

Women honored by pope in Croatia

John Norton/CNS

RIJEKA, Croatia — Pope John Paul II visited Croatia, a largely Catholic country struggling to shed the scars of war and decades of communist rule, and urged its people to build on their religious faith and traditional family values.

During the June 5-9 trip, the pope crisscrossed the country carrying a message of hope, preaching post-war reconciliation and paying tribute to the country's women and families.

The 83-year-old pontiff, who suffers from Parkinson's disease and hip and knee conditions, kept up a grueling pace, logging 1,250 miles within the country and celebrating four outdoor liturgies in intense heat and humidity. It was the 100th foreign trip of his 24-year pontificate.

At a June 8 Mass in the far-northern port city of Rijeka, the pope urged Croatians not to lose hope in the face of postwar difficulties but to find "authentic joy" in following Jesus individually and as families.

"Society today is tragically fragmented and divided. This is the reason why it is so desperately unfulfilled. But Christians do not become



Reuters/CNS

Pope John Paul II waves to Croatians in Rijeka June 8 during a five-day visit that included the beatification of the founder of the Daughters of Mercy.

resigned to weariness or paralyzed by inertia," he said.

The frail pope's perseverance drew enthusiastic cheers from the 150,000 people gathered for the

Mass. Throughout the trip, the pope occasionally looked tired or flushed in the heat but he consistently spoke in a strong voice.

The main purpose of the trip was the beatification of a 20th-century nun, Sister Maria Petkovic, who devoted her life to the poor and founded the Daughters of Mercy, dedicated to charitable work.

Beatifying the nun during a dockside Mass in Dubrovnik, a port on the Adriatic Sea, the pope drew attention to the central role of women in society and their wartime sufferings.

"I think of you, dear women, because by your sensitivity, generosity and strength, you enrich the world's understanding and help to make human relations more honest and authentic," he said.

"Women of Croatia, conscious of your lofty vocation as 'wives' and 'mothers,' continue to see every person with the eyes of the heart. Continue to reach out to them and to stand beside them with the sensitivity born of your maternal instinct," he said.

In Osijek, a far-eastern city a few miles in each direction from Hungary, Bosnia, and Serbia and Montenegro, the pope preached reconciliation. The area saw some of the fiercest fighting during the 1990s' war, and ethnic tensions remain high over the return of Serbian refugees.

During the June 7 liturgy, the smell of freshly cut grass mingled with hot dust kicked up by more than 200,000 pilgrims, who included Catholics from neighboring countries, a Serbian Orthodox delegation led by bishops, and Jewish and Muslim representatives.



Reuters/CNS

Nuns worship at the pope's final Mass in Croatia, June 9, as he honored women's role in society.

"After the trying times of the war, which has left the people of this region with deep wounds not yet completely healed, a commitment to reconciliation, solidarity and social justice calls for courage on the part of individuals inspired by faith, open to brotherly love and concerned for defending the dignity of the human person made in the image of God," the pope said.

The pope also made a plug for Croatia's entry into the European Union, a show of support that was sure to please his hosts. He said the rich cultural tradition of Croatia, which formally applied for union membership earlier this year, would strengthen the union as a territorial, cultural and spiritual reality.

Despite several reported death threats before and during the visit, the pope continued to travel through crowds with the bulletproof windows of his popemobile rolled down.

The pope's schedule included a brief stop in the eastern town of Dakovo, where he made a private visit to the city's famous 19th-century cathedral, reportedly described by Blessed Pope John XXIII as the most beautiful church in that part of Europe, is a unique mix of Roman and Eastern architectural styles.

In Rijeka, where the pope returned every night to stay in an archdiocesan seminary, he privately visited the Marian shrine of Our Lady of Trsat, that Croatians hold with special devotion as the temporary 13th-century resting spot of Mary's house. The shrine's Franciscan caretakers say that contrary to centuries-old legend, which credits angels with moving the house from the Holy Land to Croatia and to its current resting spot in the Italian city of Loreto, recent research suggests the structure was transported by the more conventional means of boat.

The pope left a rosary at the shrine, and in improvised remarks said he hoped Croatians would pray for him "during my life and also after my death."

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