

High-Level Thematic Debate on Promoting Tolerance and Reconciliation: Fostering Peaceful, Inclusive Societies and Countering Violent Extremism

*New York – United Nations Headquarters
April 21-22, 2015*

April 22, 2015 - Main Plenary Session

INVENTING PEACE

Dr. Maria Voce

President of the Focolare Movement

I would like, first of all, to thank the United Nations Organization and the Alliance of Civilizations for having arranged this Debate and for having invited me to contribute to it, but more than that I wish to thank you for all that you have done and that you do on a daily basis, through diplomatic means, human resources and all the channels available to you, to foster a more fraternal, secure and peaceful world.

I have a story to tell.

In 1943, during the last terrible phase of the Second World War, a group of young women got together in the small city of Trent in northern Italy. While their city was being bombed, those young people, who were guided by a young teacher named Chiara Lubich, and urged on by a new understanding of the radical nature of Gospel love, decided to risk their lives to relieve the suffering of the poor. Theirs was a choice that many others had made before and will make in future (it is enough to think of the refugee camps in Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Iraq, or the slums surrounding some huge cities.) However, this choice has the power and the moral fiber to introduce into the destructive cycle of conflict a commitment to regenerate the fabric of society, by doing peace-building action. “It was during the war and everything was crumbling” are words said whenever we start telling the story of those young women; but they decided to break the vicious circle of violence by responding with attitudes and actions which in the atmosphere of conflict might have seemed unrealistic or even irrelevant. However, they were not and they are not!

I am not telling you this as if it were a case study, or to point out exemplary dedication to a social cause, but rather to indicate that today too we are experiencing very serious political, institutional, economic and social breakdown, which requires equally deep-seated responses, able to change the prevailing paradigm. It seems that conflict and violence prevail in many parts of the world, affecting innocent people, guilty only of being in disputed territory, or belonging to a particular ethnicity or adhering to a specific religion.

In the Focolare Movement, which I have the honor to represent, the encounter between cultures and religions (Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism and Traditional Religions) is an ongoing and fruitful experience not confined to tolerance or the mere recognition of diversity. It goes beyond reconciliation, essential as that is, to create, so to speak, a new identity, one that is broader, more general and shared. It is an effective dialogue which brings together people of very different beliefs, including non-religious beliefs. It spurs us to see what the real needs are and to respond together to the most difficult challenges in society, culture, economics and politics, as our commitment to a more united and socially inclusive world. This is happening in places which have been or are at present characterized by very serious crises, such as Algeria, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Nigeria and the Philippines.

It is clear that our times do not require half measures. 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.

Connected to this Institution is the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations, which puts forward an alternative and constructive narrative for global interaction and seeks to emphasize what unites humankind in all its varied expressions rather than what might seem, at first sight, to divide it. So it is excellent to speak of an alliance of civilizations! Nonetheless, we might ask ourselves whether, nowadays, we could get closer to the roots of this new outlook and focus not only on an alliance of civilizations but on what might be called the “civilization of alliance”; a universal civilization which enables peoples to see themselves as part of a great happening, which is both varied and fascinating, that is humankind’s journey towards unity. A civilization which makes dialogue the pathway to recognizing each other as brothers and sisters, as free and equal.

Among the many organizations represented at the United Nations, allow me to mention New Humanity, a non-governmental organization representing our Movement, which promotes and supports its projects and is in official partnership with UNESCO.

Here, in front of such a broad based and inclusive assembly, I cannot avoid the question that surfaces: shouldn’t the United Nations perhaps reconsider its own vocation, and reformulate its own fundamental mission? What does being a “United Nations” organization mean today, if not an institution which truly works towards *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.

Conflicts within nations and international conflicts; the deep divisions we are aware of at world level, together with the great local and global injustices, in fact require a true conversion in the actions and choices made in the field of global governance, to put into practice the motto formulated by Chiara Lubich, and launched in this very place in 1997¹, “love your neighbor’s country as your own” so as to build up universal fraternity.

Lastly, we cannot give ground to those who attempt to describe current conflicts as “wars of religion”. War is by definition *irreligion*. Militarism, economic dominance and intolerance at all levels are causes of conflict, together with many other social and cultural factors among which religion is often only an unfortunate pretext. What we are witnessing in many areas of the world, from the Middle East to Africa, including the tragic deaths of hundreds of people fleeing wars who are shipwrecked in the Mediterranean, has very little to do with religion. From any point of view, in these cases we should not speak so much about wars of religion but more concretely, realistically and prosaically, about the religion of war.

What can we do then? After the attacks on 11th September 2001 and the military intervention in Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003), Chiara Lubich wrote, with hope and firm conviction: “Let’s not surrender! (...) There are many signs that a new awareness may finally emerge out of this serious international situation. Awareness of the need to work together for the common good, among more or less wealthy peoples, with more or less sophisticated weaponry, believers or not, but who have the courage to ‘invent peace’. The time for “holy wars” is over. War is never holy, it never has been. God does not want it. Only peace is truly holy because God himself is peace.”²

Religions can make a significant contribution to this new awareness; being to be faithful to their foundational inspiration and to the Golden Rule they share. Religions want to be themselves and not a tool used by other powers, even for the noblest aims; or precepts studied so as to resolve conflicts or crises. They want to be a spiritual process which can be lived and becomes a community able to share and give meaning to the joys and sufferings of people today, channeling everything towards the realization of one universal human family.

Maria Voce

¹ Cf. C. Lubich’s talk at the Symposium “Towards the unity of Nations and the unity of peoples”, UN Headquarters, 28 May 1997.

² C. Lubich, *No alla sconfitta della pace (No to the failure of peace)*, Editoriale, Città Nuova, 2003, n. 24.