

French Ambassadors for Peace Hold Annual Assembly

Jacques Marion
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Paris, France—French Ambassadors for Peace had their annual assembly on December 12, 2015, a month after terrorist attacks in Paris that killed 130 persons.

The UPF-France conference was held under the theme “Taking up the Challenges of Sustainable Peace and Development—Vision, Values and Partnerships.”

The conference closed a year that also had begun with bloodshed in Paris in January. However, other significant milestones marked the year 2015: the United Nations announcement of its 2030 Global Sustainable Development Agenda; the inauguration of the Sunhak Peace Prize, a project related to UPF, which was awarded for achievement in environmental issues; and the 2015 United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP 21), also in Paris, which also was scheduled to end on December 12.

The conference, which took place at the Accueil Barouillère Hall in Paris, was organized in three sessions representing a broader vision for peace and development: interreligious dialogue as the conscience of society; the rise of a global, multicultural society; and the challenges of renewable energy for sustainable development.

The event began with a moving interreligious ceremony in honor of the 130 victims of the November 13 terrorist attacks: One hundred thirty rainbow-colored origami birds were displayed, symbolizing the victims’ souls moving toward Heaven. In front, five large candles were lit one by one from one central candle by representatives of major religions, while an excerpt of each religious scripture was read by the moderator, Mrs. Myriam Trachez. Mr. Emmanuel Chouraqui, son of famed French scholar André Chouraqui, a translator of the Bible and the Koran and a co-founder of the Fraternity of Abraham, then gave a brief testimony about his father’s work. A beautiful musical piece that was played on piano and flute by two young UPF volunteers, Ye-Bonne M. and Takeyuki Koyama, opened and closed the ceremony.

The first session, on the theme “Religion and Politics – Cooperating for Lasting Peace,” was moderated by Patrick Jouan, the vice president of UPF-France. It began with an introduction to the values underlying the conference theme by Mr. Jacques Marion, UPF-France president. Then Sheikh Abdelkader Achour, the imam of the Omar Mosque in the 11th district – the Paris district mostly hit by the November attacks – gave a talk on “The Value of the Human Being in Islam.” A longtime disciple of former Grand Mufti of Syria Ahmed Kuftaro, Sheikh Achour is widely respected by his coreligionists and other district religious leaders for his wisdom and spirit of tolerance.

He was followed by Mrs. Sabine Le Blanc, a professor of religion, who spoke on the impact and interconnectedness of spiritual experiences, beyond religious affiliation, and their potential contribution to

peace. The next speaker, Dr. Ali Rastbeen, the president of the Academy of Geopolitics of Paris, proposed a geopolitical appraisal of conflicts in the Middle East and gave a broad review of groups throughout the world that use religion to justify terrorist activities. The last panelist was Dr. Jean-Luc Berlet, a professor of philosophy, who offered reflections on universal values conducive to lasting peace, emphasizing the “three blessings” as a framework for a meaningful life and a peaceful world.

The debate that followed, intense but respectful, focused on the connection between terrorism and religion and the role of Islam in current political developments.

The second session, on the theme “One Global Society, One Human Community,” was moderated by Mr. Jacques Marion. He began by reviewing UPF Peace Initiatives throughout the world, notably in the Korean Peninsula, Southeast Asia and the Middle East. He reported about the recent UPF conference in Tirana, Albania, which celebrated ten years of the Balkan Peace Initiative, and he raised prospects of UPF’s work in the Balkans. That served to introduce the first panelist, Dr. Nano Ruzin, a dean of political science at FON University in Skopje, Macedonia, and a former Macedonian ambassador to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Dr. Ruzin reviewed the recent history of the Balkans since the breakup of Yugoslavia, including the ethnic conflicts that ensued, and the gradual development in his country of Macedonia of a multiethnic democracy.



The next speaker was Mr. Doudou Diène, a former UNESCO high official and United Nations special rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination and intolerance. He described current societal transformations and the irreversible rise of multicultural societies, emphasizing the key role of interreligious dialogue. Such dialogue, he said, should move from a theological to an ethical base, and be based on human rights criteria. The final speaker was Mr. Jean-Claude Félix-Tchikaya, a sociologist and researcher at the Institute of Prospective and Security in Europe (IPSE). Mentioning his family roots in the Congo, he spoke of the challenges of integrating into French society, and his work with radicalized youth, yet concluded with optimism about the prospects of a multicultural society in France.

The third and last session, “Issues and Challenges of Energy for Sustainable Development,” was moderated by Mr. Alexandre Huard, coordinator of Youth UPF. The speakers were a husband and wife team: Mr. Thierry M., an engineer in new technologies for the environment, and Mrs. Ye-Bonne M., a doctoral student in fluid mechanics, both of them UPF volunteers. Giving a thorough description of the energy issues at stake regarding sustainable development and climate change, responding to questions from the floor, they stimulated the audience with a lively presentation of the key questions discussed by world leaders at the COP 21 conference, which was coming to an end, almost simultaneously, a few miles away. Thierry M. concluded with a presentation about his experiences in recent years of setting up a drinkable water project in Madagascar villages.

The conference ended with the awarding of certificates to two new Ambassadors for Peace: Mrs. Sobrino, an insurance agency director, and Dr. Koué, a criminologist originally from the Central African Republic, who was moved to tears as he spoke of his war-torn country.