

UPF Vienna, Austria discusses faith-based organizations' role in preventing crime

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Vienna, Austria -- UPF participated in a discussion at the United Nations about faith-based organizations' role in preventing crime.

"Spirituality and Justice" was the title of the daylong event organized by the UN Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC) on October 7, 2019, to discuss collaboration with faith-based organizations (FBOs).

The event at the Vienna International Centre was opened by the UNODC director of policy analysis and public affairs, Dr. Jean-Luc Lemahieu, and the permanent representative of Spain, Ambassador Senén Florensa. Representatives from Austria, Russia, Belarus, Canada, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Eritrea, Jordan, Lebanon, and Morocco attended the four sessions. A list of potential topics for discussion was prepared by the Civil Society Team of UNODC.

The International Commission of Catholic Prison Pastoral Care distributed a pamphlet titled Basic Principles: Religion in Prison and organized an international exhibition of prison art at the United Nations. Bishop Franz Scharl, who is responsible for Catholic prison pastoral care, spoke at both the UN and the evening event near St. Stephen's Cathedral in central Vienna.

Imam Džemal Šibljković, the coordinator for care of Muslim prisoners in Austrian prisons, Markus Fellingner, a Protestant chaplain, and Mrs. Susanne Halbeisen from the Buddhist community also participated in the articulation of the "Vienna Recommendations." Professor Ismail Yasin offered his reflections on the situation in Syria.

Dr. Michael Platzer from the UN Studies Association and Dr. Elmar Kuhn from the European Academy of Sciences and Arts moderated the discussions of empathy and social justice, ethics and good governance, humane treatment and resocialization of offenders, restorative justice and victim assistance. Professor Karin Bruckmüller from Sigmund Freud University in Vienna made an impassioned plea for non-judicial settlements with acknowledgment of harm done to victims and non-penal community

service.

Dr. Thomas Walsh, the chair of UPF International, in a message to the conference thanked Dr. Platzer for being a never-tiring activist. He then addressed the topic "Spirituality and Justice":

"Religion and spirituality have been integrally related to human beings throughout all the ages. Among the many billions of people currently dwelling on this planet, the vast majority either explicitly subscribe to a particular religious tradition or have been profoundly shaped, perhaps without acknowledgment, by the ideas, images, memes, symbols, and characteristics of religion.



"Its death has often been prematurely predicted," Dr. Walsh said. "Religion, however, is sticky. That stickiness fixes itself in the minds and hearts of people and impacts human thought and action. Religion does not dwell in a private sphere set apart from life. It is part of the fabric of life. While it is prone to failings and corruption, like all human endeavors, it also reaches the greatest heights of insight, wisdom and service.

"The universal aspiration for justice derives from a moral insight which has roots in the world's great religions," Dr. Walsh said. "Believers, by and large, are justice-seekers, called to that mission by their scriptures and their founders. Justice cannot be achieved by the actions of governments alone. It requires the participation of all sectors, including academia, civil society, the media and the arts, educational institutions -- and, indeed, FBOs."

Professor Azza Karam, the UN coordinator of the Task Force for Engagement with Faith-Based Organizations, delivered an encouraging video message from New York, while Mr. Ibrahim Salama from the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights sent a positive message from Geneva to invite closer collaboration between the two offices.

The Universal Peace Federation, its affiliated organization Women's Federation for World Peace, and Dominicans for Justice and Peace played important roles in organizing and getting important people to the events.