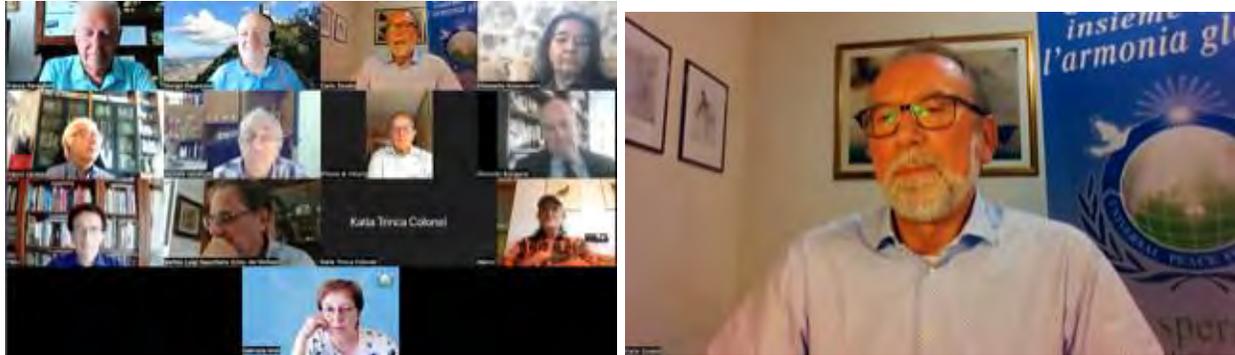


UPF Rome, Italy Holds Second Think Tank Meeting

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Rome, Italy - The second meeting organized by the UPF-Italy Think Tank was held online on July 29, 2022, under the theme "Peace I Leave with You; My Peace I Give You: Churches, Religions among Wars and Peace in the 21st Century."



The speaker was Professor Riccardo Burigana, an Ambassador for Peace and the director of the Study Center for Ecumenism in Italy and professor of ecumenism at the Theological Faculty of Central Italy (Florence).

Professor Burigana spoke for about 20 minutes, and then a debate was opened among all the participants. To read his speech, [click here](#).

Peace I Leave with You; My Peace I Give You: Churches, Religions among Wars and Peace in the 21st Century

**Professor Riccardo Burigana,
director of the Study Center for Ecumenism in Italy**

“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.” (John 14:27).

These words were read, commented on and preached so many times during the centuries; they were often considered just an irenic exhortation, a utopia, for explaining the necessity of war or the necessity of “just war.” There were Christians who took these words literally, but were a minority, even in the first centuries of Christianity, when, at least to the so-called Edict of Milan (313), the topic of the relationship between Christianity and society aroused a wide debate, among Christians inside and outside the Roman Empire, giving origin to a multiplicity of forms. In the 16th century – the century of religious reformations to make the Church as close as possible to the biblical text – there was no lack of reformation projects which started, in fidelity to the Gospel, from a redefinition of the presence of Christians in society, with the complete and radical rejection of all forms of violence, with the condemnation of war. This kind of reformation project led to reactions from those who wanted to remove from the religious horizon the proposals for a Christianity of peace and for peace: These reactions,

which people sometimes can define as persecutions, were often justified by quoting the Sacred Scriptures, for supporting the necessity of war, but they did not completely extinguish the vocation to peace of Christians. The experience of these traditions for peace from the 16th century, which survived above all in North America, constitutes one of the elements that provoked a rethinking of the relationship between Christianity and war; this kind of rethinking, in which very different instances converged, including a deep aversion to nationalism, played a fundamental role in the birth of the contemporary ecumenical movement at the end of the 19th century: The ecumenical movement took on a global dimension, with the involvement of an increasing number of Christians, even after so many dramatic experiences of war in the last century.

With the celebration of the Second Vatican Council, the topic of peacebuilding, rooted in the Gospel, for the Catholic Church took on a completely new meaning, far beyond the documents promulgated at Vatican II, where we can read just something of the broad and lively debate that characterized the Council on peace as element for the “*aggiornamento*.” So many were the interventions of those who believed that a clear and unambiguous word on peace was needed on the part of the Catholic Church in a time of “Cold War,” when several local conflicts posed new questions to Christians, while the question of the atomic bomb as an “instrument of peace” remained in the background, a definition contested also at the Council,

especially in the drafting of the document “*Gaudium et Spes*.” The debate for a full and daily commitment of Christians to peace, in which the question of the “just war” remained very much alive, weighed on the reception of Vatican II also for the words and deeds of Paul VI, who wanted to establish a World Day of Peace to be celebrated every year on January 1, possibly with an ecumenical and interreligious value; for Paul VI it was necessary for relaunching the idea that Christians have to build peace together with men and women of good will, as Pope John XXIII wrote. The World Day of Peace assumed particularly significant meaning in the construction of peace for the Church and for religions in the face of the wars that bloodied so many places in the world, even after the collapse of the Berlin Wall.

Even in the light of the history of the ecumenical movement in 20th century presenting, in a synthetic way, the war in Ukraine, the steps by the churches and religions for peace, the importance of the dimension of the healing of memories wants to be a contribution to reflecting on how the churches and religions can play a fundamental role in building peace in daily life.

1. Ukraine, a close and old war

The war in Ukraine opened up new scenarios, for many reasons, in Europe on the role of the churches for building peace, because it is a war that is “close” and “old.”

The war in Ukraine is a “close” war not only for its geographical location but for the relations which, in the last years, especially after the first Russian invasion of Donbass (2014), had been multiplying between Ukraine and Europe; this “closeness” represented an element that determined, from the first days of the war, a very particular reading, so much so that it was written and said that it was the first war in the heart of Europe since the end of the Second World War.

This kind of reading reinforced the idea of “closeness,” making us lose the memory of what was war in Europe and for Europe in the last decades; since the beginning of the 1990s Europe was bloodied by the civil war in Yugoslavia: a war that determined new divisions, exploding ancient wounds, in a land that had lived in peace only because it had been imposed by a dictatorship that was one of the causes of the terrible events that marked the process that led to the dissolution of Yugoslavia. So many interventions, from military to diplomatic in nature, led to the birth of new states and the signing of treaties without reaching peace, as is evident beyond official declarations. Even in Europe – and we Europe by membership of the Council of Europe – it should be noted that the Caucasus is experiencing a time of war, daily and bloody, of which there is no end in sight despite the silence that accompanies this situation. The war in Ukraine is so “close” that Europe runs the risk of forgetting how much war is still present, beyond the many wounds left by centuries of local and continental wars.

The war in Ukraine is “old” for the religious dimension that characterized it well before its outbreak: For centuries Christians clashed in Europe even in the name of religion, seeking in religion the justification for military action, so much so that the churches mobilized in granting an ideological cover to the war. When people address the topic of the “blessing” of weapons, people often go to ancient times, thinking especially of the Mediterranean, where Christians and Muslims clashed for centuries; people are tempted to present the history of clashes, using the category of “crusade,” which does not help to understand the reasons and consequences of the centuries of wars in the name of religion, not only in the Mediterranean, as the Thirty Years’ War (1618-1648) shows, just to give an example, even for its global and present consequences.

The war in Ukraine, “close” and “old,” has shown, however, how much Christians, especially in Europe, discovered their vocation to become builders of peace in the name of the Gospel after centuries, when quoting the Holy Scriptures Christians justified war, not only the “just war.”

2. Lights and words

On October 27, 1986, in Assisi, John Paul II launched, together with all those who had accepted his invitation, a message to the world: Religions, together, were called to condemn war and to build peace.

The Assisi Encounter depended on an intuition of John Paul II in the light of his experience of the Second Vatican

Council; in fact, the pope, who was one of the protagonists of the Council, considered fundamental that religions help the world to live peace as a daily element with the “light” of faith that characterized every religion. At the Second Vatican Council the Catholic Church proposed, above all with the document *Nostra Aetate*, to abandon the season of opposition between religions to open a new dialogue, based on knowledge, with the desire to identify common values; in this direction was also placed the decision of Paul VI to establish an Office inside the Curia Rome for promoting the positive knowledge of other religions. The pope took his decision before the promulgation of the declaration *Nostra Aetate*, so as to reaffirm how important the topic of interreligious dialogue was for him and the Catholic Church for developing the dialogue in and with the society.

Paul VI’s decision, as well as the debate at Vatican II on interreligious dialogue, was not limited to the Catholic Church and was not something new of the ’60s, but it took on a completely new value with the celebration of Vatican II and with its first reception, so much so that this position of the Catholic Church determined new collaborations with many who, for years, believed the dialogue between religions as a fundamental dimension for the construction of a world different from that defined by the “Cold War.”

The Assisi Encounter of 1986, which aroused, since its convocation, interest and hopes, also because it had been conceived at a time when local wars and international tensions were multiplying, was a turning point for the level of participation, for the methods of development and for the

breadth of the addressed topics: The image of the representatives of religions, coming from all over the world, with their colors, gathered in the same place, delivered the message of a profound sharing of religions to the appeal of Pope John Paul II to live peace as a central and indispensable element of their faith, trying to work together in the world, bringing “the light” of peace to defeat the “darkness” of war thanks to love for the other.

From the Assisi Encounter many things began in many places of the world for relaunching the idea that religions should, together, play a specific role in the construction of peace: Among so many initiatives one must remember the annual conferences, promoted by the Community of Sant'Egidio, which favored the knowledge of the “spirit of Assisi,” which determined deeds and words that showed how much religions could do for peace.

In the reception of the “spirit of Assisi,” also nourished by the visits of the popes to Assisi for updating the message of 1986, Christians discovered how important it was to give even more strength to the construction of peace, speaking with one voice; Christians witnessed how they were deeply united, beyond the theological questions that still divided them, in living evangelical peace in the world, sharing what had been done by the contemporary ecumenical movement for the overcoming of divisions thanks to a rereading of the past that would lead to the healing of memories.

3. Healing of memories

The healing of memories is a topic on which the contemporary ecumenical movement has questioned itself since its first steps, by finding the reason for the topic in the historical-critical rereading of the religious events of the 16th century; this kind of reading had to face nationalistic policies of the 19th century which tended to provide a new ideological interpretation that obscured the common spiritual heritage of Europe, helping to create new divisions. The historical-critical presentation of Christian traditions was often the initial step in the dialogue between Christians who, even in the knowledge of the other, began a journey of reconciliation, with which fostering a path of understanding the unity of diversity, as a central element to strengthen the mission of proclaiming and witnessing to the Word of God. The topic of the healing of memories took on a completely new value during the 20th century even after the dramatic experience of the World Wars, nourishing reflection for a daily action of Christians for peace, in every place and in every time, as a fundamental part not only for ecumenical dialogue. In fact, Christians in sharing a memory, often fragmented and opposed, discovered how important the healing of memories is for society so as to hope for the involvement of men and women of good will.

Since the celebration of the Great Jubilee (2000), when there had been criticism even within the Catholic Church for the indications offered by John Paul II for a rereading of the history of the Church in an ecumenical perspective which led to reconciliation, the healing of memories became part of the agenda of the contemporary ecumenical movement not

only as an element from which to begin a theological dialogue for the overcoming of divisions in the perspective of living the full and visible unity, as it had been for years, but as a central element in building peace with the active participation of Christians, opened to any kind of collaboration.

On the occasion of the common commemoration, as it was defined on the occasion of the ecumenical prayer of October 31, 2016, in Lund (Sweden), by Pope Francis and Bishop Younan Munib, president of the Lutheran World Federation, of the 500th anniversary of the beginning of the Reformation, the topic was further deepened, opening new perspectives, so much so that some went so far as to support the need for the drafting of an Ecumenical History of the Church: It is a Church History which, starting from the assumption of the historical-critical method, proceeded to a reconstruction of the event and, at the same time, of the tradition of the event over the centuries. The Ecumenical History of the Church could clear how, often, the event and its tradition to be read together were decisive in the construction of the divisions that prevented the understanding of what really happened.

The reflection on an Ecumenical History of the Church, which went beyond the definitions and attempts made in recent decades, showed its fruitfulness on the occasion of the war in Ukraine, when it became clear how the presentation of the historical events of the peoples and regions involved in the war fueled the ideological clash; the ideological presentations of the history of the Church in

Russia and/or in Ukraine were quoted to justify the reasons for the war. Therefore it appears more than necessary the project for the drafting of an Ecumenical History, as indicated above, even for building a peace process to be started by overcoming the wall of divided memories.

The topic of healing of memories, through a path of historical-critical knowledge, with a very particular role to the oral tradition, is so present in the reflection of the World Council of Churches, as pointed out by the preparation for the XI General Assembly (Karlsruhe, August 31 – September 8, 2022) and in the magisterium of Pope Francis, as has become evident, just to give an example, in the apostolic journey to Canada: It assumes a fundamental value for the war in Ukraine, as for all the other present and past wars, because it is the key to open hearts and minds so as to know the past for building the present in the peace, from sharing the black and white pages of history.

Some final remarks

The war in Ukraine aroused many different feelings, in so many places in the world, but it is evident that it provoked a European involvement whose dimensions are not easy to define, because of the many shapes it has assumed, especially in the field of material and spiritual acceptance beyond the official positions of the political institutions. The mobilization for Ukraine has run the risk of forgetting, once again, how many realities there are in the world in which war has been experienced daily, sometimes for years, as

happens in Syria, so much so that the possibility of achieving peace is considered a utopia and not a path to be built, starting with silencing weapons. The war in Ukraine caused a certain relaxation of that tension to condemn all forms of violence and to denounce attempts to justify this violence with religion, for the images and for the stories of damage by weapons, not only in that region, as also demonstrated by the consequences of the war in many countries, determined by the reckless growth in the prices of some raw materials, such as wheat, on which the lives of millions of people depend. The daily denunciations of violence had already suffered some weakening due to the pandemic, which provoked new discrimination, but it remains a privileged field of ecumenical witness of the Christians.

In sharing the common patrimony, represented by the Sacred Scriptures, Christians discovered, especially in the course of the 20th Century, how much the Word of God constitutes the privileged source for a journey toward unity with respect for diversity, with recourse to dialogue, on the model of that proper to that in the Sacred Scriptures, to be lived in everyday life; this journey is nourished by a common root that invites peace as a distinctive sign of local communities to build a universal brotherhood for a world radically different from the present one, heir to centuries of wars.

The common biblical root of the Christian experience drove men and women to overcome divisions that have created moats and walls that have gone far beyond confessional

boundaries; it is not a question of remaining inside a perspective of the unity of the Church, but of proposing an “Ecumenical Revolution”: The “Ecumenical Revolution” means the obedience of the power of dialogue, in the appreciation of diversity in order to grasp spiritual and local riches, scattered over time, without any pretense of reaching uniformity; it is the way to build an evangelical peace, which is not just a signature to establish winners and losers, but the beginning of a path of reconciliation of memories to discover, day by day, all together, the joy of sharing the hopes and troubles of living in harmony in the world and for the world.