

CASE STUDY - FATHER TOMISLAV MATANOVIC



Case Study: Father Tomislav Matanovic

Tomislav, known as Tomo to his friends, was born in 1962 in the Bosnian town of Prijedor, the only son of Bozana and Josip. When he grew up Tomo decided to train as a Roman Catholic priest. In September 1984, he went to Innsbruck, Austria, to study. He made friends with theological students from many parts of the world, including the UK. When he was ordained in 1989, several

international students visited his home town to celebrate his first Mass with him. Jonathan, a former student colleague, now a teacher in Norfolk, remembers the day clearly. It was a multi-cultural occasion with friends and neighbours from the whole community, Croatians, Serbs and Muslims joining together to offer Tomo their support and congratulations.

Tomo returned to Innsbruck to study for a Doctorate, but was soon summoned home by his Bishop. Tensions were rising in the Balkans, Serbs, Croatians and Muslims were no longer living peacefully together. The professor of Church History at Sarajevo University had requested permission to leave the country. He felt it was crazy to stay there as a Croatian Catholic. Tomo was asked to fill his position, even though he had not finished his studies.

In 1992, as the Bosnian conflict escalated, Tomo was recalled to his own Diocese of Banja Luka. For the next three years he lived in the Bishop's house in the Cathedral compound, where he was responsible for the distribution of aid that was arriving from Western Europe. He distributed aid to whoever was in need, Croatian Catholic, Bosnian Muslim or Serb.

During this period he was also appointed as Parish Priest to his home town where his parents were still living. He would travel there on Sundays and feast days by car, negotiating the many armed road blocks and if necessary, bribing his way through with cigarettes, vodka, and according to Jonathan, a unique brand of humour and fun. This was how Tomo tried to **Stand up to Hatred**.

In April 1995 Tomo asked his Bishop for permission to live in Prijedor, as the people had no resident priest, his family was there, and he recognised the need of his parishioners. Despite his Bishop's concerns over safety Tomo went home and took up full time duties. He would not let the hatred that was developing stop his work. He continued to work as parish priest, caring for those Catholics still left in the town. The church building had been blown up in 1992, so the congregation now met in the Parish House.

On August 24th, at about 10pm, police cars turned up at Tomo's house and the police arrested him. He was taken to the local police station, whilst the police ransacked his house, before wrecking it along with what was left of the church. Evidence suggests that Tomo was interrogated and then brought, with his father, to his parents' house, a few minutes walk from the Church. He and his parents were placed under house arrest. Tomo was allowed a few visits from priests. These took place in the garden of the house and those who visited him, during this time, speak of his optimism and of his mother looking through the window into the garden, clutching a set of rosary beads, a symbol of her faith.

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On the evening of the 18th September, Tomo was allowed to go next door to his cousin's to watch television. Something had happened during the day and for the first time, Tomo was visibly frightened. His cousin tried to persuade him to escape. Tomo refused, saying he was concerned for the safety of the police officers on duty outside the house if he left. It seems that one of the guards was a former school friend and Tomo didn't want him to get into trouble.

At 2am on 19th September, two unmarked cars pulled up outside the house. Tomo and his parents were bundled out of the house, handcuffed, and driven away. They disappeared. His case was taken up by Amnesty International, and by President Clinton, but no one knew, or no one was saying, where Tomo and his parents were or what had happened to them.

Evidence given to Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International suggests that that they were driven to the Serb controlled, and 'ethnically cleansed' former Muslim area of town, where they were shot in the back of the head, and their bodies thrown down a well. A returning Muslim family discovered them in 2001. After DNA identification they were buried in Prijedor. No one knows exactly why Tomo and his parents were killed. In February 2004 11 Serbian Police officers stood trial for the illegal detention of Tomo, but the case collapsed due to lack of support from the local authorities. Most of the police officers allegedly involved are still serving in Prijedor today. Out of the 120,000 Croatian Catholics, who lived in the Diocese of Banja Luka before the Bosnian conflict, today only 7,000 remain. Many Muslims who survived the ethnic cleansing are too frightened to return.