

## UPF Italy's First Webinar of the Series Peace Meetings Attracts 200 Participants

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Italy -- The first webinar of the series Peace Meetings organized by UPF-Italy (with the collaboration of the Women's Federation for World Peace-Italy) was followed by about 200 participants. The main theme of the meeting was "The Role of Faith and Spirituality in the Time of the Coronavirus."

The panelists were: Imam Nader Akkad, Phd and Ambassador for Peace; Don Valentino Cottini, Catholic priest and lecturer at the Pontifical Institute of Arabic and Islamic Studies; Franca Cohen, copresident of the Italian Federation of Progressive Judaism; Francesco Canale, pastor of the Evangelical Community "Equippers Church"; and Raffaella Di Marzio, director of the Centre of Studies for Freedom of Religion, Belief and Consciousness.

The meeting was introduced by Gabriella Mieli, with special greetings to the participants by Elisabetta Nistri, president of the Women's Federation. Carlo Zonato, president of UPF-Italy, introduced and moderated the meeting. Franco Ravaglioli, secretary general of UPF-Italy, submitted the questions to the speakers while the technical direction aspect was conducted by Giorgio Gasperoni.

Some significant passages from the panelists' speeches follow:

### **Nader Akkad:**

Every faith cannot lack in its role of connection with the transcendent from the vertical point of view without ever losing the connection with its own community. Therefore we need a vertical connection but also a horizontal one at the same time without ever losing connection in the relationships and problems that emerge. Certainly in the time of the coronavirus we must respect social distancing for security reasons, but it is precisely here that spirituality can and must intervene because it has no boundaries. Very significant is the document inspired by the "Human Brotherhood" that Pope Francis wanted to sign, where it is pointed out that faith must lead every believer to see in the other his own brother to be supported and loved. In this respect, the day of fasting and universal prayer open to all faiths has taken on great significance: a collective and interreligious prayer. We must strive to strengthen these bonds of brotherhood.

### **Don Valentino Cottini:**

The coronavirus situation took us by surprise and found us unprepared and blocked in many ways. It has highlighted individual and social merits and defects in reality already present before but exacerbated in this circumstance. Covid-19 was surely democratic and impartial in its manifestation, in the sense that it made no difference between classes and classes. Here faith has another task, which is to try to find the meaning in phenomena such as the pandemic. Until modern times the sense of pestilence was seen as God's punishment for our sins, and this perception has not yet completely disappeared. Science, however, in a certain sense "purifies" faith from certain distorted perceptions. Moreover, Jesus' message shows that he went through death for the purpose of salvation and rebirth. The pandemic has almost created a sabbatic period for a possible "conversion" to the significance of life's priorities. In this sense we could also see it as a period of grace especially if we put ourselves in the condition of finding ourselves again as children towards God.

**Franca Cohen:**

The pandemic brings widespread fear for survival, fear for changes towards something unknown; it's almost like facing a war whose weapons are unknown. The fears involve various fields: the health sector, the economic sector, the threat of instability. The reaction to fear could cause anxieties and mistrust: feelings that if not well controlled could also become dangerous. And it is here that prayer or fasting or practices of faith can become a support to deepen one's spirituality in one's renewed bond with God and among others. As humanity, we always yearn for the best or for happiness, but often with too much worry that can become an obstacle in itself. We seek to live with a "healthy balance" and moderation with respect to the natural goods that God himself has made available to us. This approach is no longer just a warning from faith. I want to quote a warning from a virologist and therefore a person of science: "A less racing future, planning a virtuous existence with Mother Nature. Without her we would become extinct; she will save us because she is telling us that this is no longer good and is giving us advice to plan a new world."

**Francesco Canale:**

The proposed theme opens many important reflections. In our community what we experienced at the time of the coronavirus was the crisis of liturgies, meeting habits and ecclesial activities. We found ourselves having to rethink models and formats to give meaning and connection with the community. We tried to produce dozens and dozens of hours online to make up for the lack of community due to confinement. Webinars of preaching, activities for children or young people to get involved. This at the community level. But for the individual in the situation of confinement, faith and spirituality can be like an enzyme that can transform this moment of crisis not only to overcome fear but to overcome "this test" renewed inside if we deepen our trust and bond with God. In this sense "this trial" produces something new. Knowing how to rejoice in the trial produces constancy, the ability to continue for good and therefore also becomes a favorable and productive time. Having all of us experienced a trial in a transversal way, I am convinced that this will help us to continue better together.

**Raffaella Di Marzio:**

I thank you for the messages of brotherhood and spiritual charge that I have heard. Since the beginning of the pandemic, we as a study center have tried to monitor the situation, and we have realized that the pandemic has brought some knots to the comb. First of all, at which stage is the possibility to exercise the freedom of religion? We have witnessed episodes of strong prejudice against some faith groups that, even before the total confinement was decreed, had been pointed out as spreading contagion. We have seen very different attitudes: For example football matches were played in the same places with hundreds of people for whom there was no concern. These situations were not only in Italy, but we also had news from abroad. In a secularized society, people think that religion is a private thing; so if you can't go to church or to worship, it's not an important problem. But one cannot say that worship and faith are not important; for those who are believers, it is an essential link in life. So why then, when newsstands, museums or other places have reopened, why haven't the places of worship opened, even with precautions? It is another sign that faith and spirituality are put in the corner, they are put in second place. The point is that faith for those who live it or have it is an essential part of their living, much more essential than other aspects of life. Therefore, spirituality must be defended, preserved and sustained as a public fact. Also, almost always those who have faith and spirituality dedicate themselves to offer help that would not be exercised by others. It is therefore a problem of priorities. Faith and spirituality cannot be lived as a secondary fact.

From the series of questions expressed by the attendees of this webinar emerged the proposal to draw up a summary document, shared by the most varied expressions of faith, that can safeguard and promote the exercise of faith and spirituality as an essential part of life itself. UPF, as requested by the speakers, could be the promoter of this document to be then submitted to the different communities of faith for a collection of signatures for support and then also to be submitted to institutional levels at government level.