

IAPD Italy's Interfaith Harmony Week and Human Brotherhood Day Meeting

Michele Cavallotto

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"The occasion that brings us together today is the celebration of two great and significant anniversaries of the United Nations, the "World Day of Human Brotherhood" and the "World Week of Harmony Among Faiths." With these words and quoting Antonio Guterres, Secretary General of the UN, who urged to "do more to promote tolerance, understanding and cultural and religious dialogue", Gabriella Mieli, moderator of the event, opened on Monday, February 15 the webinar meeting "Building bridges across borders: fraternity, shared prosperity, universal values". The event was organized by the "Interreligious Association for Peace and Development" (IAPD-Italy), a project of the "International Federation for Peace" (UPF-Italy), in collaboration with the WFWP.

"We live in an era of great progress, but where often selfish personal, economic and political interests prevail. The IAPD aims to bring out the need for spirituality in politics, culture, media, economics and education and through concrete initiatives to guide society towards peace and the ideal of "One Human Family with God." With these words, Michele Cavallotto, coordinator of IAPD-Italy, opened the panel.

After "Amazing Grace", one of the most famous Christian hymns, Gabriella Mieli, read the message of Rabbi Barbara Aiello, the first woman rabbi in Italy and founder of the Progressive Jewish Pluralist Movement. The religious woman spoke of three practical experiences lived together with her community, of how to build bridges of brotherhood: the participation in the final dinner of Ramadan, at a Sufi community; the opening to the public of the synagogue, during a city festival, with the exhibition of the Torah scrolls; and the celebration, with the parish priest and the local Catholic community, of Jewish holidays. The Rabbi then spoke about her appearance at the United Nations, where she outlined her interfaith programs and activities.

This was followed by a message from Imam Nader Akkad, Ph.D. and researcher. "We can build bridges in five ways: first, recognizing man in his integrity as a soul body, with his right to spirituality, to a respected faith of his own; second, man's right to peace and for that to work for the reconciliation of conflicts; third, building and practicing solidarity; fourth, creating the culture of tolerance in saying and doing; fifth and last, is that of fraternity, equality, recognizing each other as brothers and sisters with equal rights. The Imam then urged the practice of the teachings of the sacred texts and to become builders of peace and dialogue".

For Francesco Canale, Evangelical Pastor, "we must identify the bridging values that unite and help us to

understand others' understanding of God. These principles can be represented in three steps: in the passage of confrontation and dialogue, which initially creates a mutual bond; in the confrontation of 'love, which nurtures mutual knowledge and respect; and finally in communion, which creates union. What we are doing today is important, to practice thinking in terms of bridges, to share values that build bridges, and to create a culture that is always willing to eliminate contention and facilitate dialogue."

Don Valentino Cottini, the catholic priest and professor of Islamic-Christian Relations, stressed "the importance of charity, capable of going beyond the limits of one's own culture and religion. Charity is not easy as true interreligious dialogue is not easy, because it demolishes many cultural barriers and requires infinite patience and delicacy". Don Cottini recalled John Paul II's initiatives, such as the 1986 Assisi meeting; Pope Francis' meeting with the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar; and the Encyclical "Brothers All." He concluded by stating "that religions are a sign and instrument of hope if they agree to collaborate in charity."

After the musical break "The Gift of Love," the First World Interfaith Hymn, performed by Sami Yusuf, Luis Miguel Perea Castrillon, bishop of the "Anglican Episcopal Church of Europe" took the floor. "The highest expression of power is to reach out to the stranger, and as ministers, we have the task not only to reinforce the spiritual message to our faithful but also to touch the heart of each person with whom we speak. This is to achieve a two-way communication, upwards, with the Creator, but above all downwards, to find the other person and recognize him or her the same value that we claim for ourselves. Regardless of his language, the color of his skin, the place where he was born and the creed he was taught."

Tibetan Buddhist monk Tenzin Khentse explained how "as noble as the image of building bridges is, these structures are created to overcome natural obstacles, but barriers, borders, barbed wires, cultural, ethnic, religious walls, are entirely artificial. The first thing to do is to break down these barriers that make us see the other, too much other. We don't have to make a lot of cultural and philosophical speeches, but simply invite the other person to your home, offer him dinner, make him participate in your holidays and celebrate with him your New Year, your Easter and make him hear your song when you pray. These are the things that make a dent in people's hearts."

Giampiero Leo, spokesperson for the Interfaith Coordination "We are with you", of the Piedmont Region, illustrated the activities of his association aimed at "supporting the victims of persecution, the recognition of the human right to religion, peace and human rights". He concluded by stating how solidarity leads to justice, shared prosperity and how important it is to cultivate a culture of tolerance and how fraternity is perhaps the only ideal, cultural and political force that can lead to confront the immense problems of our world".

David Fraser Harris, UPF Middle East, and North Africa secretary-general, emphasized how in times of suffering and loneliness it is good for united faiths to offer a voice that comforts, heals and gives hope. He then recalled the meeting celebrating the Day of Brotherhood on February 4, held by UPF in collaboration with Al-Liqa, the Center for Religious and Heritage Studies of the Holy Land, which was attended by Monsignor Yoannis Lahzi Gaid, former Private Secretary of Pope Francis, and Judge Mohamed Abdel Salam, Secretary-General of the High Committee for Human Fraternity. Appealing then to religious leaders, he asked that "our love for the one God, our mutual respect and our passion for peace, shine and serve as a united voice, representing the loving God who is calling all his children home."

Franco Ravaglioli, secretary-general of the International Federation for Peace (UPF-Italy) read the UPF Declaration on Interfaith Dialogue. The document calls for the creation of a Council of religious leaders of different faiths at the United Nations, who would collaborate with government representatives for lasting peace. He then concluded the meeting by recalling Pope Roncalli's (John XXIII) main teaching: "Seek what unites you, rather than what divides you" and quoting Mother Moon's words: "If we change our way of thinking from wanting to 'receive love' to wanting to 'give love,' world peace would be at the doorstep. My prayer is that you will make this motto your own: Peace Begins with Me."