

UPF Rome, Italy: Role of spirituality to orient humans to goodness and harmony

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Rome, Italy -- "The role of spirituality is to orient humans to goodness, harmony and beauty, to build peace in oneself and in the world and to eliminate evil nature, which is the cause of strife and conflict." With these words from **Carlo Zonato**, president of UPF-Italy, the panel discussion on "The Value of Spirituality for Social Harmony" opened.

Sponsored by the Italian chapter of the Interreligious Association for Peace and Development (IAPD), one of the UPF associations, the online meeting was held on October 5, 2022.

The event moderator was **Maria Gabriella Mieli**, director of external relations for UPF-Italy.



The first speaker, psychiatrist **Agata Distefano**, cited research that appeared this year in the medical journal *The Lancet*, showing that "the first pandemic wave and the related lockdown led to a significant worldwide increase in cases of anxiety and depression." Fear, she explained, detonated rampant psychic distress, which affected both sexes identically.

She reported on a Columbia University study showing that an attitude marked by resilience and flexibility has a calming effect on psychological distress. "A particular attitude from an ethical and spiritual point of view," she pointed out, "can result in a very important condition of societal well-being, highlighting that our attitude has the power to modify the impact that a stressful condition produces."

She spoke of the great difficulties experienced by health workers during the pandemic period. In her own case, such difficulties were alleviated by her spiritual teacher. "This enabled me to be able to cope with the rampant suffering that affected especially the young people, who lacked great personal tools and found themselves living in a situation of isolation that froze them," the psychiatrist concluded.

Francesco Canale, evangelical pastor of the Equipppers Church, referring to the previous speaker's speech, highlighted "the importance and value of spirituality for the human being, in order not to feel alone, lost and disoriented. A compass that most of humanity, so caught up in the material, has lost, but which we have a duty to find again, because the personal dimension of spirituality can be a value for

building social harmony."

He told of his youthful relationship with God mediated through music, as he served in various communities as a musician and choir director. "Musical harmony," he explained, "can be built by tuning. One must not forget. If one forgets, one does not participate and harmony is not created."

For the pastor, the spiritual dimension of our existence is able to tune our differences. It can balance conflicts and restore to humanity, to our generations who increasingly experience depersonalization, a sense of why we should be united. He ended by stating that "harmony is the perfect fit that I believe can be achieved only when we have the opportunity to share spirituality."



Bishop Luis Miguel Perea Castrillon of the Anglican Episcopal Church said, "When we talk about harmony at the social level, we want to refer to the right point of balance achieved in the most intimate thing for the human being: his ability to relate to his brother, his encounter with the other."

He related that when he was a university student of philosophy, he met a young man of great human qualities who deeply impressed him. "This young man sharing his ability to play the guitar and perform some numbers he learned in the circus changed not only his life but also the lives of many young people around him. He became a policeman and continued to maintain a positive attitude, regardless of his religious beliefs, and was able to raise the human quality of the very poor ... communities in which he served." This young man, the bishop explained, understood that by promoting harmony and balance, it is possible to positively transform a society.

He concluded by stating: "We have a great need to get everyone on the same page to achieve social harmony. This task might seem to concern only the leaders of nations, but it is the responsibility of each of us, for which we must act to transform society."

Nader Akkad, imam of the Grand Mosque of Rome, opened his speech by reciting in Arabic the Holy Quran verse of spiritual and social harmony, which he explained point by point.

"The verse addresses all of humanity and binds people to the creator. Therefore, total harmony cannot be created unless we acknowledge that we were created by God," he commented.

"The statement 'We created you from a male and a female' presupposes a harmonious discourse between man and woman that is the basis of the family." He further explained that God created all of us from a pair, and therefore there is an equality of rights and duties.

"We have made you of different peoples and nations"; this point, the imam stated, indicates that harmony cannot be created if we do not feel the value of diversity. A harmonious society is one that recognizes that differences are a gift from God.

"So that you may know each other"; all the points that have been illustrated must lead to mutual knowledge, which requires respect for the parties.

The imam explained that the verse ends by pointing out that one comes to the Creator and all values that lead to social harmony through love and fear of God. "Love leads me to worship him intensely, as a friend and as a neighbor, and fear enables me not to commit the sins that can lead me away from the Lord," he said.

Sergio Coscia, the director of the Turin chapter of Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (FFWPU), an organization that is affiliated with UPF, said, "When I heard about the theme of this evening, I immediately thought of the family."

He cited the European Social Charter, which states that the family is "the fundamental cell of society" and must be protected "to ensure its full development." It represents the first place of inner formation and social interaction from the earliest years of our lives, Mr. Coscia said.

"The family also influences sensitivity to spiritual values, religious faith and whether or not we are open to the different forms of spirituality of others," he said. Regarding the difficulties of families, "we must trust in humans' spiritual nature, which, if rooted in love, contributes to the formation of strong, united and harmonious families."

Speaking about the current crisis of the family institution, he pointed out how this situation causes malaise and suffering, which is also reflected at the societal level, sometimes in an extreme way, with anti-social and criminal behavior.

"We must support the family so that it becomes the school of love, of living for others, a creator of peace, stability, inner and outer well-being and social harmony," Mr. Coscia concluded.



Tibetan Buddhist monk **Tenzin Khentse** said, "The true meaning of spirituality is deeper and more universal than that of religion, and ... we must learn to let our spiritual part out with spontaneity." The divine nature within us, he explained, if repressed or disturbed by an agitated mind, leads us to put ourselves and our interests first. This "is wrong, not only in terms of the teaching of a spiritual tradition but also with respect to the natural order of things, as taught by nature itself, an example of harmony and beauty."

The monk urged us to learn from these qualities of nature; to open our hearts to the whole; to enrich ourselves with family values, understood as a place of growth; and to consider the world as our extended home.

Referring to inner peace, he explained, "It is taught to us by the spiritual masters, who educate us to discipline our minds so that its qualities may be made available to the attainment of communion with others and their well-being."

He noted that "there can be no personal happiness apart from that shared with others, and that this message, before being a religious teaching, is a law of nature itself."

Psychologist **Antonio Buonaiuto** explained that he entered his profession out of a desire to help people in need. He spoke about the agitated mind within us, which "manifests itself when there is no harmony between reason and our emotional part and when rationality is not applied to emotion, which then takes over."

Mr. Buonaiuto said, "When we are able to bring our emotions to the plane of reality and understand that there may be distorted thinking behind them, rationality can help us to take back control."

For the speaker, the coexistence between the two hemispheres of the brain, between emotions and reason, and between human beings within a group, is crucial. The lack of it causes a dysfunctional existence, leading to destruction; this, he repeated, happens when emotions take over.

"We have talked about the importance of harmony with others," he said, "but it is fundamental to first find equilibrium within ourselves. This condition allows us to contribute to social harmony, even with our differences. The tools are empathy, tolerance and respect for differences."

The panel discussion ended with a question-and-answer session between young people from the communities of the religious leaders present and the speakers.