

A Youth Network for Peace

Building Bridges in the Balkans: *Go4Peace* Youth Camps

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From a youth center in the archdiocese of Paderborn, Germany, a peace initiative arose in the mid-1990's, one that eventually led to the more recent participation of youth from Bosnia and Herzegovina. An experience built over time, it has come to involve young people from more and more countries who base their lives on the Word of God. They remain connected to one other through a special phone App and go4Peace (go for peace) is the motto that unites them. It is an initiative open to young people of other religions as well and more than a few have rediscovered their faith and taken concrete life commitments along the way.

It is five in the morning on Sunday. In the distance I hear the call to prayer by the *muezzin* [the man who calls Muslims to prayer from the minaret of a mosque]. It's already very hot, with temperatures in the 80's. I'm still in bed in a small wooden hut in the "Peace Village" of Shkodra in Albania, built by the local diocese in 1999 to welcome Kosovo refugees during the Second Balkan War. Now, the building serves wonderfully as a meeting place for a hundred young people, from throughout Europe, here for the *go4peace* youth summer camp.

Living for peace

Last night, we performed in the cathedral square, offering our dances, songs, dialogues and personal experiences to a crowd of more than 2,000 people, mostly young Albanians. They remained visibly moved. Among those present were representatives of both Church and civic authorities. As the evening ended, Mike, from Ireland, shared the message of peace that had been lived and experienced by 100 youth during the week spent together: "If we truly love one other, peace will be born. We are convinced that this peace is a gift from God. It lives in our hearts and among us. "Blessed are the peacemakers," that is, those who build peace. For this we need passion, patience, experience and tenacity, as Pope Francis told us. We want to be a new generation animated by a passion for peace because we are brothers and sisters. Please join us. We count on you. *Let's go4peace!*"

Illuminated by Jesus's Words

We had come together from Kosovo and Albania, Slovenia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Poland, Croatia, Spain, Ireland and Germany. After settling into the "Peace Village" in small groups from two or three different countries, we met for the first time to get to know one other and discover the things that we had in common.

The next day, the whole group took time to explore the region, starting from the "Church of Our Lady" shrine. Sitting on the steps in front of a statue of the Blessed Mother, we tried to understand how to put Jesus' words into practice. In a world full of things that demand too much of our attention and moving too fast, these "words of Heaven" run the risk of becoming lost amid many other messages and never really reaching our hearts. Looking around we saw a cow. Everyone knows that cows, after grazing on fresh grass, lie down in fields and take time to ruminate to leisurely chew on their food. The *motto* for that day was born: "*Be cool - be cow!*". Do what cows do. Being so busy, it's a matter of finding calm, quiet moments, of not missing what God has given us - interiorly and exteriorly.

In the course of the day's adventures, a group of children mostly from Fermentin - a poor local neighborhood - welcomed us with traditional dances. The joy was visible in these little ones, dressed in their colorful Albanian costumes. Soon, we joined their dances, too . . . Our day ended with Mass and a festive dinner in the "Peace Village."

A Shared Commitment

The participants had the opportunity to talk with one other and with the residents of Shkodra. More than a hundred lively young people from Fermentin were welcomed each day. There were many concrete projects: repairing the floors and roof of a family home; making key rings and symbols of peace; and renovating and painting parts of a nursery school building to make it more welcoming for children. An interreligious workshop looked at the relationship between different religions in the Balkans. A visit to the women's Focolare community house in Tirana generated a lively exchange on how the words of the Gospel can transform life. Trees were planted for a forest of peace. A group of youth also met with special needs children being cared for by the Sisters of Mother Teresa, and many of the cabins in the "Peace Village" were repainted.

Since the Mid-1990's

The beginnings of this path of peace date back to 1995. The war in the Balkans had just ended and Cardinal Lehmann asked whether the reconstruction in Bosnia and Herzegovina could be a task for German youth, which moved us to go to the archdiocese of Sarajevo. For 20 years we have been there with 700 young people, contributing to encounter and to reconstruction. We have been busy with the work of our hands and at the same time we have established bonds beyond national, religious and generational borders. One day Cardinal Puljic, visited us and, with great emotion, affirmed: "You bring the light of Heaven, the Gospel, to the dirtiest corners of my city. Not just in words, but you go where nobody wants to go."

For a united world

In 2014, after 20 years of work in the Balkans, we realized that Europe's plight - which in the 1990's had been most evident in those lands - was now a reality that could be found in our own country of Germany as well. Seeing things in Bosnia and Herzegovina well under way and able to continue independently, the time had come to leave that reality which had been so dear to us. A million refugees had entered Germany, escaping war-torn regions in search of survival and the chance to live again. Pope Francis, in his formal proclamation for

the Extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy, helped us to better understand this: "In each of these 'little ones' Christ himself is present. His flesh becomes visible in the flesh of the tortured, the crushed, the scourged, the malnourished, and the exiled ... to be acknowledged, touched, and cared for by us." [*Misericordiae Vultus*, n. 15]

So, we decided to bring *go4peace 2015* to our city of Kamen (Germany). There were 120 young people from 17 European countries, joined by 18 refugee youth arriving from ten additional nations. As the summer camp concluded, George, a young Syrian Christian, and Fajir, a 13-year-old Muslim teen from Pakistan, took more than 600 people on a tour of the world, in search of the "key to peace." It was very moving to hear Fajir, having arrived just six months prior in Germany, address everyone in his fluent German, sharing: "This is the answer. We are brothers and sisters, there are no borders! Where we begin to see a brother or sister in every person, peace comes. Thus, the earth becomes beautiful again." At the end of that camp, there was no doubt that *go4peace* should continue! But where? "Couldn't you come to us once?" asked the young people of Albania. And thus, the 2016 youth summer camp took place in Shkodra, in the northern part of Albania.

The Power of the Experience

Afterwards, two participants shared their stories:

"I loved how we celebrated Masses together, prayed and tried to live according to the Gospel. I had a strong religious upbringing but because of my studies I live far from the family. So gradually it seemed to me that I was moving away from faith. Although I was proud of my faith, and from time to time I prayed and went willingly with my parents to church, doubt and sadness made their way into me. Amid so many young people living together in this way, I found new strength. Together with faith, the gift of self to others was also fundamental for me during this summer camp. I am very grateful to have been able to help others in need and to establish a bond with them."

"This youth summer camp was God's answer to a prayer. I had asked him many times to strengthen my faith, to make it more 'real' in my everyday life . . . Since last Sunday, I've been certain that God has fulfilled my request and this is why he brought me here for this week. Rarely in the past have I experienced such a strong sense of harmony as during the evening Masses. It is because they were not, in fact, majestic rituals, but moments of lived, profound faith in a simple place that I immediately felt a part of. After this experience I'm proud to be able to say that 'I am a Christian', together with you, and with Jesus himself."

Ongoing Developments

How have the journeys continued? One youth, Alexander, journeyed towards the ministerial priesthood as did ten other youth before him from different countries. Lena graduates this year and would like to become an evangelical pastor. Amela, who studies business economics in Austria, faithfully translates our monthly contribution for their

shared App into Albanian and posts her experiences online. By using Apps in multiple languages, today's socially connected youth can live in sync with Jesus' words for peace.

In Albania, a small group of young people now meets regularly with children in Fermentin, the rural Shkodra neighborhood fraught with social problems. Sports and artistic initiatives are also animated by young people in collaboration with the Sarajevo youth center team.

Time for Reflection

"When the power of love overcomes the love of power the world will know peace," says a popular Jimi Hendrix lyric. In *Go4peace*, young people experience this "power of love."

Youth:

- find themselves beyond borders
- are nourished with the words of the one who is Love
- experience for themselves through involvement and assistance to others in need
- discover the secret of God hidden and now present among them
- remain connected to one another across the world through their App
- become messengers of peace in their own environments.

Go4peace 2020 is scheduled for July in the Kloster Brunnen, an old German Monastery that is now the diocesan center of the Catholic Young Community (KjG) in the Archdiocese of Paderborn, Germany and will take place in conjunction with efforts by youth all around the world. For more information and related videos: <https://www.go4peace.eu/go4peace/go4peace-camps>