

Local Peace Council in Korça promotes World Interfaith Harmony Week

Following its yearly plan, the Local Peace Council in Korca city, southeast of Albania, held a half day event to commemorate the World Interfaith Harmony Week on February 7, 2012. Although very cold and snowing heavily they made it to have a full meeting room and the attention of local media for the theme Interfaith Harmony and Korça Contribution.



Mr. Kotmilo opening the conference in Korca state University



It was a beauty to see young students and key Ambassadors for Peace to fill a rather small hall inside the Korça State University. The program, moderated by the respected ApP Mr. Dionis Kotmilo, included greeting messages from all faiths and in-depth local studies and reports on local interfaith issues. Among those present was Father Edmond Brahimaj (World Leader of Bektashi Order), the Mufti of Korça, the Orthodox Church representative, the imam of Mitrovica (Kosovo Republic), the Rector of Korca State University, the prefect of Korça region, leadership of Local Peace Council and ApPs. To support the event a group of UPF Tirana Peace Council attended and made it on time for 11 o'clock AM.



After the remarks of rector Gjergji Merko, there was a message from the prefect of Korça, Mr. Andrea Mano who said that this conference is very important for the messages of love and peace that it conveys. "I believe there are two virtues that made it possible for many religions to cohabit and flourish in Albania. First we are a people who believe (in God). Faith is a most important thing in a man.

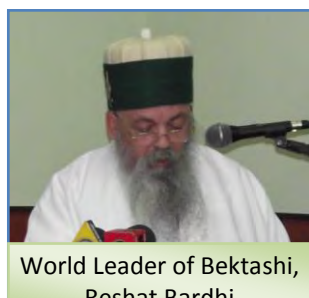
It does not matter which religion you belong to. It is important that when one believes he/she is always a better person, he offers something more to the society. The second reason is that this (interfaith harmony) was the only way for us to survive as a nation and have independence. And religions served to the unity of the nation and played a vital role to independence. I hope that the message of interfaith harmony today can be one of general impact to the daily life of our people. I hope that UPF can continue to be active as it can offer only good things to Korca people“.



In his speech, Dr. Niko Faber, (Local Peace Council Chairman) said that even though Albanians are proud of being a multifaith people what hasn't been said is that none of the religious communities has so far claimed the central role in the country although statistics show a supremacy of one of them (muslims). This is not only the merit of those respective communities but also of their wise leadership. Looking back to the 100 years of Albanian independence we can say that interreligious relations have improved progressively. Starting with the national movement in the 19 century and continuing throughout the Second World War the people of Korça have united under the goal of national freedom.



Prof. Gjergji Mero



World Leader of Bektashi,
Reshat Bardhi



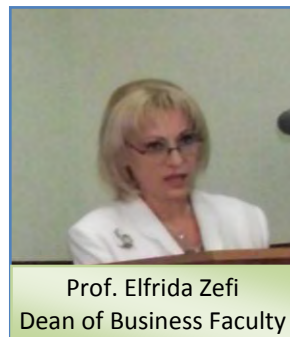
Korca Prefect,
Mr. Andrea Mano



Dr. Niko Faber, Chairman
of Local Peace Council



Orthodox priest,
Mr. Vangjel Panolli



Prof. Elfrida Zefi
Dean of Business Faculty



Mr. Qazim Muçi
Mufti of Korça



Msc. Ardian Matka
Lecturer of Sociology



Mrs. Klara Çela
Local NGO leader and ApP



Mr. Rexhep Luzha
Imam of Mitrovica, Kosovo



Mr. Sokol Rexhepi
Secretary General, UPF Albania

After the War, communists decided for Albania to be the first atheist country in the world, by stopping all religious activities for 23 years. Although mainly with negative effects this decision brought people more close and the element of religious affiliation was not important anymore. Interreligious marriages and common graveyards were not anymore unusual.

Transition into democracy reestablished the right of religion and continued the good tradition of interfaith harmony in the region of Korça. As an example is the tradition of celebrating and acknowledging all religious holy days as well as blessing the national flag on Independence Day, every year. We also recall the Kosovo crises in 1999 when Korca people hosted about one thousand people mainly of Muslim background.

However we should be alert on any fundamentalist effort, radicalism or leadership from religious communities. It is time for a law on religions and for the government to restitute religious properties.



Korça and Tirana ApPs rejoice after the success of the event

We should pass on this beautiful spiritual tradition to Kosovo and Macedonia who have similarities in population structure and UPF and Ambassadors for Peace will give their best to do that.”

After a short introduction to Islam, Imam Rexhep Luzha from Kosovo said that the effects of religious intolerance were seen during the Kosovo war 1999-2000 when over 200 mosques were destroyed by the Serbian army. However, after the war the Kosovo Muslims did not revenge on the Orthodox churches but protected them, including the church of Decan, the monastery of Sokolica in Mitrovicë etc.” Mr. Luzha brought other vivid examples of interfaith cooperation from his community towards other communities showing the true desire for religious tolerance from his side.

The best example of interfaith is Jesus Christ himself, said Mr. Vangjel Panolli from the Orthodox Church of Korça. “He did not come to save the orthodox or catholic Christians. He even preached and met with Israelites, Samaritans and Gentiles. The whole holy law is included in “love God and love your neighbor”. The neighbor is not only your family but whoever stands before or beside you; without cultural, ethnical or religious barriers. Generally we are limited to interreligious tolerance and harmony when thinking about interfaith cooperation, but indeed these are crippled concepts confronted with what Christ teachings. God is love and we should live in love with ‘our neighbor’ in order that we can resemble His image”.



Mr. Elfrida Zefi, the Dean of Economy and Business faculty presented a short research on interfaith harmony focusing on the translation of Quran in Albanian by an orthodox man (Ilo M. Qafëzezi) in 1921 century, when it was not yet done in Turkish language.

Mrs. Klara Cela, ApP and head of a local NGO emphasized the role of civil society in interfaith harmony.

Mr. Ardian Matka, lecturer at history and social sciences department presented his research on *“Elements of Interreligious Tolerance in Korca region”*.

In the end Mr. Sokol Rexhepi, said that “with this event Korça is joining a global community that is today holding an event to commemorate the World Interfaith Harmony Week emphasizing the role of UPF in interfaith dialogue and praising the Local Peace Council for the important initiative to hold this symposium in Albania”.

The event was followed by local media and reported on the evening TV news. It was a milestone for Albanian UPF and a unique event marking the World Interfaith Week in Albania.

Reported by UPF Albania secretariat