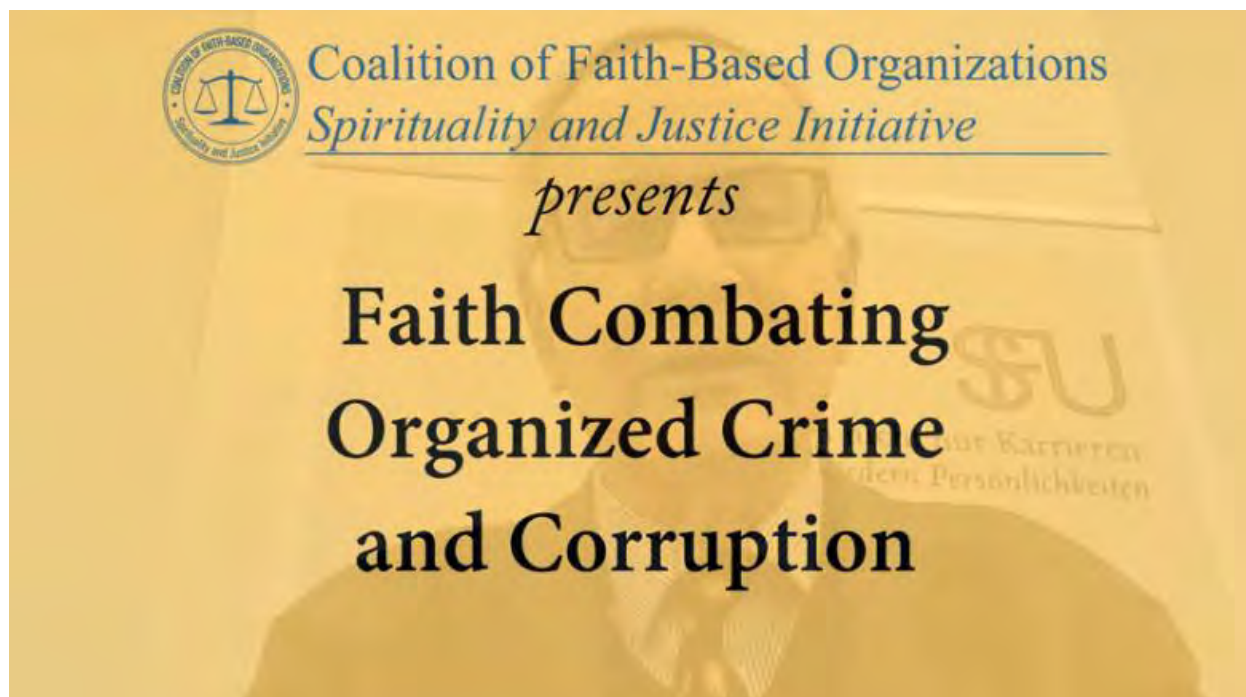


Faith-Based Organizations Looks at International Organized Crime - Part Two

Thomas G. Walsh
October 15, 2020



Vienna, Austria -- On the afternoon of October 15, 2020, the Coalition of Faith-Based Organizations held a web conference titled "Faith-Based Organizations: Combatting Organized Crime and Corruption." The conference had 100 attendees from 31 countries. The morning session on the same day took as its theme "Social Harm of Organized Crime on Communities." UPF is a founding partner and member of the coalition.

Dr. Michael Platzer (Co-chair, Coalition of Faith-Based Organizations) gave an introduction to the host organization. During the 28th session of the UN Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice on May 20–24, 2019, the Coalition of Faith-Based Organizations Spirituality and Justice Initiative was established in Vienna and New York. Dr. Platzer singled out H.E. Alvaro Albacete (Deputy Secretary General, King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue [KAICIID]) and Jean-Luc Lemahieu (Director, Division for Policy Analysis and Public Affairs of the UN Office on Drugs and Crime) and their organizations for their support.



H.E. Aftab Khokher (Pakistan's Ambassador to Austria) served as moderator. The ambassador commended the host for organizing the webinar as a side event to the 10th session of the Conference of the Parties to the UN Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime, sponsored by the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). He also pointed out the relevance of the venue, Sigmund Freud University Vienna, because of the contribution of Freud to our knowledge and development of why people commit crimes.

Panelists

Jean-Luc Lemahieu (Director, Division for Policy Analysis and Public Affairs of the UN Office on Drugs and Crime) spoke first. He began by saying that faith-based organizations must mobilize youth and society to combat transnational organized crime. Corruption has always been a problem in governments, but its effects during a pandemic can be quite severe. Scam artists are selling fake vaccines, ineffective masks, and counterfeit cleaning supplies. Corruption undermines faith in democracy and contributes to radicalization and recruitment by extremist and terrorist groups. These shared threats require shared action; the international community must bring a multilateral response to transnational organized crime, he concluded.



Dr. Venerable Sobhita (Founder and Principal, International Buddhist Education Center -- Myanmar, Nepal and The Netherlands; Founder and Pro Rector, Sitagu Buddhist University) followed with his remarks. Crime and violence have always been problems, but the present crisis has amplified their dangers and undermined trust between the nations of the world. Crime prevention requires both a change of mindset and addressing the material conditions at the root of the problem. Inequalities generate violence; justice and rule of law reduce these inequalities, and therefore pave the way for peace and harmony.



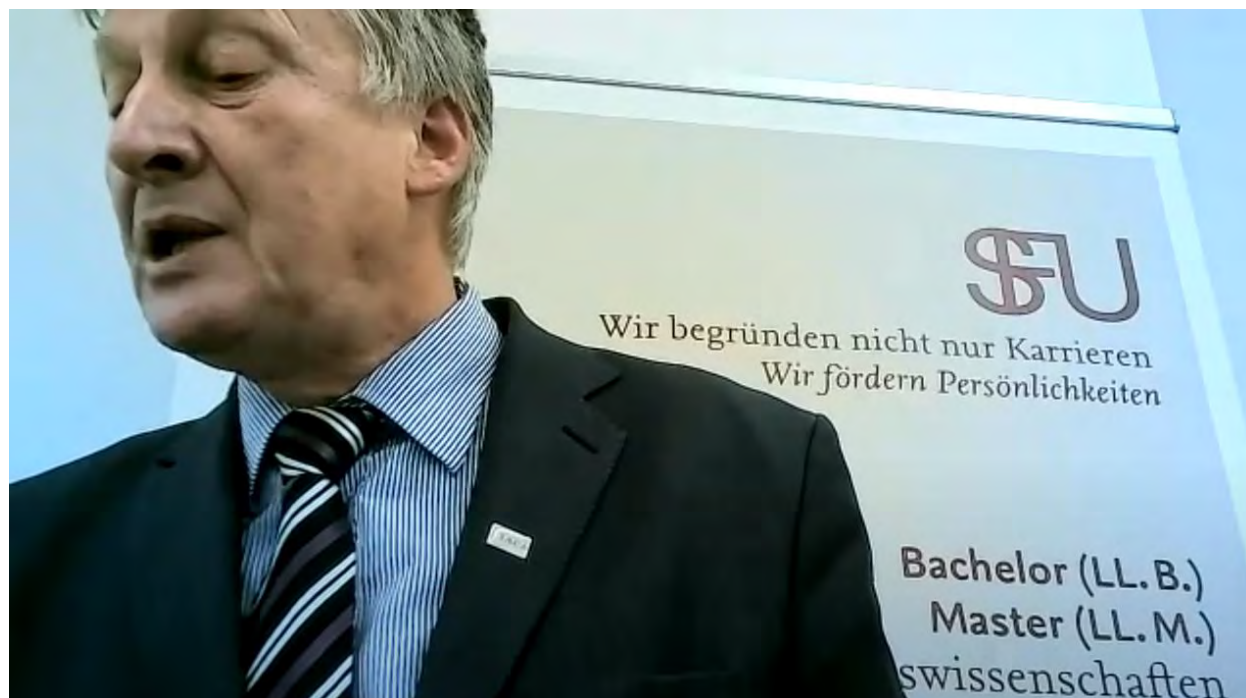
Don Luigi Ciotti (Italian priest and activist; Founder of Libera Association) followed with a video presentation. Despite the extraordinary struggles of judges and law enforcement against organized crime, political and cultural support, as well as understanding the origins of the problem, are often lacking. There is need for a paradigm shift that recognizes how deeply the organized criminal world is intertwined with our own. Criminal organizations, especially the Sicilian Mafia, often take advantage of religious institutions to win public support and mask their activities. Pope Francis has made rhetorical and material efforts to strip away the Mafia's ability to take advantage of the Roman Catholic Church. The Libera

Association works worldwide to mobilize religious leaders in opposition of organized crime.

Amb. Alvaro Albacete (Deputy Secretary General, King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue [KAICIID]) was next to present. Corruption is a serious threat to social cohesion and common citizenship. Corruption exacerbates poverty and erodes trust in the social contract. When it comes to responses to COVID-19, corruption has manifested in partisan allocation of pandemic management resources; rather than emphasize the common good, some political groups prioritize protecting their own. Religious actors can step in as moral voices in places where corruption has eroded trust in political institutions. KAICIID advocates against discrimination based on religion and political affiliation and promotes the rule of law. By emphasizing values like integrity and honesty, it hopes to push back against corruption.

Sahibzada Najeeb Sultan (Sufi saint and spiritual leader, Pakistan) gave his remarks next. Spirituality can be a force against organized crime and corruption, he observed. The world's religions offer a fundamental spiritual message that is antithetical to corrupt and criminal behavior. The message of peace and love for all can save human beings from evil thoughts and deeds, he observed.

H.E. Thomas Stelzer (Dean and Executive Secretary, International Anti-Corruption Academy) was next to speak. Faith-based organizations can contribute to solving numerous problems in anti-corruption work. They can help with information sharing as well as with ensuring accountability for anti-corruption actors. They can also raise awareness and support for anti-corruption work. The International Anti-Corruption Academy is the only organization with an exclusive mandate to fight corruption. Through its academic programs, it directly trains its students to fight corruption. Success in fighting corruption has increasingly been recognized as a prerequisite for achieving the UN's Sustainable Development Goals. Ambassador Stelzer closed with recognition of Pope Francis's vigorous anti-corruption advocacy.



Rev. Dorothee Hahn (Vicar, Christuskapelle, Vienna) spoke next. Faith-based organizations must present a unified front regardless of their individual affiliations. Deeper sensitivity is necessary for faith leaders to teach their members to acknowledge corruption; corruption is often "known but not seen." The Coalition of Faith-Based Organizations serves as a valuable network for achieving these goals. Faith leaders are most effective when they are deeply involved with their own communities while remaining in cooperative communication with leaders of other communities.

Prof. Azza Karam (Secretary General, Religions for Peace) was the last to speak. In 2010, a UN interagency task force on corruption was founded. Since its founding, the task force's engagement with faith-based organizations has steadily increased. It is critical for review mechanisms to be established, in conversation with non-government organizations, to track progress against corruption and organized crime. A multilateral approach to these issues is the only effective approach, but it is also an approach that requires robust support and transparency.