

## UPF Europe and the Middle East: Building a Culture of Truth and Love at Times of Crisis

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Al-Liqa' Center for Religious, Heritage and Cultural Studies in the Holy Land  
مركز اللقاء للدراسات الدينية والتراثية والثقافية في الأراضي المقدسة

Conference of the Church and Contextual Theology  
"Building a Culture of Truth and Love during Times of Crisis:  
The Role and Responsibility of the Church"

يعقد الدورة الواحدة و الثلاثون  
مؤتمر الكنيسة واللاهوت المحلي  
"بناء ثقافة الحقيقة والمحبة في أوقات الأزمات: دور الكنيسة ومسئوليتها"

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Europe and the Middle East -- UPF co-sponsored an international webinar titled "Building a Culture of Truth and Love during Times of Crisis: The Role and Responsibility of the Church."

The Al-Liqa' Center for Religious, Heritage, and Cultural Studies in the Holy Land convened the webinar together with UPF and its Inter-religious Association for Peace and Development (IAPD) on May 28, 2021. The international audience numbered nearly 150.

Speaking against the backdrop of the recent hostilities between Israel and Palestine, church leaders and scholars from Jerusalem, Beirut, New York and Mexico City addressed that crisis as well as the global pandemic and related questions in the field of medical ethics.

Introducing the webinar, **Dr. Yousef Zaknoun**, the director of the Al-Liqa' Center and a professor of philosophy and ethics of life at Bethlehem University, Palestine, honored two of the prominent speakers. He reminded us of the love and hope given to the suffering Lebanese people by their patriarch, Cardinal Bechara Boutros Al-Rahi, and likewise the guidance in historically difficult times for the people of the Holy Land provided by the Latin Patriarch Pierbattista Pizzaballa. Dr. Zaknoun said the pandemic has exposed how little we understand about life, leading us to ask ourselves once more, "What is ethical?" and "What is humanitarian?"

Referring to Pope Francis and his predecessors Benedict and Paul VI, **His Eminence Cardinal Bechara Boutros Al-Rahi**, patriarch of Antioch and All the East, Maronite Church, reminded us that love requires the light of truth. Truth prevents love from being separated from the human and universal dimension. He spoke of the vital interconnectedness of truth and love: "If I don't know who God is, how can I love Him? If I don't know the value of a country, how can I love it?" To those in the Holy Land and to all the oppressed, the cardinal said, "We pray with you for God to put in your minds the light of truth and in your hearts the light of love."

**His Beatitude Pierbattista Pizzaballa**, Latin patriarch of Jerusalem, speaking on "The Role of Faith at the Time of Crisis," pointed out that faith, the personal experience with God, and religion, the institutionalization of that experience, are distinct but related and need to be well balanced. Faith also shapes personal and collective identity, taking on different forms in different places, he said.

While the Israel-Palestine conflict is primarily a matter of land and therefore political, he said, the political perspectives are directly influenced by religion -- an example being the role of Al-Aqsa in the recent conflict – a symbol at once national and religious. This makes religion a fundamental element of the conflict relations between different identities, the patriarch said.

For Christians today, faith has a fundamental role in forming the conscience, in turn influencing lifestyle, attitude and social behavior, he said. "It is not limited to devotion. We have to be outspoken where necessary, but with the proper attitude, directly connected with Jesus." Faith won't resolve the problems on the ground, but it does give the vision, the strength and the courage to keep working. and no weapon can kill that, he said.



**Dr. Thuraya Bashalani**, a professor and researcher at the Faculty of Religious Sciences, University of Saint Joseph, Beirut, and secretary-general, Middle East Council of Churches, spoke on "The Mission of the Church in a Tormented World." The first challenge, she said, is how to interpret the situation we face; this requires spirit. In the midst of all the political powers, we must remember God's word to Cain: "Where is your brother, Abel?" Amid all the conflicts and challenges we have to bring a spirit of hope, she said. We have to work for spiritual renewal and be present in all aspects of Arabic culture. She advised us to always remember Jesus' words: "You are the salt of the earth."

**Dr. Thomas G. Walsh**, the chairman of UPF International, spoke on "The Role of Faith-Based Organizations during the Pandemic." Pandemics historically have been "very complex, broad-based disruptions," he said, and this one too has had a very wide impact on human security, with businesses closed and jobs lost. There has been an intensified polarization in the political world and the media, which has affected even science and the church itself.

Yet there also has been a "silver lining," Dr. Walsh said. Despite the challenges, churches have continued to serve, bringing comfort and compassion and even adapting quite ably to the world of social media and

digital platforms. The crisis does provide the opportunity for deeper reflection on the meaning and value of our lives and on our relationships with God and others. Dr. Walsh presented seven recommendations which highlighted integrity, respectful dialogue, compassion and service to others. He concluded by reading a recent UPF statement on the crisis in the Holy Land.

**Dr. Maria Elizabeth De Los Rios Uriarte, Ph.D.**, a professor of philosophy at Anáhuac University and Panamericana University, Mexico, spoke on "The Vision of the Church on Medical Ethics and Human Dignity." Her well-structured presentation dealt first with the notion of the person as a unit of body and soul. Our human dignity derives from the fact that we are all children of God, she said. Body and soul are one unit, and it is through the body that we can be present in the world.

Turning to health, sickness and death in the Catholic tradition, Dr. Uriarte described health as a right which we have a duty to restore. Sickness, the corruption of the body, can serve as an alarm (not to be ignored); it is also linked to suffering, which itself has the potential to bring us closer to God and to be offered to others in need. Death, entering eternal life, should be allowed to occur naturally and need not be feared, she said.

Commenting on the principles of Christian social doctrine as applied to medical ethics, Dr. Uriarte again emphasized human dignity and physical integrity. Free will must be balanced with responsibility (informed decision-making). Finally, the principle of common good allows fair treatment of all but also greater attention to those in greater need.

**Father Dr. Edgard El-Haiby**, a professor of moral theology and bioethics at the Faculty of Religious Sciences, Saint Joseph University, Lebanon, spoke on "The Church and the Ethical Issues of Humanity." He focused on the challenges of globalization and of biomedical development.

Father Edgard raised a number of the issues that have emerged during the pandemic, including medical-social issues related to vaccination, lockdowns and the effect on the economy. To these, he added the need for spiritual security as a responsibility of the church – are we safe if our spirit is in danger?

He also mentioned the importance of Christian ethics in situations in which there appears to be conflict between religion and science. He closed with a reminder that we must be humble in front of God and others.

The panelists then were given the opportunity to answer questions from the audience. Topics raised included "How can religious leaders guide political leaders?" and a request for examples of best practices to build trust between different faith communities. Following replies from some on the panel, we heard some further audience comments, including an acknowledgment that the church in the Middle East has become a minority church but remains a yeast.

**Emeritus Bishop Munib Younan**, the president of the Lutheran World Federation (2010-2017) and honorary president of Religions for Peace, Palestine, offered the closing remarks. Quoting St. Jerome ("Once the ship sails and the Holy Spirit guides it, we never know to which shore it will take us"), Bishop Younan was very appreciative of the webinar, saying he had learned a lot. Picking up on a reference to Pope Francis' words about "political love," he said it is good to remind politicians that love is more important than interests. He also highlighted a recurrent theme from the whole session: our God-given human dignity. Thanking each of the panelists individually, he expressed a hope that soon we will be able to meet in person.