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Avoiding war and creating peace in Kosovo

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—Getty Images/Chris Hondros
International peacekeeping troops from Thailand patrol the streets March 14 in Mitrovica, Kosovo.

Avoiding war and creating peace in Kosovo

By MATTHEW J. GAUDET
VIEWPOINT

Eight years ago, the United States and NATO intervened on behalf of ethnic Albanians in the Serbian province of Kosovo. Slobodan Milosevic became a household name in the United States, as daily news reports tracked the staggering number of refugees fleeing Kosovo. Since that time, Kosovo has remained officially part of Serbia but is effectively governed by an interim administration formed by the U.N. Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK). This summer Catholic Relief Services and the National Catholic Education Association sponsored five other Catholic school teachers and me to visit Kosovo and speak with leaders of the UNMIK government, NATO security forces, the Catholic diocese of Kosovo, nongovernmental organizations and numerous other people who have dedicated themselves to rebuilding Kosovo.

When the conflict ended, Albanians flooded back to their homeland and many of the Serbs fled in fear of retaliation or in response to Albanian intimidation. Today, 90 percent of the population of Kosovo is Albanian, and they, understandably, do not want to be under Serbian rule. What I realized during my stay, however, is that they will not hesitate to return to war to avoid such a scenario. In the minds of many Kosovars, there are worse things than war. Today, after eight years of rebuilding, Kosovo anxiously awaits its independence as an autonomous nation.

It quickly became clear to me that nothing is simple in the Balkans. The Serbian government has rejected any settlement that includes independence for Kosovo. Its motives are numerous, but primarily the Serbs are seeking to protect the Serbian minority still living in Kosovo, as well as to retain the historic land where the Serbs defended themselves in vain against the Turkish Empire in the 14th century. Given the Serbian history of violence and ethnic cleansing against the Kosovo Albanians, Serbian objection to independence alone may not have held much weight. However, Russia has given Serbia the full support of its U.N. Security Council veto, placing Kosovo independence in a very precarious state. We have to ask ourselves: Is Kosovo headed for a return to war or is there still an open path for a negotiated peace?

A return to war?

In 1999, Fr. J. Bryan Hehir, a leading thinker on ethics and public policy, wrote with great foresight, "The idea of restoring the autono-

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A wise and witty guide to prayer

SISTER WENDY ON PRAYER
By Wendy Beckett
Harmony Books, 144 pages, $21.95

Reviewed by ERIN RYAN

Though she has been a hermit for the past 37 years, lots of people know Sr. Wendy Beckett. Her books and TV documentaries about art, such as "Sister Wendy's Grand Tour" and "Sister Wendy's American Collection," took her to galleries around Europe and the United States and brought her name into the homes of viewers everywhere. In an introduction to her new book, *Sister Wendy on Prayer*, David Willcock, a producer at Spire Films who worked on many of Sr. Wendy's TV programs in the United Kingdom, explains the nun's impact on the television milieu. Wherever they were filming, he writes, "Resolutely agnostic producers, world-weary crews and hard-bitten press men could all be found, once the cameras were wrapped, pressing for answers to deeply felt questions about life, God, prayer and religion."

Still, the 77-year-old contemplative nun always regards these sojourns into the media world as an interruption in her "real life" of prayer, which she lives out in her hermitage, a trailer behind a Carmelite monastery in Quidenham, Norfolk, England.

While writing *Sister Wendy on Prayer*, she says she hesitated at first to extend her insights. Most other people are not able to spend seven hours a day in prayer, and so "I have been tempted to think that my privilege invalidates anything I say." But she realized that some people are afraid to try prayer because it seems too complicated. Sr. Wendy's advice is just to do it. Prayer is simple, she says, and it is as unique as each of us.

"Each of us is called to an individual fulfillment that only God understands," she writes in "Holiness," a chapter in *Sister Wendy on Prayer*. "Because we are all different ... 'holiness' will be different for each of us." In a chapter called "What Should I Do?" — one of the most frequently asked questions she receives — she writes, "The answer is of the usual appalling simplicity: Stand before God unprotected, and you will know yourself what to do." There is no magic template, no formula that can be followed.

Mr. Willcock's biographical introduction to Sr. Wendy is an integral part of the book. Without knowing what kind of person Sr. Wendy is, we have no basis for understanding where she is coming from. Early

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my of Kosovo within Serbia might have been possible before the purge of the Kosovars, but is hardly feasible now." It is irrelevant for us in the West to ask, "What if Milosevic had not attempted to cleanse Kosovo of its Albanian population?" That history is a sad reality for everyone I met in Kosovo, Albanian and Serb alike. One individual described the Balkans as suffering from "a disease in which one people always needs to control another people." The metaphor seemed to reflect a commonly held view: That disease, while not good, is very real, and may be fatal.

Currently, the United States, the European Union and Russia have brought the parties together for a final round of negotiations. If those negotiations do not produce a resolution approved by the U.N. Security Council by December of this year, then the United States has already declared it will support a unilateral declaration of independence by Kosovo. The doomsday scenario is that Kosovo declares independence and Serbia responds with military force, but this time backed by Russia's military. In 1999, when Kosovo asked for military assistance in throwing off its Serbian overlords, it was NATO that responded, not the United Nations. Even then, Russia supported Serbia and wielded its veto to block U.N. intervention. However, according to Balkan historian Tim Judah, behind the scenes, Russia was telling the United States that it would veto any resolution and express its dissatisfaction in the media, but not provide military support to Serbia. This agreement allowed NATO to engage in Kosovo without fear of war with Russia. This time around, the situation may be different. Many analysts cite the Kosovo standoff as part of a campaign by Russia's president, Vladimir Putin, to exert Russian authority over the former Eastern bloc. Mr. Putin has also publicly objected to NATO placing elements of a missile defense system in Poland and the Czech Republic, two former Eastern Bloc countries. Furthermore, Russia does not want Kosovo's independence to become a precedent that might legitimize the independence claims of Russia's own rogue province of Chechnya.

Kosovo Albanians stand behind barbed wire on the bridge in the ethnic Albanian half of Mitrovica Feb. 9 as 10,000 Serbs across the river protest a U.N. plan setting Kosovo on the path to independence from Serbia.

—Reuters/Hazir Reka

Regardless of whether Russia would enter the fight, NATO must be wary of going to war in Kosovo again. In 1999, the U.S. military led the effort and was not engaged in conflict anywhere else in the world. Today, the military presence in Kosovo is predominantly European and would have to remain so in an all-out war, as U.S. forces are depleted with the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

A negotiated peace

There are motivations for all parties to want peace. However, as the negotiations reopen, it is important to understand the enormous division that still exists between the Albanians and Serbs in Kosovo. For this, one need only look at the northern city of Mitrovica, once a bustling mining town and important cultural center for Kosovo. Today it is known as the "divided city." During the conflict, Serbs fled to the north side of the Ibar River and Albanians fled south. After the conflict subsided, NATO upheld the demarcation to reduce skirmishes and established a small "confidence zone" around the major bridge connecting both sides. The ethnic division remains acute. Neither Serbs nor Albanians will cross the Ibar unescorted. In fact, license plates on the Northern side are still Serbian while cars on the opposite bank have United Nations Missions in Kosovo-issued plates. For our delegation to cross the Ibar, our car was registered in a neutral country, Macedonia, and we had to switch drivers in the confidence zone. Moreover, funerals require a NATO escort because the Albanian cemetery is in the northern part of the city, while the Serbian cemetery is in the south.

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Both the United Nations and many nongovernmental organizations have targeted Mitrovica for peace-building efforts. But reducing hatred is a slow process, especially when hatred culminates with the mutual destruction of each other's homes and livelihood. To make matters worse, political pressure coming from Belgrade further hinders the healing process. Government functions from education to road maintenance continue to be funded by Serbia, and through this influence, Belgrade still maintains significant control over the Kosovo Serbs.

The Serbs we met were guarded when it comes to trusting Westerners, and with good reason. They describe themselves as refugees, isolated from their homes, their families and the rest of their country. In 1999, most Serbs fled the Albanian sections of Kosovo to Serbia proper. Those Serbs remaining in Kosovo live in enclaves. While those we spoke with certainly want a different outcome from the process than their Albanian counterparts, they share the Albanians' strong desire for a final settlement to the issue. Ultimately, they just want to be free to live a life without fear and isolation. Many consider Kosovo's independence imminent and are prepared for that result so long as protections for them are in place.

It was clear to me that both sides desperately want peace and resolution. With such sharp division, it is hard to predict if independence would spark violence in Kosovo or if it would be a catalyst for increased economic growth and a necessary step toward reconciliation. Ultimately, the terms of the resolution, specifically the protections for Serbs in Kosovo, will probably dictate the short-term outcomes. But getting to a resolution may prove an impossible task.

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