

UPF Rome, Italy: Building Bridges - Fraternity, Shared Prosperity, Universal Values

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Rome, Italy -- Building bridges between different faith traditions was the theme of a webinar held by UPF and an affiliated organization.

One hundred people participated in the online conference titled "Building Bridges across Borders: Fraternity, Shared Prosperity, Universal Values," held on February 15, 2021, to commemorate World Interfaith Harmony Week and also the first International Day of Human Fraternity.

The Italian chapters of the Interreligious Association for Peace and Development (IAPD), a UPF association, and Women's Federation for World Peace (WFWP) organized the conference together.

Gabriella Mieli, the vice president of WFWP-Italy, was the moderator of the event. In welcoming the participants, she referred to United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres, who urged humankind to "do more to promote tolerance, understanding and cultural and religious dialogue."

Michele Cavallotto, coordinator of IAPD-Italy, said: "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 toward peace and the ideal of One Human Family with God."

After listening to "Amazing Grace," one of the most famous Christian hymns, Mrs. Mieli read the message of Rabbi Barbara Aiello, the first woman rabbi in Italy and founder of the Progressive Jewish Pluralist Movement. The rabbi spoke of three practical experiences lived together with her community 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 described her interfaith programs and activities.

This was followed by a message from Imam Nader Akkad, a PhD 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."

Francesco Canale, an Evangelical pastor, said: "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, a 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 the initiatives of Pope John Paul II, such as the 1986 Assisi meeting. He also spoke of Pope Francis' meeting with the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar and his encyclical Fratelli Tutti ("All Brothers"). He concluded by stating that "religions are a sign and instrument of hope if they agree to collaborate in charity."

After a musical break in which the audience listened to the first world interfaith hymn "The Gift of Love" performed by Sami Yusuf, the next speaker, 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," he said, "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: upward with the Creator, but above all downward to find the other person and recognize in 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 said: "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 Piedmont region chapter of the interfaith group We Are with You, 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, the UPF secretary general for the Middle East and North Africa, emphasized how in times of suffering and loneliness it is good for united faiths to offer a voice that comforts, heals and gives hope.

Mr. Fraser Harris recalled a meeting held on February 4 to celebrate the International Day of Human Fraternity, held by UPF in collaboration with the Al-Liqa' Center for Religious and Heritage Studies in the Holy Land. This meeting was attended by Monsignor Yoannis Lahzi Gaid, the former private secretary of Pope Francis, and Judge Mohamed Abdel Salam, the 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, the secretary general of UPF-Italy, read the UPF Declaration on Interfaith Dialogue. The document calls for the creation at the United Nations of a council of religious leaders of different faiths, who would collaborate with government representatives for lasting peace.

He concluded the meeting by recalling the main teaching of Pope John XXIII: "Seek what unites you, rather than what divides you."

Finally, he quoted UPF co-founder 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.'"