

UPF La Rioja, Argentina Holds Religious Freedom: A Right Globally Under Threat

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August 31, 2023



La Rioja, Argentina -- "Religious Freedom: A Right Globally Under Threat" was the theme of UPF-Argentina's Academic-Interreligious Forum on August 31, 2023, held at UNLaR University's Microcine Hall in La Rioja, Argentina's central region. This event took place as part of Peace Road 2023 Argentina (1).



This UNLaR's University Extension Project, organized by the Theology and Comparative Religions Department along with UPF-Argentina, under the general framework of Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion..."

also supports the International Day Commemorating the Victims of Acts of Violence Based on Religion or Belief.

This was an occasion for representatives of different religions and local and international experts to share their experiences and perspectives on basic human rights currently under threat in different countries. Some of them attended in person, others joined online or through video, such as renowned Italian sociologist **Massimo Introvigne**, founder and director of the Studies Center on New Religions (CESNUR) and the Interreligious Committee for Peace (COMIPAZ).



The program began with an introductory video on UPF (2) and Peace Road 2022 La Rioja. Welcoming remarks were given by **Dr. Roxana Khairallah**, secretary of UNLaR's University Extension Project, and **Mercedes Cáceres**, dean of UNLaR's Human Sciences and Education Department, who stressed the importance of interreligious dialogue, peaceful coexistence, development in values, and human rights. She also suggested this activity should be promoted in the next edition of Peace Road.



Miguel Werner, UPF-Argentina president, gave an online message, thanking and congratulating

directors and promoters of the Project. He explained UPF's lines of action and the need to work together for peace, as proposed by Peace Road. He showed the Peace Road shirt with a quote on peace from the Founder of UPF: "Where there is a will, there is a way, [especially] if we join in the same cause under divine inspiration" (3).



Thereafter, on-site speeches were given by **Father Oscar Gabriel Díaz**, from the Greek Orthodox Church of the Ecumenic Patriarchy and member of the COMIPAZ, and **Father David Cuello**, both main professors and coordinators of the Project and members of the Academic Department of Human Sciences and Education; and **David Jabif**, director of La Rioja's Jewish Library and Agnon Zionist.



"Religious freedom is an essential cornerstone for a democratic, pluralist society. From our perspective, such freedom is considered a reflection of the gift of free will, given by God, and is appreciated as a fundamental right that should be respected by all people and beliefs," claimed **Father Díaz** from his Orthodox Christian viewpoint. In his extensive speech, he mentioned different ways that religious freedom has been limited, from prohibition and State control on religion, to religious violence, which can include attacks on worship sites, murders, violations, and forced migration of people due to their beliefs (4).

Dr. David Frol, second vice-president of the Argentinian Council for Religious Freedom (CALIR), IAPD-Argentina representative and leader of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, gave an online presentation. He analyzed the global religious freedom situation due to a worrying deterioration in exercising this right in countries from all regions (5). This was shared by a representative of the same community, **Andrea Fernández Bevans**, member of Peace Road 2023 Argentina's monitoring team in the Center Region, who also introduced the international guest **Massimo Introvigne**, specialist in religious freedom.

Mr. Introvigne talked about his experience studying and researching various religious groups for more than 40 years, which convinced him that rejecting "all useless and dangerous concepts of 'cults' and 'brainwashing' is the best way of protecting religious freedom and successfully chasing groups guilty of real crimes such as murders, sexual abuse and theft..." The CESNUR founder claimed that "'cult' is just an insult we need to avoid" and criticized certain governments that pretend to replace the concept of supposed "brainwashing" with "coercive persuasion" (6).



The Forum included video messages by Catholic bishops **Monsignor Dante Gustavo Braida**, bishop of La Rioja Diocese (7), and **Monsignor Pedro Torres**, bishop of Rafaela Diocese; **Federico Palacios**, representative of Córdoba's Archdiocese Commission of Ecumenism and Interreligious Dialogue; **Monsignor Iosif Bosch**, archbishop of Buenos Aires and South American metropolitan of the Greek Orthodox Church of Constantinople Patriarchy; **Rabbi Marcelo Polakoff**, from Córdoba's Israel Union Center; and **Mara Pedicino**, worship director of Córdoba Municipality and member of the Interreligious Committee for Peace (COMIPAZ) (8).

Between the academic and interreligious presentations, there was a music break. At the end there were comments and contributions from the audience as well as video performances by singer **Yéssica Rezinovsky**, and the music group **Los Legales**. The event finished with the song "Ruta de la Paz," first presented at Peace Road 2022, sung by **Gabriel Torino** (9), and an interreligious prayer.

The emcees were **Javier Casco** and **Daniel Caniza**, UNLaR theology and comparative religions students, a unique option in South American public universities. They promoted this Forum along with the faculty and UPF-Argentina. The Forum was also coordinated by **Natalia Gachon**, member of the Peace Road 2023 La Rioja team.

It is worth recalling that Peace Road 2023, the theme of which is "Argentina Chooses Peace," began on July 29 with an artistic festival in Plottier (Neuquén) (10), which included an exhibition of works by more than 80 artists from 14 countries; and another event on August 12 in Godoy Cruz (Mendoza) with an educational activity of community training developed by Red Manos Unidas during Breastfeeding Month.

As in the 2021 and 2022 editions, Peace Road Argentina seeks to develop Peace initiatives in each of the 23 provinces: solidary, ecological, educative, artistic, sportive, interreligious or intercultural activities, focusing on each individual's dignity, common good and peace. This global campaign of "Connecting the World through Peace" promotes greater interrelation among peoples, greater commitment of the international community in solving local and global issues, from violence and poverty to the global refugee problem, climate change and peace in the Korean peninsula (11).

Links:

1) Academic and Interreligious Forum on Religious Freedom for Peace Road: extensionunlar.com.ar/index.php/2023/09/04/el-dia-jueves-31-de-agosto-se-llevo-a-cabo-el-foro-academico-e-interreligioso-ruta-de-la-paz-libertad-religiosa/

2) UPF introductory video: youtu.be/2k2K_sphYvM

3) Message by Miguel Werner: www.slideshare.net/UPFArgentina/mensaje-miguel-werner-foro-de-libertad-religiosa-en-ruta-de-la-paz-argentina-2023

4) Speech by Father Oscar Gabriel Díaz: www.slideshare.net/UPFArgentina/pater-oscar-gabriel-daz-de-la-iglesia-ortodoxa-griega-del-patriarcado-ecumnico-foro-de-libertad-religiosa-en-ruta-de-la-paz-argentina-2023



5) Speech by Dr. David Frol: youtu.be/NDw4JFpbuI4

6) Speech by specialist on religious freedom Massimo Introvigne: youtu.be/c17jov8xnw8

7) Video message by Monsignor Dante Braida: youtu.be/o-O2P8ksIxg

8) Video messages by COMIPAZ members: youtu.be/kWCZ4M4rGHI

9) Song "Ruta de la Paz" by Gabriel Torino: youtu.be/evvoZ4LDsMo

10) Art festival in Patagonia launches Peace Road 2023 Argentina - 7-29-2023:
youtu.be/SG0CrKpMbGM

11) More info on Peace Road 2023 Argentina: www.slideshare.net/UPFArgentina/cuadernillo-gua-ruta-de-la-paz-argentina-2023

Promotional videos on Peace Road 2023 Argentina:

youtu.be/q-sBX62ix8s

youtu.be/QR67x5y6nY8

youtu.be/kkqNrWoj0_w