

UPF Rome, Italy Celebrates UN World Interfaith Harmony Week and UN International Day of Human Fraternity

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Rome, Italy -- UPF celebrated UN World Interfaith Harmony Week and UN International Day of Human Fraternity at an online discussion.

"Freedom of Religion, Belief and Conscience: Foundation for Dignity and Human Development" was the theme of the roundtable held on February 7, 2023, in online mode.

Organized by the Italian branches of UPF and its Interreligious Association for Peace and Development (IAPD), the meeting was designed to support the two anniversaries established by the United Nations and their message of interfaith harmony, mutual respect and cooperation that are the foundation of a culture of peace.



The eight speakers at the panel discussion were:

- **Michele Cavallotto**, the coordinator of IAPD-Italy;
- **Agata Distefano**, a psychiatrist;
- **Don Valentino Cottini**, a diocesan priest of Verona;
- **Francesco Canale**, an evangelical pastor of Equipppers Church;
- **Luis Miguel Perea Castrillon**, the bishop of the Anglican Episcopal Church (A.E.C.E.);
- **Nader Akkad**, the imam of the Grand Mosque of Rome;
- **Tenzin Khentse**, a Tibetan Buddhist monk;
- **Sergio Coscia**, the director in the city of Turin of the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (FFWPU), an organization that is affiliated with UPF.

The moderator of the meeting was **Maria Gabriella Mieli**, the director of external and international relations for UPF-Italy.

The meeting's authoritative presentations with many insights from all the speakers were followed by a very interested and motivated online audience of 58.

In the concluding part many questions arose, especially from the younger participants. The atmosphere of unity and cohesion, especially among the representatives of the various faiths, contributed to the success of the panel discussion. This created a climate of concrete fraternity of purpose in promoting freedom of religion, belief and conscience as key factors in building a free and fraternally united human family for the good of all.

Summaries of all the speeches can be found here: bit.ly/3IrrmmH8

SUMMARY OF SPEECHES

Opening the proceedings, **Michele Cavallotto**, UPF Italy's IAPD project coordinator, began by stating that "all religion and all expressions of spirituality come from God, who is a free being, and everything derived from Him has characteristics of freedom. Religion, faiths and conscience are gifts from the Creator and cannot be imprisoned by men. Freedom of religion is the basis of universal human rights," he recalled, "and is a hallmark of every free society. He went on to speak about the "Second Hope Conference" held in December 2022 in Seoul, Korea, where 510 parliamentarians from 193 nations signed the Declaration of Fundamental Human Rights and Human Dignity. "My hope," he concluded, "is that this event will be a moment of inspiration; that it will help us understand and appreciate the value of freedom of religion, belief and conscience; create new opportunities for brotherhood; and work to promote peace.

Agata Distefano, a psychiatrist, spoke of "a very happy story of brotherhood and freedom of conscience that is still alive today, that of Democratic Psychiatry." "The story I want to tell you about was born to address the reality of asylums and the hardships of the mentally ill," he said. "This movement to renew psychiatric legislation began in 1973, and subsequently the debate on asylums reached parliament. Despite strong opposition, the law that led to the gradual closure of asylums was passed in 1978. Italy was the first country in the world to abolish psychiatric hospitals." For her, the patients acquired legal dignity, they were taken care of with welcome, with active cooperation and not with imprisonment "I think that awareness of oneself and the outside world must pass through respect for humanity, for the fragility of the person, for his or her freedom, and yet this limitation is still present in the projects of institutional organizations such as prisons. I think this is a point to which we need to bring our attention and our social commitment."

Don Cottini diocesan priest of Verona said that "a human being is worthy of the name only if he is free, because this condition and human dignity are directly proportional." He remarked that freedom must be both physical because there are still many forms of slavery and coercion that are open or hidden, and spiritual, because of the many insidious manifestations of coercion of thought and conscience, which effectively limit a human being's ability to make free choices. "Truth belongs totally to no one, no structure can claim a monopoly on it: we are all 'pilgrims of truth'." For the priest, "a second deleterious aspect is exaggerated proselytism, which the most recent popes of the Catholic Church have fought and are fighting because as Benedict XVI and Pope Francis explain, 'the church does not grow by proselytism, but by attraction and witness.' Freedom as also freedom of religion, belief and conscience is inherent in the essence of human nature, he said, adding that a rule of law is such when it protects individual and associational freedom of religion, and this is authentic when it respects the conscience of its adherents and recognizes all that is good and true in other religions. "Only in this way will it be possible to build the universal 'spirit of brotherhood' already proposed by the Declaration of Human Rights and strongly reaffirmed by Pope Francis and other religious leaders."

Francesco Canale evangelical pastor of "Equippers Church" referring to the previous speeches remarked that our freedoms end where each other's begin; he recalled the importance of respect which is a manifestation of love; and the value of conscience as an awareness of who we are, how we position ourselves and our actions regarding belief and religion. In everyday life, he noted, the lack of a relationship with the Creator, of a healthy cognition of what our place is in the universe, of what we can be in this time is very often the real cause of an absence of awareness of what our freedoms are and of the decisions we make every day in conducting our lives. 'You will know the truth and the truth will make you free' is a wonderful expression, he reiterated, reminding us that we cannot feel free unless we develop a relationship with the Creator and a healthy relationship with that part of us that harmonizes us with everything around us. "Unfortunately, the general culture wants to convince us otherwise, but even on occasions like these we can strongly reiterate that the relationship with God can show us the way to a healthy common consciousness and true freedom in this world and if there is one after that."

Luis Miguel Perea Castrillon bishop of the Anglican Episcopal Church (A.E.C.E.) then spoke, observing how "each of us, exponents of different faiths, cannot always give the right answer to what the human being seeks. It is complicated because the relationship with the Creator, whatever we want to call or identify, is

unique, intimate and personal, it comes from the depths of our heart and cannot be mediated by any religious authority." He went on to say that the claim to possess exclusive truth and salvation is incorrect, because truth belongs to each of us, like our mother tongue, and we experience it in a personal way. "This is why the challenge is so powerful in this historical time in which we find ourselves."

Nader Akkad, Imam of the Grand Mosque you Rome referring to the 'Document on Human Brotherhood for World Peace and Common Coexistence,' recalled that "common coexistence cannot arise without respect and recognition of the freedom of thought and belief of others and that faith leads the believer to see in the other a brother to be supported and loved..." He went on to quote the concept of freedom stated in the document, "Freedom is a right of every person, everyone enjoys freedom of belief, thought, expression and action, and pluralism and diversity of religion, color, sex, race and language are a wise divine will by which God created human beings. He explained that when God calls humanity in the Holy Quran, he addresses it by saying children of Adam, hence the concept of universal brotherhood. He explained that "the task of the prophets is to invite people to faith, to convey God's message and not to convert." In testimony, he quoted the verse "Invite them to the way of your Lord with wisdom and good manners and discuss and dialogue with them with good manners." He ended by saying that "the freedom of belief enshrined in the Holy Quran and the document cited above, give us a very strong signal that nowadays we cannot live as human beings without being free."

For **Tenzin Khentse** Tibetan Buddhist monk, "even if each of us has made the choice to live religion ourselves by adhering to different faiths, this is no impediment to feeling that we are all brothers and enriching ourselves with the words of each other's tradition. This is the meaning of human brotherhood." Every diversity, he explained, is a different expression of the way of being, which if I know and understand, enriches me and contributes to the realization of my true freedom. Here brotherhood becomes an accomplished act and is no longer just a word or an ideological hat. "For many years I have been comparing myself with other representatives of spiritual traditions and I myself was an ardent Catholic, but in all religions, I found no difference in good heart, brotherhood, spirit of help, compassion, love and tolerance." The speaker urged not to get into extremely philosophical debates by looking for diversity in expressing a certain truth, but to look further downstream. In fact, he reminded, "all spiritualities and religions invite us to respect, to know the other, to share, to help the other and to be on his or her side because we are all brothers. We will never tire in our own small way of trying to contribute to the achievement of our ideals."

Sergio Coscia director of the Family Federation (FFPMU) of Turin opened his speech by stating that "Freedom of religion, belief and conscience is an intrinsic part of human dignity. When a person's right to believe freely without being discriminated against is violated, we are faced with a real affront to his or her dignity as a human being. "We believers feel particularly touched by the injustices and suffering caused by religious persecution and discrimination of believers of other faiths or their own believers who have converted to other religions." He explained that in the Family Federation's vision, before the church or community of believers, it is the family that is the privileged place to welcome God. He spoke of the Federation's tradition of fostering cross-cultural and interfaith marriages; of Father and Mother Moon, founders of FFPMU, who value and respect all religions because their purpose is to bring man back to God and to make him rediscover his essence as a daughter and son of Heaven; and of the importance that Mr. and Mrs. Moon recognize in the individual conscience as the door through which God can speak to us. "Tolerance is not enough, it must be turned into acceptance; dialogue is not enough, it must be turned into sharing; and one's unwavering faith is not enough, it must be turned into pure love. What is our responsibility as believers to support freedom? To show that we are one big family under the same Heaven, forgetting what differentiates us in order to be more and more amazed by all that we have in common."

The panel discussion concluded with a question-and-answer session between some of the young people present and the speakers.