

Sunday Message from Fr William for Twelfth Sunday of the Year 2023

I think this was my sixth year cycling in central Europe: Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia, Croatia, Croatia again, and this time BiH (Bosnia and Herzegovina). I started from Mostar. If you want to get from there to Sarajevo, as I did, you either take the direct route North, crammed with fast moving and heavy traffic, or you find another, quieter, roundabout way. I opted for a quieter, roundabout way, and set off due West.

And it was quieter, sometimes off road along peaceful farm tracks or logging tracks, and on one occasion so overgrown that I'm sure no had been that way for years. On the third day I turned North over some beautiful high ground, snow still visible on some of the highest peaks, then descended to a beautiful lake called Šćit, well worth checking out images on the internet. The next day I began to turn East and after a full day cycling through a tranquil forest, and another day descending to signs of human habitation, came in sight of Sarajevo. I stayed in Sarajevo for a few days.

On my return to Mostar I continued East from Sarajevo into the East of the country and into one of the two regions of BiH designated Republika Srpska, then for the next couple of days headed southwards through this region. I didn't actually go up any mountains, but cycled among them, including a spectacular mountain pass. The final day was downhill nearly all the way from 1000m, heading westwards back out of Republika Srpska and back into Mostar less than 100m above sea level.

The people I spoke to identified clearly with the ethnic and religious identity of their region. In Republika Srpska the people I spoke to were, by their own account, definitely Serbian, and definitely Orthodox Christians. Their orthodox churches in the towns I passed through looked solid and confident, and very Orthodox. In the rest of BiH, the central region they seem to refer to as 'the Federation' [ie of Bosnia + Herzegovina], there is a wonderful intermingling of Roman Catholics and Muslims, and a wonderful juxtaposition in every town of multiple churches and multiple mosques with their multiple minarets in whichever direction you look. The Muslim call to prayer calls out throughout the day, starting, for some reason, at 4.30 in the morning, and ending around 11pm. You'd have thought this would be disturbing at such extreme hours. But there was something quite peaceful about it, and very eastern.

My first Thursday I pulled up in a town for the night and all the shops were closed, and I was caught out, hoping to stock up with food. A young man in his late teens or early twenties tried to explain it to me – it was Corpus Christi. He was also caught out trying find somewhere he could buy cigarettes. He was heading out to the filling station on the edge of town where he was confident of buying some. As for me I found a kebab outlet, then went and had a beer in one of the bars, ubiquitous in every town. I got talking with an elderly gentleman called Vladimir who spoke excellent English. I wanted to know what the difference is between Bosnia and Herzegovina. He explained it to me. This was Herzegovina, he said, and it's 'the California' of the Federation.

The next morning all the shops were open.



Twelfth Sunday of the
Year, 25 June 2023