



In the town of Siroki-Brijeg, not one single divorce has been recorded among its 13,000 inhabitants. Not only single family has broken up in living memory. Does Herzegovina enjoy a special favor from heaven? Is there a magic formula that keeps the demon of division at bay?

The answer is very simple! For centuries, because of the pressure from the Turks and then the Communists, the people suffered cruelly as their Christian faith was always threatened. They knew through experience that salvation comes through the Cross of Christ. It does not come from disarmament plans, from humanitarian aid or peace treaties, even if these things may bring limited benefits, the source of salvation is the Cross of Christ! These people possess a wisdom that does not allow them to be duped over questions of life and death. That is why they have indissolubly linked marriage with the Cross of Christ. They have founded marriage, which brings forth human life, on the Cross, which brings forth Divine life.

The Croatian marriage tradition is so beautiful that it is beginning to take hold in Europe and America! When a young couple is preparing for marriage, they are not told that they have found the ideal partner. No! What does the priest say? “You have found your cross. And it is a cross to be loved, to be carried, a cross not to be thrown away, but to be cherished.”

If the fiancés were told this in France, they would be struck dumb! But in Herzegovina, the Cross represents the greatest love and the crucifix is the treasure of the home.

When the bride and groom set off for the church, they bring a crucifix with them. The priest blesses the crucifix, which takes on a central role during the exchange of vows. The bride places her right hand on the crucifix and the groom places his hand over hers. Thus the two hands are bound together on the cross. The priest covers their hands with his stole as they proclaim their vows to be faithful, according to the rites of the Church. Fr. Jozo explains that the bride and groom do not then kiss each other, they rather kiss the cross. They know that they are kissing the source of love. Anyone close enough to see their two hands joined over the cross understands clearly that if the husband abandons his wife or if the wife abandons her husband, they let go of the cross. And if they abandon the cross, they have nothing left. They have lost everything for they have abandoned Jesus. They have lost Jesus.

After the ceremony, the newlyweds bring the crucifix back and give it a place of honor in their home. It becomes the focal point of family prayer, for the young couple believes deeply that the family is born of the Cross. When a trouble arises, or if a conflict breaks out, it is before this cross that they will seek help. They will not go to a lawyer, they will not consult a fortune-teller or an astrologer, and they will not rely on a psychologist to solve the problem. No, they will go straight before their Jesus, before the cross. They'll get on their knees there and in front of Jesus; they will weep their tears and pour out their hearts, and above all exchange their forgiveness. They will not go to sleep with a heavy heart because they will have turned to their Jesus, the only One who has the power to save.

They will teach their children to kiss the cross every day and not to go to sleep like pagans without having thanked Jesus first. As for the children, as far back as they can remember Jesus has always been the friend of the family, respected and embraced. They say “nighty-night” to Jesus and kiss the cross. (As Fr. Jozo says, “They go to sleep with Jesus, not with a teddy bear!”). They know that Jesus is holding them in his arms and that there is nothing to be afraid of, and their fears melt away in their kiss to Jesus. Dearest Gospa, please extend the blessing of this beautiful marriage to the whole family of your children!

-Sr. Emmanuel