, including to school children.

Feeling 'at home' with interfaith dialogue

Still, Klarić acknowledges that interfaith cooperation is an abiding passion, saying she feels "at home" when she engages in interreligious dialogue.

She says that is due to a number of factors — a basic one being that Jajce is a community with a mixed religious population. And that being in dialogue with neighbors is a Christian mandate, she says. "We're different but we're connected," she said. "The church calls us to be in dialogue with everyone."

But in the small village where Klarić grew up — Gornji Bešpelj, not far from Jajce — "Catholics and Muslims weren't strangers to each other," she recalled. "We had good communication then."

Given that background, when Klarić arrived in Jajce for ministry in 2009, "I felt there was something for me to work on," she said. "I felt interreligious dialogue is the mission [through which] I should live my Christian call and Franciscan charism."

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She was particularly inspired by the story of the 1219 encounter of St. Francis of Assisi with the sultan of Egypt in a peacemaking effort during the Crusades.

"I feel God was asking me to come here."

Something similar animates the ministry of Sr. Blanka Jeličić, 55, a Croatian-Slavonian music teacher and member of the Sisters of Mercy of St. Vincent de Paul. Her ministry included a year, 1994-95, during the height of the siege of Sarajevo.

She recalls a shared sense of suffering and solidarity across ethnic and religious lines.

"We were sheltered in a basement, Serbs, Muslims and Croats all," Jeličić said, recalling the Sarajevo siege. "We shared things."

The dangers were real. "Every day you were under pressure," she said. "It was a miracle when you weren't killed."



The landscape between the Bosnian cities of Jajce and Livno includes snow-covered plains, plateaus and mountains — and the occasional sighting of a shelled-out house, a tangible and physical reminder of the war of the 1990s. (GSR/Chris Herlinger)

She said a kitten saved her life.

Out in a public space, she bowed down to the animal, telling it to "go away, go away." As she did that, a sniper's bullet passed over her head.

"It was an experience," she recalled. "Every day you were alive in Sarajevo was like a gift you received. It was like winning the lottery — you had another day."

Yet Jeličić downplays the event's significance in her life. "It happened and life continues," she said, though adding, "It was one experience that made my life richer."

Now Jeličić ministers in the city of Livno, home to about 32,000 residents — predominately Croatian with a small Muslim minority. The hilly city of brooks and streams, bridges and venerated mosques and churches is about 70 miles southwest of Jajce, reachable by car through snow-covered plains, plateaus and mountains — and the occasional sighting of a shelled-out house, a tangible and physical reminder of the war of the 1990s.

Formerly the provincial superior for her congregation, Jeličić has now returned to teaching church music for Catholic youths and families at a Livno parish. But assisting with interfaith dialogue and cooperation is an animating passion, given her experience in the war and living and working among people of all faiths.



The Hadži Ahmeta Dukatara mosque, dating from the 16th century, in the western Bosnian city of Livno (GSR/Chris Herlinger)

Seeing God's creation in everyone

Jeličić was asked last year by a priest to serve on an informal city interfaith council of about 27 members, a position she gladly took up.

"It's not strange to me," Jeličić said last month in an interview in a stylish coffee shop in the center of the picturesque city. "It's natural for me. I see God's creation in each person. If someone needs help, I will help them. It doesn't matter what faith tradition a person belongs to."

The council meets regularly to foster dialogue but also conducts joint projects, such as actions to raise awareness about violence against women and children. "It's important to send a message about that," Jeličić says, calling it a serious problem in the country.

She was chosen for the role partly because of her visibility in raising money for small-scale projects to help those needing assistance, like a Muslim resident whose family needed a washing machine.

The successful fundraiser for that project united Jeličić with an important ally — a teacher who works in a Muslim school and is the mother of an 8-year-old daughter. Šejla Mujić Kevrić, 35, praises her Catholic sister colleague for her outgoing optimism and enthusiasm, calling Jeličić "a member of my family now."



Sr. Blanka Jeličić, 55, left, a Croatian-Slavonian music teacher and member of the Sisters of Mercy of St. Vincent de Paul, with her friend and colleague in interfaith cooperation, Šejla Mujić Kevrić, in the city of Livno, Bosnia and Herzegovina. (GSR/Chris Herlinger)

Over the past six years, the two womens' work has focused on youth and women, two groups that are open to a spirit of cooperation between those of different faiths, which in Livno includes not only the Catholic majority but the Muslim minority and an even smaller group of Orthodox Serbs.

Social media and some television coverage have helped the interfaith group publicize its work, which is often small-scale — like making food packages for the needy — yet important for the community. The work has gotten recognition, including an award from a civic group in Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina's fourth largest city.

While pleased with progress, both women don't want to paint a portrait of a society fully healed from the wars of three decades ago.

"There are still some suspicions," Kevrić said of relations between people. "It's not a utopia. There are sometimes tensions though they're often not visible. But we're here to break those tensions."



Sr. Blanka Jeličić, 55, right, a Croatian-Slavonian music teacher and member of the Sisters of Mercy of St. Vincent de Paul, with her friend and colleague in interfaith cooperation, Šejla Mujić Kevrić, during an interview in a café in the city of Livno, Bosnia and Herzegovina. (GSR/Chris Herlinger)

Residents in Jajce express similar sentiments, saying that not all divisions have healed, and that tensions can be exploited for political purposes by political figures. In that regard, the shadows of war are perhaps not fully behind Bosnians.

Yet, Andrea Budeš, 29, a Jajce teacher, feels relations between residents in Jajce are probably better than in other communities, given the close ties that existed between those of different faiths before the war, and a lingering respect for each other's cultural traditions.

She also sees a wider picture, noting that in a "globalized world, it's normal to accept each other."

If that's the bigger view, working neighbor to neighbor is also important.

"We're trying," Jeličić said, noting that her work with her Muslim friend particularly in helping the poor in Livno, "fits completely" with her congregation's charism.

"Christ said to take care of your closest like you care of yourself, because the hearts are broken, the bodies are injured, the souls are hurt," said Jeličić. "As a Catholic and as a sister, the only thing that is certain [to me] is Christ's love."

Asked if females make better peacemakers than men, both women smiled and Jeličić winked at her friend. "Yes," Kevrić said, but with both adding that, in their Bosnian experience, women are often better acquainted with the immediate needs of their families and neighbors.



From the back, Sr. Blanka Jeličić, 55, left, a Croatian-Slavonian music teacher and member of the Sisters of Mercy of St. Vincent de Paul, with her friend and colleague in interfaith cooperation, Šejla Mujić Kevrić, as they walk down a path in the Bosnian city of Livno, Bosnia and Herzegovina. (GSR/Chris Herlinger)

That might lead to valuing the importance of dialogue with others. Borelli of Georgetown said women's dialogues "among the ethnic groups in the Balkans and in the Middle East or in Europe and the United States among Christians, Jews, and Muslims [have] remained ongoing [when] formal dialogues stopped or collapsed among official representatives."

Certainly no one doubts the commitment of Catholic sisters as peacemakers.

"Catholic sisters, wherever and whenever there are wars," Kevrić said, "are there to give help. I admire them for that."

Of course, small acts of kindness are common among people of different faiths everywhere, and Klarić praises her Muslim friends and neighbors in Jajce for their neighborliness, solidarity and hospitality.

"That's who we are [as Bosnians]. It's much nicer to celebrate the holidays together, to drink coffee together," she said. "We'll all be happier that way."



Sr. Iva Klarić, left, a Croatian teacher of religion and a member of the School Franciscan Sisters of Christ the King, Bosnian-Croatian Province, who has resided in Jajce for 15 years and Muslim elementary teacher Almina Sulejmanović, from the city of Fojnica, during a "peace gathering" of Catholic and Muslim students in Sarajevo, the capital of Bosnia and Herzegovina. (Courtesy of Sr. Iva Klarić)

It is not difficult to be a Catholic Franciscan sister in that context, noting that Muslims in Jajce welcome the ministries and friendship of Catholic sisters. And during the visit to the mosque by Klarić and other Christian visitors, Ramiz Kahrić, the Jajce mosque's imam, noted with pride Mary's veneration in the Quran.

"It seems like they trust us," Klarić said, saying that Muslim neighbors see the sisters as being "present for the small people," and are also not committed to proselytizing those of other faiths.

"Our source, the Bible, and our Franciscan charism should inspire us to be open to difference, to be there for everyone, to be a sister to everyone and to all of God's creatures, as St. Francis teaches us." Klarić said.

"I tell everyone: 'Don't be afraid of the other. Look at how God created us, as all different. It shows how large his creation is. That's a beautiful thing.' "

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