

UPF meeting in Vienna was beyond boundaries of religion age, race or culture

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One of the wonderful moments of our events is the break time, a relaxed moment when friends can relate to one another, coffee in hand, beyond boundaries of religion age, race or culture. I witnessed this in our last UPF meeting in Vienna at the end of April. As I watched people socializing with one another, I thought, Why don't we convert the breaks into a program? I then realized that though many of our religious friends have been loyal participants in our projects (some for more than twenty years) they do not know one another much. I felt the absence of an interfaith, loving UPF family. Therefore, the plan was simple: I proposed to the one hundred speakers we'd had over the last ten years to come for a relaxed event with many tempting foods and drinks and plenty of time to get to know one another. Several told me they could not fully understand the program but at the same time, it intrigued them. Speakers tend to be busy people. Getting them together on a Tuesday evening seemed improbable, but finally twenty-three of them came. They were touched by the experience and expressed the desire to have more "inter-spiritual family" events in the future. They will promote the idea to other religious leaders. We did not open the event to the public. Our other programs do that. We just invited several other Unificationists to help and to enjoy a unique event.

Of course, religious people cannot meet just for eating, especially during Ramadan! We had to add a few extra spiritual goodies to make it exciting. Our friends usually have so much to offer, they don't just talk.

In the first part, our Sikh friends guided us through a mantra and a Catholic priest, who is a nationally renowned poet, recited two poems. Our Shia friend recited an Islamic text, which was comparable to hearing deep Flamenco singing. A Catholic theologian, considered a top Liberation theologian in Spain and Latin America, prayed strongly. I gave a presentation on our interfaith projects and our international events.

After that, we had a break with enough food for a hundred people. A beautiful moment came while taking a group picture with the brothers and sisters we have worked together with for such a long time. We closed with different prayers -- Jewish, Tibetan Buddhist, Anglican and Catholic. For the final prayer, we held hands and ended by raising our hands, pointing our palms toward each person and wishing that he or she receive God's blessing. To look into the eyes of each person in the circle and give that blessing fully intent on their receiving it -- taking our time -- was moving.

I was glad to see among us five prestigious Catholic priests (professors and theologians) and several lay Catholic leaders. One of my main concerns in the interfaith outreach here is to overcome misunderstandings with our Catholic brothers and sisters, who are the country's spiritual foundation. We need to work together for society's wellbeing. Besides the Catholics, we had an Anglican minister, a Mormon bishop, a Jewish synagogue director, Sunni, Shia and Sufi Muslims, several Sikhs (among them the president of the European Sikh Council) a Zen master, a Tibetan monk, a few yoga teachers and the president of the Spiritualist Association of Spain. They expressed how others' sincere hearts had moved them and how they felt God's presence in this unique gathering of peace loving people.