

PRESS RELEASE, April 23, 2015

Tolerance is not enough: Religious leaders at the UN encourage peace-seekers to find new pathways toward reconciliation

Focolare President Maria Voce challenges the United Nations to re-envision its vocation

At the beginning of the second day of a two-day High-Level Thematic Debate on “Promoting Tolerance and Reconciliation, Fostering Peaceful, Inclusive Societies and Countering Violent Extremism,” UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon opened with an urgent request to the religious leaders present: “I’m troubled by an empathy gap in the world today, and am worried that numbness is setting in as people witness atrocity after atrocity.”

Time and again, religious leaders answer with certainty: religion is not the cause of war. “A crime perpetrated in the name of religion is the greatest crime against religion,” said Rabbi Arthur Schneier, one of the founding members of the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations. Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists and Christians of various churches were present and affirmed this. Rather than tolerance, people must begin to talk about mutual acceptance: “In order to build peace, we must prepare ourselves for peace and not for war,” said Bhai Sahib Mohinder Singh, a Sikh leader of England.

Maria Voce, president of the Focolare Movement, proposed a radical change of mind-set. “It is clear that our times do not require half measures,” said Voce. “If violent extremism exists - while accepting the need to defend oneself and especially those who are weak and persecuted - our response must be similarly radical, but one that is structurally different, by which I mean ‘extremism in dialogue’! A dialogue which requires the highest level of engagement, which is risky, demanding, challenging and which aims to sever the roots of incomprehension, fear and bitterness.”

Rather than an Alliance of Civilizations, she proposed a civilization that is based on alliances.

Voce called on the UN to reconsider its own vocation. Her proposal: “What does being a ‘United Nations’ organization mean today, if not an institution which truly works toward unity among nations, while respecting their strong identities? It is certainly essential to actively maintain international security but, although security is vital, it is not necessarily the same thing as peace.”

Her words were based on real-life testimonies from around the world on what happens when people give priority to relationship-building on all levels, even in situations of unrest and terrorism.

She then recalled the words of Focolare founder Chiara Lubich at the United Nations in 1997 acknowledging the need “to work together for the common good, ... believers or not, but who have the courage to ‘invent peace.’ ... Only peace is truly holy because God himself is peace.”

In a lively afternoon debate, speakers gave concrete examples of initiatives that are already building solidarity among members of various religions — often news that gets little attention by the media. They called for more recognition of the contribution of religion on the part of governing bodies, which sometimes give lip service to the importance of religion and then leave religious representatives out of the decision-making process.

Before leaving, the High Representative of the Alliance of Civilizations Nassir Abdulaziz Al-Nasser repeated the UN Secretary-General desire: to convene an advisory council of religious leaders that could study how faith leaders can be better involved in the front lines of building peace and reconciliation.

Victoria Gómez (+39) 335 7003675 – Benjamim Ferreira (+39) 348 4754063