

## An interview of Willem van Eekelen

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*Dr. Willem van Eekelen and his wife drinking holy wine*

*Dr. Eekelen was born in Utrecht, the Netherlands, in 1931. He has had a long and diverse career in government and public service. What follows are mere highlights: He worked in his nation's Foreign Ministry (1957–1977). In that capacity, he took charge of coordinating European political cooperation and was director of Atlantic cooperation and security affairs. He was part of the Dutch delegation to NATO.*

*He has been a member of both houses of the Staten Generaal (the Dutch legislature). He was secretary-general (1989–2004) of the Western European Union (dissolved in 2011), which grew out of a treaty for collective self-defense, social and economic collaboration between ten member states. At some point, he worked with the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies as head of the Policy and Research Unit for Islamic Relief Worldwide. Perhaps this explains to some degree his interest in the European movement's Middle East Peace Initiatives. From 2005, he has been involved in various Universal Peace Federation conferences.*

### **How did you become interested in politics?**

As a boy, I was always very much interested in history and influenced by World War II, which finished when I was fourteen years old. My parents liked to travel abroad, and I felt attracted to foreign countries. At a later age, I had the desire to work as a diplomat and see something of the world. I studied law and during that time, I also went to the Princeton University [in the United States]. There I met German and Japanese students and realized that they were people like me.

My parents lost a close friend in the war and hated the Germans. They did not want to buy a German car or go to Germany anymore. My experience with students from the former enemy nations opened my eyes toward the world and helped me overcome the hostile feelings after the war. Thanks to the European integration and the good behavior of Germany after the war, hostility against Germany diminished quickly.

After I had been a diplomat in India, London, Ghana and with NATO, I was asked to become a candidate for the elections of the Dutch Parliament. I was elected and soon after appointed in government positions.

Next I became secretary-general of the West European Union (WEU), a military organization for West European cooperation. My career mainly has focused on Europe or European security.

The Berlin Wall fell and the discussion about European security changed. How were we to deal with a unified Germany and the former Warsaw Pact countries? The WEU had a stabilizing role, as an organization, between the European Union (EU) and NATO in this process of change, which led to

expansion of the EU.

Quickly I could organize for representatives of East European countries to be present at our WEU meetings.

They could be informed about the opinions of the member states and give their reactions. In this way I could organize an informal solution for interaction. In the process, they became members of the EU and NATO.

In my career I learned that participation is often more important than formal membership. This worked well.



*Dr. Eekelen with Mrs. Hae Ok Lee, wife of the overall president of Japan's Blessed Family Associations*

#### **How did you come into contact with UPF?**

In 2006, I was invited to speak at a UPF conference in The Hague about the future of Europe. I was given the certificate as an ambassador for peace.

Since that time, I have visited quite a number of conferences in the Netherlands, like the European Leadership Conferences (ELC) in Glory House and other interesting meetings abroad. Especially the Middle East Peace Initiative (MEPI) was very inspiring.

I have always been interested in the situation in the Middle East. The meetings in Israel and Palestine I considered very successful and balanced.

The MEPI participants met representatives of Israel and Palestine from various backgrounds. In this informal setting, both sides could express themselves freely. I also visited other conferences. As I have experienced in my work as a diplomat, that people understand each other is very important. We have to know why people act as they do. If you understand the other side, there is a chance to come to consultation and a compromise.

That is, I think, also the message of UPF: try to understand why there is a problem and next try to find a solution. We have done this in different ways. I have experienced the UPF conferences as very positive. Participants were always ready to listen to each other and the speakers were well worth listening to. They gave you a deeper insight and more balance in the formation of your thoughts.

#### **What do you think of the inter-religious dimension of UPF?**

I myself am not very religious, but I can endorse the message of UPF. In my speeches, also recently in Japan, I often refer to the ceremony when representatives of different religions came to the stage with a bottle of water in their hands in order to pour out the water in a large bowl, representing the unifying elements of the religions. Maybe this is not really expressing complete unity, but it shows respect for each other. Respect for each other and the readiness to work together is most important. Often freedom is seen as very important, but there is no freedom without responsibility.

Either there is no democracy without respect, especially for the minorities. These are fundamental principles. This may not be very religious but it corresponds to the Golden Rule: one should treat others as one would like others to treat oneself. I consider this a very important point.

The founder of UPF, Father Moon, is an advocate of an inter-religious council at the UN. I read his autobiography. The history of his life is very impressive, especially his perseverance.

His idea about adding a Council of Religious leaders to the UN sounds good, but in general religious leaders like to promote their own religion. I know that this does not apply to Reverend Moon. If the religious leaders would like to contribute from their background to the higher goal of world peace as Reverend Moon does, such a council might be valuable.

#### **In 2010, at an ELC in San Marino, you participated in the Inter-religious Blessing Ceremony. How did you experience this?**

The experience brought deep emotions, where you look back on your life, which in the case of my wife and me, is in general a life of happiness.

There was one downside: We lost our son at a rather young age. Also in politics, I had some setbacks, but that is normal. My life has been full of variety and this is still like that. I consider it all together a blessing.

**Recently you were invited to Japan for a speaking tour.**

That was great! I was very well received and spoke for big audiences of important people about issues of international cooperation, peace and security. Before coming to Japan, I had been in Hong Kong and Taiwan for other meetings with high level officials.

That was interesting as there were tensions in Hong-Kong and between China and other Asian countries like the Philippines, Vietnam, Japan and Korea. China claims more and more territory, islands and areas in the sea. Also there was the APEC conference in Beijing and accusations from the UN about the situation of human rights in North Korea. Asia was in the news.

At the time that I went to Japan, my wife, who had been in a Japanese prison camp in Indonesia at the time of the war, also came to Japan for a reconciliation mission between Dutch and Japanese citizens. Mentioning this was a very good entry in my speeches in Japan. We appreciate reconciliation attempts very much. This corresponds to the manner in which the European integration took place. How Germany has dealt with its past, is a very good example. Germany does not want to be a dominating power anymore, certainly not by military means, but wants to be a European Germany.

After World War II, the European Community for Coal and Steel (ECSC) started. The idea was to share resources instead of these being controlled by one dominating power. European countries were not anymore the base of national expansion. Germany developed well into a democratic country. In Japan, I mentioned how European integration could be a model for nations in Asia to cooperate.

**Do you have recommendations for UPF?**

It is important for UPF to focus on young people. One of the great successes in Europe for the process of integration has been exchange programs between the young people of France and Germany. Furthermore, we have to find in the present conflicts points for rapprochement and from there improve the situation.

MEPI is a good example of attempts to bring people in conflict together in a wider context of discussion and dialogue.

Now it is important to set up dialogues between Europe and Russia and exchange programs for young people. Another point is to help continents organize better around a set of common principles. I was involved in the process of preparing the Helsinki Final Act. Such an agreement on fundamental principles is needed to create a peaceful world of nations.

Unfortunately, many nations do not follow these principles yet. For me the European Union with all its difficulties and challenges still is a good model how to develop cooperation between nations.