CHAPTER 7

Catholic Missionary Activity in the Northern Balkans in the Seventeenth Century

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The Balkans represent a particularly illuminating area of early modern Catholic missionary activity. By the latter half of the sixteenth century, the zone was largely under Turkish control, either through direct integration into the Ottoman empire or through the medium of satellite statelets such as Walachia and Moldova. However, Turkish rule was super-imposed upon a pre-existing Christian European framework which meant that various jurisdictional claims and relics of previous Catholic organization persisted, and that frictions frequently existed between Roman and native ecclesiastical institutions and clergy. This meant that the Christian populations under Turkish rule in South-Eastern Europe were of concern to the papacy, and its interest in the Balkans developed steadily in the wake of the Council of Trent. A few rather desultory initiatives were undertaken before an ambitious two-pronged Jesuit mission from both Royal Hungary and Ragusa was launched during the pontificate of Paul V (1605–21). This essay focuses on this challenging missionary project.

As mission territory, the Northern Balkans enjoyed an unusual status. While under the rule of a non-Catholic power, the territory had previously been the site of several Christian kingdoms. In his capacity as king of Hungary, the Holy Roman emperor continued to claim *ius patronatus* for all areas which had previously pertained to the crown of Saint Stephen (and indeed to significant territories which had never been under Hungarian control) and nominated bishops to numerous sees within the Ottoman empire. However, these bishops were invariably non-resident and the issue of their jurisdictional rights became particularly fraught once Propaganda Fide attempted to institute a resident mission hierarchy in the area after 1622.

The other significant native Balkan institution which came to clash repeatedly with Roman-sponsored missionary endeavours was the Franciscan province of Bosnia. Bosnian Franciscans aspired to provide pastoral care throughout the Balkans, particularly in the relatively rich lands of what had formerly been the kingdom of Hungary, because of the importance of the income derived from this activity for the upkeep of the order’s convents in Bosnia itself. Consequently, the Bosnian Franciscans proved generally hostile
to attempts by missionaries sent by Rome to insert themselves into valuable territories. The clashes between Bosnian Franciscan friars and, in particular, Jesuit missionaries provide a fascinating contrast between two very different models of Catholic identity and practice. Remarkably, despite stronger claims to being better representatives of the ‘mission culture’ of post-Tridentine Catholicism, the Jesuits were ultimately out-manoeuvred by their Bosnian antagonists and the papacy eventually came to accept that the Bosnians would have to remain key players in the provision of spiritual services to the Balkan populations.

While these struggles form the first major theme of this essay, it will also examine the relative failure of Catholic missionary activity. Although Roman interest in the area increased markedly in the century after Trent, the overall effects of missionary activity were limited even in terms of maintaining the confessional allegiance of the existing Catholic population. Indeed, the seventeenth century was notable for a significant degree of Islamicisation of Catholics in the important reservoirs of Bosnia and Albania. Despite the recognition of the importance of the creation of educational institutions which could sustain a native priesthood, Propaganda Fide lacked the capacity to create sufficient establishments to furnish Balkan Catholics with an educated and resident clergy. The actual limitations of this vital aspect of missionary activity become even more apparent when account is taken of the enormous sums which were disbursed by the papacy at the end of the sixteenth century, in the context of war against the Turks with the proposed objective of liberating the Balkans from Ottoman control.

The Religious and Political Geography of the Region

Prior to the Turkish subjugation of the Balkan peninsula, the organisation of the Catholic church in the region had been principally centred around three archbishoprics: Ragusa (or Dubrovnik) on the Adriatic coast, Bar, which was the metropolitan seat of the Albanian and Serbian churches, and the second Hungarian archbishopric of Kolocsa, which from 1247 exercised ecclesiastical jurisdiction over the bishopric of Bosnia. By the latter half of the sixteenth century, in the wake of the dismemberment of Hungary following the battle of Móhács in 1526, Turkish control had spread as far north-west as Buda, the ancient capital of the kingdom. The sees of Scardona, Tinini, Duvnói and Makarskai were now wholly within Ottoman-dominated territory and Kalocsa and the dioceses of Pécs, Csanad, Vác, Várad, Veszprém, and Zágreb in