

## RfP European Assembly 2015 28 Oct. – 1 Nov. 2015

and International Youth Training Seminar 27 Oct. – 2 Nov. 2015

### Castel Gandolfo

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#### REPORT

#### Background

The *Religions for Peace European Assembly 2015*, took place at Castel Gandolfo, Italy, on 28 October - 1 November 2015, and gathered 290 faith and religious people from 28 countries and ten different religious communities and faith traditions, hosted by the Focolare Movement.

“**Welcoming each other: from Fear to Trust**”, the theme of the Assembly is a crucial and predominant issue that Europe is facing today: fears are spreading throughout the different nations of the continent, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia and the waves of incoming refugees cause fears on many sides. Religious communities are encouraging everyone to act in cooperation with all people of good will.

The theme was addressed in three sub-topics: “Inner peace”, “Freedom of expression” and “Protecting the most vulnerable”. Experts, leaders, young people, women, all were strongly urging to be aware that the contribution of each and every one was needed to reach the goal of this encounter. This was implemented through a programme articulated in three steps: plenary sessions with panels involving a variety of voices from religious people, experts and also people directly affected by the main problems Europe is facing today; followed up by a variety of workshops where the participants deepened their reflexions on the issues and prepared recommendations for future action; and back in plenary again where reports and recommendations were presented as outcomes of the participants’ contribution in the workshops, followed by best practices shared.

**Greeting from officials and religious leaders:** greetings were presented to the Assembly from distinguish guests and participants in the Assembly: Ms **Katharina von Schnurbein**, Co-ordinator of the Dialogue with Churches, Religions and Philosophical and Non-confessional organisations; **Bhai Sahib Ji Bhai Mohinder Singh** Aluwalia, Spiritual Leader and Chairman of Guru Nanak Nishkam Sewak Jatha, United Kingdom member of ECRL; **Edmond Brahimaj**, Head of the Bektashi community; **Metropolitan Antonii**, Eparchy of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church for Western and Central Europe; **Mgr Luigi Bressan** Archbishop of Trento; **Mrg Siluan Span**, Bishop of the Romanian Orthodox Church of Italy, **Revd Dr Manuel Barrios**, Director for Ecumenism and Inter-religious relations, Spanish Bishops’ Conference, **Revd Keiichi Akagawa**, Deputy Director of External Affairs Department of Interfaith Dialogue and Cooperation, Rishso kosei-kai; **Mustafa Ceric**, Grand Mufti Emeritus of Bosnia Herzegovina, **Dr. Mustafa Y Ali**, Secretary General, Global Network of Religions for Children. A symbolic moment during the session of greetings was represented by Zosia Socha, from the European Interfaith Youth Network, with her young baby in her arms.

**Keynote Speaker: Philip McDonald**, ambassador of Ireland to the OSCE; *Fears that affect Europe: the responsibility of religions for building trust in pluralist societies*

As part of the larger agenda of the Assembly, an International Youth Training Seminar took place in parallel: “Empowering Youth for Interfaith and Multicultural Peace Action”, from 27 October to 2 November. The seminar gathered 54 young people and facilitators from 12 European countries and 8 religious communities and non-believers. They also participated in various Assembly activities and presented a report in a special youth plenary session with recommendations.

This common space with these two events running in parallel, gave visibility to what was in fact a big investment in human and spiritual resources that had led to make this into an opportunity for genuine dialogue in the fields of intercultural, interreligious and inter-generational encounter.

The spirit and outcome resulting from empowering young people to participate in meaningful and effective interfaith and intercultural dialogue in order to strengthen societal stability and security, is something which is essential in our society.

**The all-round experience:** the Assembly reinforced the feeling of belonging to: “different faiths and a common aspiration to become more proactive to contribute to a united family”. Through sharing reflexions, best practice in small groups and plenaries, participants listened to effective projects religious people and communities are implementing in order to contribute to a more welcoming society in Europe. These experiences included participation in dialogue between communities and with political leaders and authorities, advocating for the rights of the excluded, training opportunities for young people, solidarity with migrants and refugees, empowering of women, using sport and art to promote peace, alternative respectful ways to communicate, inner spirituality as a contribution to peace, and others. They affirmed the importance of giving visibility to these positive actions and working closely together and with other social and political actors in society for being more effective in contributing to real peace based on respect, justice and solidarity.

“It was like a forum, a spiritual market where people come and go and express their ideas, worries and wishes”.

**What was learned:** dialogue - including head, heart and foot - is essential for our living together.

**New methodologies shared to contribute to peace inside and around us:** using sports, music, art and action. Many examples were presented in this Assembly, especially in working for the refugees and marginalized in our societies.

In communication, other methodologies such as theatre, role-play, painting and pictures were used bringing another language, other words to our exchanges and to the encounter with others:

- Raising awareness among participants and developing a critical approach
- Young and older people were moved to go deeper in their own understanding and in the understanding of others
- The power of paintings (exhibited during the Assembly) was stronger than words in deepening our awareness of the relation with God.

## **Fears and challenges in today’s Europe**

### **1. The growing presence of refugees and migrants**

Participants noted that Islamophobia, anti-Semitism, xenophobia and violence against incoming refugees and migrants were real fears in the current situation unless the welcome and integration processes were properly handled. One basic weak point in the current situation lies in the fact that the existing law on refugees and asylum at EU level (so-called “Dublin 3”) has been abandoned,

existing merely on paper but no longer taken as a reference for policy. It needs to be reformed and adapted to the current circumstances, which are very different from what had originally been envisaged when the legislation was drafted.

Maria Voce, President of the Focolare Movement, highlighted the dramatic situation that makes us feel “dismayed, at a loss, and sometimes very uncomfortable, perhaps also deeply ashamed at our own powerlessness”. This analysis was confirmed by Assembly participants. Among the causes she pointed to the “dramatic and questionable military interventions, which destabilised whole nations in North Africa, the Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa and other on-going conflicts. Our European nations are certainly not completely blameless with regard to these conflicts.”

## **2. The question of integration and the growing plurality of our societies**

Fears and rejection of “the stranger”, growing hatred and the possibility of losing humanity are concerns for religious people. The media sometimes feed these attitudes, contributing to stigmatization and prejudice. Growing plurality contributes to a richer and broader sense of European identity and connections with other regions of the world. At the same time Europe is experiencing an identity crisis, which hinders a co-ordinated and united response to the refugees entering Europe.

## **3. Injustice in European societies**

There is a growing injustice in Europe between the growing property of few and the growing poverty of many people. The economic crisis that has affected many European countries has deepened the inequality in the distribution of wealth. Poverty is especially affecting women and children. Corruption involving politicians and also faith people has generated a lack of confidence in authorities, democracy and religious institutions. Gender inequality continues to be a problem even if some countries have made efforts to improve their standards.

## **4. Gender issues**

One big problem everywhere is trafficking of human beings. We need the contributions of everyone to combat this modern form of slavery, to help the victims, to seek for their re-integration in society, to work to track down the traffickers.

Empowerment and role of women: Some faith communities try to give growing space and visibility to the role of women. In India in 1930s, in a conservative community, the founder of Brahma Kumaris, Brahma Baba empowered young women to become spiritual leaders and teachers; since 1969 the leadership has remained and will remain, in the hands of women.

*The dignity of Women - scriptural reflections.* Through verses from different Religious Scriptures regarding the status and honour of women, some people of faith, especially women, are trying to discover effective ways to overcome misrepresentation and discrimination of women.

## **5. Freedom of expression and ethical responsibility**

This notion is a major part of the concept of “Freedom of religions and belief” and there are many challenges on this score, varying from country to country. In Western countries one might find the conviction that proclaims Western values as dominant, a tendency to push religion back into the private sphere. In some parts of the world there is no freedom of expression or religious conviction at all.

There is a constant need to supervise the work of the media and to hint at their responsibility for mutual respect in presenting religions. Journalism has to aim at correct information in every field

including the presentation of religious communities. It is important to encourage dialogue about political, environmental and spiritual challenges in our societies because this can open opportunities for dialogue inside and among religions. This might connect different religious experiences and contribute to a purification of religious experiences.

In this process it is also important to underline the role of religions in the public sphere. Religions can help the political world to reflect upon itself and learn from local experiences. Training for journalists, religious leaders and social media workers can contribute to change mentalities and promote mutual understanding.

In reflecting on “**What is sacred? Discovering it within and around us**”, it is important to be aware of how we relate to the transcendent, considering human life as a whole, where environment, sacred scriptures and spiritual traditions are important.

Service to one another is essential to our faith and beliefs. It is the way we can bring the sacred into the world. The basis of sacred activism is the ability to advocate, initiate, support and bring about change, with an inner spirituality, an inner strength and dignity. For believers the Divine presence brings divine power that works through us in the world.

## **6. Taking responsibility for the Earth**

*Religions for Peace* has officially launched its **global multi religious campaign to protect our earth - Faiths for Earth** to mobilize religious believers and men and women of goodwill around the world to make meaningful concrete commitments, based on their own faith and moral traditions, on climate change.

*Many religions are very involved in concrete projects for protecting the earth.* The solutions required are far greater than those offered today by governments. They have to be rooted in a compassionate awareness and thinking. Do we pay enough attention to our thoughts, our prayers, and our meditations? Do we pay enough attention to nature? The scientist David Bohm in his work made us aware that the roots of change are the living system of thought: thoughts are participatory; they influence the world. So according to him, we are looking at the confluence of two living systems: the living system of thoughts and the living system of nature. It is crucial that these two living systems cooperate in harmony.

This approach has been developed in practical projects for solar energy that have benefited many communities in India. In Mt Abu, Rajasthan, there is one of the largest solar cookers in the world that can cook up to 35,000 meals at a time.

## **Guidelines and Recommendations**

- Inspired by our religious values of peace, love and hope and deeply committed to Europe's core political principles of freedom, justice, equality and solidarity
- Being aware of the particular responsibility of European political and religious institutions in the face of the current political, economic and social challenges to our continent; believing in peace, building trust, not fences - improving integration and dialogue and welcoming diversity - achieving solidarity

The Religions for Peace European Assembly, gathered at Castel Gandolfo (Italy), 28 October - 1 November 2015, urges:

1) Bringing into play our **strengths for the well-being of what people of faith have in common, following the Golden Rule by:**

- Prevailing upon our religious communities to reject and work against all forms of extremism, fundamentalism and the misuse of Holy Scriptures and Traditions in our own communities
- Creating a welcoming atmosphere in the face of those who arouse fear, and encouraging politics to stand up for shared European democratic values
- Building trust through personal encounter and through coalitions with like-minded agencies on the European, national and local level
- Involving young people, trusting them, offering them space for leadership, encouraging them in their efforts to stand together against all prejudice and learning from the commitment and hope which they have demonstrated
- Advocating the rights and dignity of the “vulnerable” when facing local, national, European, religious and political authorities, public opinion and the media
- Using the spiritual potential of our religious traditions for serving the common good
- Engaging ourselves in the necessary educational and learning processes
- Finding imaginative ways to assist all who work in areas of tension
- Respecting the equal dignity of women and men, of old and young and encouraging others to do likewise

2) **Responding to the present refugee and migration crisis:** specific recommendations

a. For religious and faith community leaders and members:

- To serve the poorest and create joint projects for providing food across a range of communities, religions and cultures
- To encourage asylum seekers (coming from different cultures and religions) to visit elderly people in our own communities, thereby creating connections and enhancing spirituality (examples from Finland and Sweden)
- To organize local charity operations and hospitality in accordance with what our Scriptures suggest for such common action and good example
- To create networks using social media or web applications to increase inclusiveness, prevent loneliness with love in digital mode (e.g. writing prayers, hymns, memories, music)
- To organize festivals and concerts, including chanting, prayers, sharing, etc.
- To encourage the legal initiative: BANK OF HOLIDAYS according to the interreligious calendar. (Every worker has 3-4 days to use during the year to celebrate the holidays of their respective faiths, meaning they are not forced to take holiday on days they do not celebrate. Additional comment: after celebrating your holiday, bring some “festive food” to your co-workers and tell them something about your religion)
- To integrate children coming from Syria, and from different faiths into our society and emphasise giving in a spirit of love (Albanian example).

b. To European political decision-makers, particularly European Union institutions such as the European Council, the European Commission and the European Parliament:

- To substantially engage in foreign policy dialogue with other major international powers such as the United States, Russia, Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia and other actors involved to overcome civil wars, violence and ethnic and religious cleansing in Africa, Asia and the Middle East, thus ending the main reasons for refugees to flee their countries of origin
- To further develop the United Nations conventions and international agreements on limiting arms trade and proliferation and to create a clear legal base in European Union primary law to prohibit all arms exports from EU member states to outside EU / NATO areas or outside UN mandated interventions and to monitor this at European and national level
- To reform the EU laws on refugees and asylum-seekers and to adapt them to better respond to the current crisis and to uphold the fundamental right of asylum in Europe
- To substantially increase the participation of religious leaders and faith community members in the search for appropriate responses to the critical issues Europe is facing today
- To substantially increase the EU's and EU member states' funding for the UNHCR, ECHO and other organizations, including faith-based charities, helping immigrants and refugees in Europe and in the host countries of the affected regions, notably in Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan
- To significantly increase funding for intercultural and interfaith dialogue initiatives and projects, for example within the framework of the EU Structural and Social Funds, and to further expand and improve existing EU programmes to support the integration of immigrants and Europeans with a migration background
- To increase the EU funding for fighting youth unemployment in Europe, with a particular focus on less-favoured young people in danger of being discriminated against because of their ethnic or religious background
- To increase financial support of the EU and EU member states for projects and initiatives combating discrimination, xenophobia, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia and religious hatred at European, national, regional and local level in order to help people to turn fear into trust, to foster open mindedness towards people from different countries and diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds, and to respect the human dignity of each person.

## Next steps

- **Promoting awareness** about the challenges identified by the Assembly and the Seminar in our religious and social communities at local and regional level
- **Exploring and finding new ways** to respond to these challenges through concrete and effective action
- **Becoming role models** for others (especially for young people) and reinforcing an open-minded attitude; what we reward will be valued, and developing the concept of compassion and service
  - In our behaviour
  - In our communities
  - By advocating for vulnerable minorities and marginalized people and communities at all levels
  - Through awareness about an inclusive language
  - By caring for the earth

## Specific outcomes

### Commitment to concrete research and working on projects at the European level for the coming years:

- 1) Establishing a **study group** of experts and members of RfP Europe to elaborate the contribution of our religious and faith communities to a fair economy – regional and global
- 2) Establishing a **think tank group** of experts and members of RfP Europe, to prepare concrete proposals for further steps in integrating refugees and encouraging stronger European cooperation in dealing with refugees and asylum seekers
- 3) Establishing a **think tank group** on “media and truth” dealing with key questions like:
  - a. How could journalists be motivated to adhere to ethical principles and objective information?
  - b. How could media work for peace?
  - c. How could media overcome obstacles to publishing and disseminating unpopular news on forgotten and hidden crises?
- 4) Establishing a **think tank group** for establishing a possible future inter universities network. Its purpose would be to reflect, from different perspectives, on “Education. How to deal with religious diversity? a crucial challenge for the current situation in Europe” and to develop a proposal enabling academic and religious people to work together on this. Key questions are: what could be the contribution of universities and academic centres to this process? How can we explore the potential contribution of research, exchange programmes, training and publications to this theme?
- 5) Establishing **partnerships between faith and non-faith based NGOs** for projects on training, non-discrimination and other matters, involving mutual recognition and collaboration
- 6) **Urging European political decision-makers**, particularly European Union institutions such as the European Council, the European Commission and the European Parliament substantially to increase their commitment on behalf of refugees
- 7) Empowering young people and women by integrating them in project management processes in order to improve all manner of initiatives

### **Final remarks from the President at the close of the Assembly and Seminar:**

#### **Let us remember all our fears**

- fear of losing our own identity
- fear of losing all our achievements, everything we have built
- fear of losing our humanity and becoming indifferent to the suffering of others
- fear of the stranger, those coming to our door and finding it closed
- fear of minority communities who feel marginalized
- the fears of the children who sometimes die on our coasts
- fear of natural disasters because of our irresponsible relationship with the earth

#### **Let us give thanks for the trust that has been created**

- during this encounter, between people, religious leaders, young people and older people; between religious and non-religious people

- through the engagement of the participants in the plenary sessions, the workshops and informal moments
- by the enthusiasm, the authenticity and the breath of fresh air the young people brought with them
- by the harmonious and welcoming atmosphere of the Mariapolis Center
- by the generosity of all those who have made of this Assembly a wonderful experience of deep human and spiritual encounter
- by the testimony of solidarity showed by many religious communities
- by the generosity of people who open up their homes to strangers
- by those who dare to stand up against injustice
- by the smiles and intense gaze of children and those whose dignity is acknowledged