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A PROFILE OF FRANJO KUŠARIĆ, THE NEW CARDINAL OF ZAGREB

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Summary: Dr. Franjo Kušarić, the Archbishop of Zagreb and the President of Yugoslavia's Bishops' Conference, has recently been elevated by Pope John Paul II to the rank of cardinal. Dr. Kušarić had served for many years as a parish priest in northern Croatia, and had distinguished himself by his outstanding pastoral work. As Archbishop of Zagreb he had revitalized Catholic Church activities in many spheres, and had won high esteem among the populace, particularly in Croatia. Since in recent years he has repeatedly been attacked by the communist press and officials, his new appointment is certainly expected to strengthen his position, which is likely, however, to become more delicate at the same time.

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Among the 18 new cardinals announced by Pope John Paul II is Sr. Franjo Kuharic, the Archbishop of Zagreb and President of the Yugoslav Bishops' Conference. Although expected, his nomination was not at all certain. Since the last and the only Yugoslav cardinal, Srgr. Franjo Šeper, died in Rome in December 1967, two other prelates, in addition to Kuharic, have often been mentioned as possible candidates for the red hat: a Slovenian, the Archbishop of Ljubljana, Alcezar Suster, and another Croat, the Archbishop of Split, Franjo Franic. (1) In recent years Kuharic has often been the target of vituperative press campaigns and of open attacks by senior Croatian party officials, who accused him of investigating and supporting Croatian nationalists under the guise of religion. The fact that in spite of all this controversy the pope has decided to appoint Kuharic as a cardinal demonstrates the Vatican's determination not to bargain over basic issues.

### A Fearless Shepherd

A graduate of the Theological Faculty of Zagreb University and a brilliant preacher, Kuharic has distinguished himself during his long ecclesiastic service above all by his outstanding pastoral work, introducing new methods while also trying to adapt religious activity to the difficult conditions under a communist regime. Another notable characteristic is his close relationship with the basic Church community, and he is very much a man of action, constantly traveling from one community to another.

His peasant origin and his very long service as a parish priest in the villages of north Croatia have forged his character and his close relations with the common man. Kuharic was born on 15 April 1919 in the Croatian village of Gornji Frišac, the thirteenth child in a poor peasant family. He worked as a parish priest, until 1964, when he was consecrated bishop. In 1969 the Archbishop of Zagreb, Franjo Cardinal Šeper, was named as head of the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and the next year Kuharic was appointed to succeed him as Archbishop of Zagreb, the largest and the most important diocese in Yugoslavia, which was founded in 1094 by the Hungarian King Ladislaus. As Archbishop of Zagreb, in accordance with established tradition, Kuharic is ex officio President of the Yugoslav Bishops' Conference, a position that invests him with some influence among Yugoslavia's other Catholic bishops.

Kuharic was appointed as Archbishop of Zagreb during a politically and psychologically favorable period. His predecessor, Franjo Šeper, had succeeded in gradually removing the main obstacles to the normalization of relations between Yugoslavia's communist government and the Vatican. As a result, diplomatic relations between Belgrade and the Vatican were re-established in 1964 and Yugoslavia became the first East European communist-ruled country to have diplomatic relations with the Holy See. In 1970 Belgrade and the Vatican exchanged envoys at ambassadorial level.

(1) Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 8 January 1963.

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Under the provisions of a protocol signed by the Vatican and the Yugoslav government, the Catholic Church in Yugoslavia was granted, under certain conditions, freedom to increase its activity in the spheres of publishing, the press, the education of priests, social welfare, and even in certain cases the organization of kindergartens. It was Euharic who was mainly responsible for skillfully exploiting all the legal possibilities for the consolidation of the Catholic community in Croatia, while at the same time avoiding potential areas of conflict with the communist state. As a result, during the late 1960s, Catholic seminaries were filled with students, and in Yugoslavia more priests were ordained every year than in Germany and Austria together. Catholic newspapers and periodicals flourished, and the fortnightly glas Hrvatske, edited by the Archbishopric of Zagreb, reached a circulation of over 150,000. New churches were built and new approaches to urban pastoral work were experimented with. On the whole one could say that this was a period of spiritual renewal in Yugoslavia, and the name of Franjo Euharic is incontestably linked with it.

#### Defender of Human Rights

Very soon, however, the communist regime turned against the Church, attempting to suffocate the expanding religious renewal. After 1973, the year of Tito's settlement of accounts with the so-called "nationalist" Croatian party leaders, the Catholic Church of Croatia was repeatedly denounced for promoting "Croatian nationalism."

Euharic again refused to be drawn into a discussion by provocative accusations: his replies to press attacks were always short and conciliatory, but at the same time firm and dignified. In the same period he especially distinguished himself as a defender of human rights. In 1978, during the public discussion of the new law on religious communities in Croatia, Euharic publicly stressed the right of the individual to freedom and religious freedom in particular. In an interview carried by the Zagreb Daily Vjesnik Euharic blamed the state authorities for the violation of these rights, saying that

it has happened in the past, and this has been frankly recognized by the state authorities, that these human rights have been violated. The principles of our [Yugoslav] Constitution and the principles proclaimed in international documents about human rights have not always been respected in everyday life. (2)

In January 1981 Euharic again warned the government not to violate the human rights of those prosecuted for political offenses. In a letter sent to the federal government Euharic demanded that the right of prisoners to communicate with their priests should be respected and that cases of maltreatment in prison and other similar

(2) Vjesnik (Zagreb), 28 March 1978

abuses of power should be investigated and those responsible should be punished. (3)

Skharin's elevation to the rank of cardinal will certainly strengthen his position and authority, and in an ever more complex situation the Yugoslav government will be obliged to listen to his voice and his advice more carefully than was the case in the past.

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(3) Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 27 January 1981.