Ivo Markovic

The history of Pontanima is a short story of reconciliation in Bosnia-Herzegovina

Beginnings

The idea to found an inter-religious peace choir emerged around Easter of 1996. The Dayton Peace Accords had ended the war and made it possible, in some way, to begin life again. I had returned from exile in Zagreb with faith in the possibility of healing and reconciling devastated Bosnia. Sarajevo was wounded and sad, with many scars; homes were destroyed, streets were dirty and pockmarked by mortar shells, nights were dark, people were worn out, unhappy, mistrustful, walking slowly and bent over. Easter needed to be celebrated more festively, with songs, and I looked for singers who could perform them. Josip (Pepi) Katavic was the first person that offered to help. I mentioned to him that I enjoy working with music as a pastoral hobby and that in that moment in Bosnia everyone should do something within his or her own ability for healing and reconciliation. Dear Josip expressed that he would like to work with a choir and proposed that we gather his friends and form a choir for St. Anthony's Church. He would direct the choir and I would play the organ. The first problem - that there were not enough Catholic singers to form a choir - was pivotal and the solution was the foundation of the future orientation and mission of the choir. Josip asked if we could invite those who are not Catholic or have no religious affiliation. Sarajevo was exactly the place where we could do that, as a step forward or signpost: with the spirituality of music we could heal, reconcile, get to know each other and grow together. Together we who are different could sing the songs that belong to all of us. While all around us there was empty talk about dialogue, enculturation and cooperation, we decided to actually live out those things.

I asked those first choir members, especially those who weren't Catholic, to stay with us and help us sing liturgical songs for mass in St. Anthony's Church. Together we could develop a mission in which the musical spirituality of religions is used for the healing and reconciliation of the people of Bosnia, and create a new perspective of cooperation and restore relations among religions. The first choir members valued the activities of the Bosnian Franciscans and genuinely trusted them, which stimulated the Franciscans' friendship toward the choir. I proposed a deal:

"We Franciscans of St. Anthony's monastery endeavor to be spiritual people, in good spiritual condition. We pray, read, write, speak, talk, listen and help to find the answers to all current issues from our perspective. Fellowship with us must be enriching. In the same way, we need you for interaction and inspiration for the orientation of our mission. We can be a blessing to each other."

Dragec, Dragana, Jasmin, Mirjana, Sanja, Željko & Željko, Mario, Daniela, Zdenka, Žana and others met with fra Vitomir, fra Perica, fra Luka, fra Thomas, and especially with students fra Zdravko, fra Ilija (Kico), fra Nue. From that fellowship was created a blessed, dynamic perspective. From the beginning, we decided to base our work on the appreciation and respect of each person and that the choir would be a community founded on that principle. For this type of open community it was important that we not avoid conflicts, but that we talk about them and resolve them. From time to time, conflicts caused tensions that threatened the very existence of the community. However, we always came through those conflicts and came to better understand ourselves and others.

The Idea and Mission
The idea of the choir was to invite people from all faiths and convictions who believe that with the spirituality of music and the peace potential of religions, Bosnia could be healed and reconciled. We wanted to influence interreligious relations and peacemaking efforts, not only in our country but to be a model and a challenge to the world in which we live. We decided to begin with Catholic music, expanding to include Orthodox Christian music and all Christian ecumenical music and from there we included Jewish and Islamic traditions. In that way we encompassed Abrahamic/Ibrahimic ecumenism through increasing enculturation with other worldviews. Our goal in that pluralism was to perform concerts of Jewish, Orthodox Christian, Islamic, Catholic and Protestant traditions. We wanted, as much as possible, to enter into the heart of the prayer and worship of each of these faiths and to sing and bear witness to the message of trust, cooperation and peace. The next step was to try to share our spiritual experiences by singing compatible songs of one community within a meditative and prayerful setting of another religious community.

We were aware that we live and act in an environment where traditional religions dominate by aggressive apologetics and a mission tinged by imperialism and especially nationalism in which traditional religions are the souls of the ethnic nations. Therefore, we insisted that our actions be founded on the principles and standards of ecumenical dialogue.

In the beginning the idea was difficult to implement because of a severe lack of confidence and mistrust among the peoples, nations and faiths in Bosnia-Herzegovina. First we prepared a Catholic Christmas concert with distinctly Catholic music. The only step forward we were able to make was our effort to create a program that was more "Christian" than nationalistic Croatian. In that time, nationalistic connotations were predominant in all "ethnic" religions.

It seemed most appropriate to enter into Abrahamic ecumenism by starting with Orthodox Christian songs. In that post-war period, Islamic songs could evoke negative reactions among Christians and we needed to be sensitive to that. The first Orthodox song that we sang was "Tebe Poem" by S. Mokranjac. Symptomatically, some of the choir members had problems singing a song of their "oppressors". They had been on the frontlines, had seen death of their nearest and dearest, and had survived a long-lasting and humiliating siege. Their grief and anger could only be healed by the nobleness of our ideal. One of the most moving testimonies to this, was a member of the choir from Muslim tradition who said, "In the beginning, it made me sick to sing it, but now I enjoy it. It's beautiful." That confession meant a lot to our choir community.

Gradually, we enriched the Catholic liturgies in St. Anthony's church with Serbian Orthodox songs sung in Old Church Slavonic and began to include the Cyrillic texts in our printed programs. That caused dissention around us. There were those who could foresee our message of peace in that gesture and openly support us. Fra Luka and fra Vitomir stubbornly insisted on our concept and supported it. Some turned their backs on us saying that it was not the appropriate time for that, and that it was a provocation, an offense and a national betrayal. Of course what we did could not pass without protests from those whose spirit was obscured by anger and passion. A good illustration of this was our 1997 concert in the Franciscan church in Zagreb (Kaptol) where we sang two of Mokranjac's compositions during mass. The Franciscans warmly hosted us and looked upon our work with love. But one of them, when seeing the program, insisted that we not perform those two "Serbian" songs because it would be a provocation. I had to give in, but as the mass began I changed my mind and gave the programs to be handed out. We sang the complete program and no one made any objections, but instead, many were happy to feel the peaceful power of our mission.

The Bridge between Christianity and Islam

In spite of post-war tensions between Croats and Serbs, the Serbian Orthodox songs were not a significant challenge in light of the trends of pluralism, coexistence, dialogue and ecumenism in the contemporary world. However, Islamic songs were a completely different challenge. Though people in Bosnia know and confirm that Christians and Muslims believe in the same God, deep, inner defense
mechanisms remain. These defense mechanisms have been produced over centuries in the form of
dangerous historical memory and were awakened in the recent war. These mechanisms did not allow
positive experiences of interaction and enculturation, only defensiveness and mistrust.

We began to ease those tensions with our first Jewish song "Mašpil Geim" by S. Vinaver. Dragana
sang the fine Semitic melody, similar to Arabic tonalities, with soul and the choir responded with Old
Testament-like power and tenderness. The song became a type of foundation for the building of
Abrahamic musical ecumenism. In the meantime, Mario, Josip and a few other musical pioneers,
searched for a way to include Islamic songs in our musical ecumenism. This time, "Tu Hi Allahu
Ekber", an Indian melody, served as a bridge to Islamic songs. Eastern spirituality acknowledges all
religious elements as potential paths to God. This potential has been forgotten by traditional
Abrahamic/Ibrahimic religions though it is a part of their essence. In spite of its syncretistic
connotations we emphasized that it is an Indian song and we welcome it as a prelude to complete
Abrahamic/Ibrahimic ecumenism.

Our composer and arranger, Mario Katavic sensed the moment and our dilemma and reacted with his
profound musical instinct. Out of the finest tradition of reverent Islamic music in Bosnia-
Herzegovina, he composed his "Allahu Ekber" and showed his understanding of the tonality of that
tradition, which will be plausible in his following works, especially the "Bosnian Te Deum". The fact
that Mario, from his Christian tradition composed an Islamic song enriched our mission. Later,
following that example we commissioned additional pieces of one tradition from composers of
another. Rehearsals for Mario's "Allahu Ekber" in the middle of 1998, once again created dissention
within the our small choir community. Most often the argument was that it was too early to perform
it, that it was used as a battle cry by Islamic soldiers, etc. We had to immerse ourselves in
understanding and patience and to re-emphasize our goal and the importance of our mission. In our
choir community we had already developed awareness of our orientation and the negative reactions
were individual and exceptional. It is interesting that people who in the beginning reacted with
disagreement and resistance and were calling us "Old Orthodox cantors", "A choir of muezzins" or
"St. Anthony's whiners", later became enthusiastic supporters of interreligious dialogue, wider
spiritual openness and enculturation. Finally, came the moment to encompass the
Abrahamic/Ibrahimic musical ecumenism with our first song from the Islamic tradition. It was on the
occasion of the our first interreligious meeting called the Spirit of Assisi 1998 which celebrated the
meeting of representatives of world religions in Assisi on October 27, 1987. Together with the
Bosnian Franciscan Commission for Justice, Peace and Ecology, led by fra Luka Markešić, we
organized this interreligious meditation. Interreligious communication on higher levels was not
possible at that moment because our religious leaders did not want to pray next to each other. The
Serbian Orthodox Church choir, the Gazi-Husrev Bey's medresa choir, musical groups from the
Baptist Church and others have occasionally participated at those annual interreligious meetings. But
in 1998, there was no Islamic choir, so it was an opportunity for Pontanima to perform "Allahu
Ekber". Open Broadcasting Network (OBN) TV filmed the entire interreligious meeting and
repeatedly broadcast the program so that it was seen across Bosnia. That was the first important
promotion of Pontanima in Bosnia with which we drew numerous supporters, but also passionate
opposition that was followed by threats. However, coming from the least respected segment of the
Bosnian population, those comments should simply be forgotten.

Pontanima

In the beginning of 1998, we decided to find a suitable name for the choir, describing its mission. It
was difficult to decide on a name because of sensitive implications. Fra Vitomir Slujić, after
suggesting that we be called "Pontifices musica" (Latin, meaning "builders of bridges with music" or
"musical priests") eventually coined the name from two Latin nouns i.e. "pons, pontis" (meaning
bridge) and "anima" (soul). By taking on the name Pontanima (spiritual bridge) we gave creative life
to dead Latin words. We decided that Pontanima would become a true inter-religious choir, in which
a gathering of women and men who are secure in their own faith and convictions embrace others in
their differences and accept them and their whole identity. The choir needs to be a community which
bears witness to the creative power of diversity and takes on the greatest musical beauty in religions, especially Abrahamic-Ibrahamic ecumenism. The diversity forms a beautiful, ecumenical mosaic, which eliminates mistrust and xenophobia, and restores communication, cooperation, dialogue, coexistence, pluralism, empowerment and enculturation. Pontanima wishes to contribute to the liberation of religions from negative secular interests and to promote the positive peace potential of religions so that they might become catalysts for creating healthier people and world. For this mission Pontanima would like to have the support of all religions, especially their intense spiritual energy. Once they are liberated from the traditionalistic ideology that burdens them, they can impact the present and direct the future of this region.

In Pontanima we are aware of our positive step forward which is can be a stumbling block and provocation to all those who agree with the status quo. However, that isn't a reason to doubt our mission, but rather an invalid argument which proves the importance of our mission and obligates us to act responsibly.

In 1998, we had already clarified our mission, style and complete program. Our concerts embraced Abrahamic-Ibrahimic ecumenism, and we enriched Catholic and Protestant worship services with songs from Jewish, Orthodox Christian, Catholic and Protestant traditions. Our name had already become known throughout Bosnia-Herzegovina because of our numerous performances and tours. We sang at all of the most important events in St. Anthony's church, performing concerts with new repertoire several times a year. We traveled throughout the Federation, tried to accept all invitations to perform in Sarajevo such as Bascarsija Nights summer arts festival and other choir festivals. We performed in Zenica, Tuzla, Livno, Mostar, Medjugorje, Kiseljak, Vitez, Vares, Kresevo, etc. We toured in Austria, Croatia and Italy. Television, radio and print journals covered our activities with interest.

Crossing the Border

The year 1999 was designated as a year of Mario Katavic’s “Bosnian Te Deum” and the “cross-border” initiative, which meant penetrating the Republika Srpska. We had different options and contacts in Republika Srpska, but the greatest opportunity presented itself in the form of the “Bosnian Te Deum” whose second performance was to be in Republika Srpska. We rehearsed together with “Arion” Orchestra from Banja Luka, conducted by Muharem Insanic, which is an extremely diverse group such as Pontanima. We planned to perform the Bosnian Te Deum for Catholic Christmas in Sarajevo, and at the beginning of the next year for Orthodox Christmas in Republika Srpska. In Lukavica in the Republika Srpska we found cultural activists and those struggling to return who supported our activity and organized accommodations for us, but the local parish priest of the Orthodox Church did not allow us to perform ilahijas (traditional Islamic songs) during our concert, so we canceled the performance and waited for another opportunity. We also attempted to perform in Brčko and Banja Luka, but we did not succeed until the beginning of 2001 when we performed an entire concert -including ilahijas - in Banski Dvor in Banja Luka. Just over two months later, at the ceremony to lay the foundation stone for the rebuilding of the Ferhadija mosque, the visitors were attacked by a terrible outpouring of enmity against Islam. In contrast, Pontanima had already succeeded to bring Abrahamic/Ibrahimic ecumenism into the heart of Republika Srpska and show the possibilities and ways of reconciliation.

Mario Katavic’s Bosnian Te Deum was most likely the finest cultural event in 1999 in Sarajevo. Out of his experiences in Sarajevo and Bosnia, Mario sincerely allowed the Christian hymn “We Praise You, Lord” to echo along with the sounds of church bells, Islamic calls to prayer and the spirit of Bosnia found on the ancient tombstones. The musical memory of the Bosnian Te Deum reverberates from the Bosnian hills and houses of worship and sends a challenge from Bosnia to the world. In the future, in a healthy Bosnia, people evaluating the Bosnian Te Deum from the perspective of music, peace, ecumenism, and dialogue will be surprised. The Bosnian Te Deum was performed in Dom Armije in Sarajevo along with Arion, the chamber orchestra from Banja Luka. They were the first orchestra from the Republika Srpska to be a guest in the Federation after the war. Many spiritual
people found a way to appreciate this great artistic and peaceful enterprise, but some religious leaders could not accept it. Their points of view were obviously different; they cared more about the protection and isolation of their own groups rather than about the growth and inspiration of their community through interaction with their neighbors.

After the disappointments with the “cross-border” initiative of 1999, we decided that we would perform four different concerts in 2001: Jewish, Orthodox Christian, Catholic-Protestant, and Islamic music. In this way, our wish was to express our respect and adoration for each of these great spiritualities and also reduce the fear of cooperation and communication. It was a huge challenge for the choir, but it was at the same time an opportunity for enculturation. After the Christmas 2000 concert, with the finest works from Catholic and Protestant traditions, we prepared a special concert of Orthodox music for Orthodox Christmas in 2001. The essence of the concert was S. Mokranjac’s "Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom”, along with the best songs from Russian, Serbian, and Macedonian Orthodoxy. The concert was extremely well prepared and took place in Dom Armije in the presence of many representatives of cultural and social life, but without many high representatives of the Serbian Orthodox Church. Even the media ignored this event. The concert of Jewish music was performed in the hall of the Jewish community of Sarajevo for the occasion of the Feast of Passover in April 2001. It was one of the most intimate concerts for us. The small Jewish community of Sarajevo along with their guests was sincerely touched by our beautiful gesture of respect and adoration.

The concert of Islamic music was the greatest challenge because of differing approaches to music in the spiritual paradigms in Christianity and Islam. We planned the concert for Kurban Bajram 2001, but we gave up out of concern that it would not be on the same musical level as our previous concerts of Abrahamic/Ibrahimic ecumenism. Islamic tradition emphasizes the text, the power of words. The music is a marginalized element. In Christian and Jewish traditions music is more independent and with its expressiveness interprets the text. We wanted Bosnian Muslims to feel our respect for them in a special way and we were concerned that our program of Islamic music was not adequately developed and so we postponed the whole project while continuing to prepare. In debates within the choir, one side thought that we should simply perform ilahijas with choir, soloists, dynamics, etc. The other side defended the idea of arranging compositions for choir in the spirit of Islamic spirituality and its musical tonality. In any case, whatever Pontanima does with Islamic music is for its enrichment. That is best shown by the exceptional compositions of sacred Bosnian Islamic ilahijas that Mario Katavic has arranged. The concert of Islamic music has not yet been performed for purely creative reasons, but it will be our first program challenge in the first half of 2002.

In relation to the concert series of Abrahamic-Ibrahimic ecumenism and the activities of Pontanima in general, we hear arguments from traditionalistic circles concerning the place where these songs are to be performed. The argument is that these sacred songs can only be performed in a prayerful and meditative setting and that only the members of that religious community can perform them. Furthermore, they insist that the songs cannot be performed publicly but only within the house of worship, among families and in the wider religious community. There are differences in opinion among the various religious traditions regarding this issue though their arguments are similar. Some even feel that singing songs of another religious tradition is an act of violence and imperialism. Pontanima has often heard that we should not sing "their" songs, but invite them to sing their own songs. This kind of argument promotes xenophobia and is not sustainable within the universal viewpoints that constitute the essence of their mission. The song of our neighbor affects us and we receive it and grow through it. Likewise, our song becomes our neighbor's heritage and impacts their growth. In that interwoven spirituality and in the discovery of our own reflection in the other, no one loses, but instead it is the only way to grow.

The Challenge of Touring

Many of our friends from abroad have discovered that the message of Pontanima is relevant for their own countries. Therefore, there is great interest in hosting Pontanima. These tours have been challenging and motivating for our choir community. They encouraged us to take on the greatest
musical goals and reach them. Pontanima has toured in Austria, Croatia, Italy and FR Yugoslavia, but our greatest challenge was our tour in the United States of America in April of 2000. Pontanima had the opportunity to perform at Harvard University and Boston College in Boston, in B’nai Jeshurun synagogue and at Hofstra University in New York City, on the Millennium Stage in Kennedy Center and the U.S. Capitol steps in Washington D.C., and in Chicago. In total, those 18 performances were special opportunities for our unique choir. Similar interest in our choir continues and we anticipate tours in England and Germany as our organizers are able. Pontanima lives and works very dynamically and is often challenged by various circumstances. Under the direction of Josip Katavic, Pontanima has found the perfect rhythm. With enthusiasm and clear, personal investment, Josip shapes the familiar soul of Pontanima and Pontanima inspires Josip through its spontaneous life. Andrija Pavlic, a Sarajevan living in Vienna, has been an important influence on Pontanima as a friend and cooperator. Fra Thomas Anthony, a Franciscan Anglican from England played a decisive role in the life of Pontanima. Likewise, other friends and lovers of Bosnia who have spent years of their lives giving to Bosnia have been of great value to Pontanima. Amy Gopp, a charismatic American who acculturated so much that she became a true Bosnian, had a decisive influence in shaping the choir in 1997-1998. A young Canadian-American couple, John and Karin Kaufman Wall carried the burden of the development of the choir into a true institution and movement. In this destroyed Bosnia, we could not have stood up without help. We needed a helping hand to lift us up. We often mercilessly accuse that hand and all that comes out of it, forgetting that it is human, it breathes and it gives meaning. Likewise, many foreign workers in Bosnia-Herzegovina found in Pontanima a community to feed their spirituality and became interwoven in its growth. Michael, Zelah, Amy Meyer, Jan, Nick, Ruth, Jean-Claude and David helped Pontanima to integrate in our global world.

In 1998, Pontanima recorded its first CD entitled "The Mystery of Peace". In 1999, a recording of the "Bosnian Te Deum" concert was produced on CD. And in 2001, in the fifth year of existence, a third CD entitled "The Power of Diversity" was produced. We anticipate the CD production of a recording of the celebratory concert of Pontanima’s Fifth Anniversary. In five years, Pontanima has performed an unbelievable 132 concerts. Each one of them was professionally organized and well performed. The choir began with less than 20 enthusiasts and now includes more than 60 women and men.

The Environment in which Pontanima works:

Dialogue among Religions

We live in a world in which more than 100 wars have taken place in the last decade. In each of these wars, religions have been drawn in to some extent. Since there is a deep trust in the positive power of religions among many people of good will, these conflicts have become an obstacle for the essential mission of each of these religions. As a matter of fact, religious exclusivity very often produces “general religious doubt” which becomes an obstacle for those who are seeking God. Religions are expected to have positive influence on finding solutions to current burning issues of our globally functioning world, i.e. the division of rich and poor, ecological endangerment of the world, conflicts of civilizations, cultures and religions. Therefore, today we need new vision and inspiration for global responsibility, which is expected from religions. It is essential that religions respect each other and cooperate more in order to meet those expectations.

Religious believers sometimes mistakenly think that they are committed to God, but change the face of God according to their own goals, and in worshipping their idols become fanatical and irrational. Others incorrectly interpret their “correctness” and by avoiding communication they become withdrawn, exclusive, apologetic and xenophobic. Therefore, conflicts arise between religions in different ways, i.e. taking up the sword; using slogans like “extermination or conversion”; writing books “adversus” and “contra”; proclaiming faith to be “opium for the masses” and uprooting it from the lives of people and forbidding it; devastating temples, burning books and destroying all treasures of cultures and civilizations. Worst of all, millions of people are killed because of their religion or are humiliated by various forms of violent conversion. In these circumstances those people developed deep inner defense mechanisms, which are mostly irrational, unconscious and mythical. These
mechanisms are dangerous material for conflict and their devastating powers can be easily provoked as has been witnessed in the Balkans, parts of the former Soviet Union, etc. Therefore, our world needs healing, purification of memory and courage for communication.

Traditions of Life-together and Dialogue

On the other hand, there were believers in religions who, from the inspiration of their own faith, were establishing peace, life together and cooperation with other religions. Each religion carries in itself a richness of respect and consideration of one’s neighbor, especially those among whom we live. Out of that richness of spiritual inspiration, a peaceful coexistence of religions and beliefs in society has developed. In our world, interreligious dialogue is becoming an imperative necessary for the survival of our world and religions. Numerous individuals, unions and institutions in all religions give a new face and chance for our world through interreligious and ecumenical dialogue.

We live in a time when members of various religions have more contact, interaction and deeper interpersonal relationships so they can discover the treasures of the other. Since this process of globalization and cultural pluralism has taken place, it has become a source of deeper, unconscious and suppressed prejudices, wrong deductions and attitudes, misunderstandings, twisting of facts, resentments and lack of sympathy, hatred and conflicts. In contrast to the threats of total self-destruction, consumer’s nihilism and the culture of death, our time has become a time of movements for peace and life, for liberation of women and men, and a time of integration with the whole of creation. We should not forget that these movements receive decisive inspiration from religions, especially in their essence when listening for the initiative of grace. Meetings of religions enable the exchange of experiences and positive influences, the borrowing of good models, the discovery and definition of our own identity in the reflection of others, growth of self-awareness and the inner dynamic of our own community. There is no religion that has not learned and adopted something from another. Moreover, enrichment of each identity comes, first of all, from communication with others.

Ivo Markovic was born in 1950 in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Since 1984 he has been teaching the pastoral (practical) theology within Franciscan Seminary in Sarajevo. During the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina he assisted in the orientation of activities of Peace Movements. After the war at the beginning of 1996 he took immediate actions on reduction of hostilities, reconciliation and return. One of his project was the inter-religious choir Pontanima with representatives from all national and religious communities in Sarajevo. In 1998, he received the first Peace Activist Award of the Tanenbaum Center of Interreligious Understanding in New York, for his actions in reconciliation and humanitarian work during the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina.