

Monthly Highlights

September 2013

International Interreligious Affairs

Rome

The major event in September for AJC's international interreligious department was the annual interfaith conference of the Community of Sant Egidio, <http://www.santegidio.org>, which is arguably the world's most impressive annual multi-faith conference that takes place in a different major city each year (almost invariably in Europe.)

Being the Community's fiftieth anniversary, the meeting was held this year in Rome, opening in the Vatican's major auditorium, with panels being held over a day and a half; and concluding in the famous (Michelangelo) piazza of the Campidoglio (Capitol Hill) with an impressive ceremony for peace in the world. The program also included a remarkable gathering of the religious leaders with Pope Francis followed by individual meetings with him.

It was my privilege not only to address two of the panels of the program, but also to be one of the speakers at the gala opening together with Italian Prime Minister Enrico Letta; the President of the Community of Sant Egidio, Professor Andrea Riccardi; Professor Jeffrey Sacks of the Earth Institute at Columbia University, the Orthodox Patriarch of Syria Jean Yazigi; the Grand Mufti of Egypt, Shawki Allam; and Didi Talwakar, the head of the Hindu Swadhyaya movement.



Italian Prime Minister Enrico Letta addresses the opening session

This opening session and the panels which I addressed, may be viewed and read at http://www.santegidio.org/pagelD/4329/langID/en/orator/260/David_Rosen.html

The event received wide media coverage in Italy. Inter alia, our AJC liaison to the Holy See and representative to Italy, Lisa Billig, who also spoke on one of the panels of the conference, wrote the piece below for “The Vatican Insider” <http://vaticaninsider.lastampa.it/en>

In addition I gave interviews on the event and on Pope Francis and the Jews, to the major Italian daily La Repubblica; to the major Italian TV channel RAI 1; and to the Catholic TV channel Telepace.

The opportunity was taken while in Rome to hold meeting with various religious leaders including a meeting arranged for David and Lisa with Cardinal Edwin O’Brien of the US who is now Grand Master of the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem, who deals with the welfare of the Catholic Church in the Jerusalem and the Holy Land.

Israel

- AJC has played and continues to play a key role in interreligious affairs in Israel, supporting various interreligious initiatives and activities. Among these is the Interfaith Center for Sustainable Development. Avril Promislow, Assistant Director of International Interreligious Affairs, has been appointed to serve on its Board.
- AJC has just produced a Hebrew translation of Rabbi Eugene Korn’s work “Christianity in the eyes of Judaism – past, present and future” with a forward by Rabbi Professor Daniel Sperber and an Afterword by Rabbi David Rosen. This publication is being sent out to Jewish religious institutions , libraries and schools around the country, as part of our effort to promote a better understanding of Christianity and Christians within the State of Israel and in particular among the more religiously observant communities which are generally unaware of the historic transformation in Christian-Jewish relations in our times.

St. Egidio's 2013 International Meeting of Prayer for Peace

By Lisa Palmieri Billig
Rome

In the 26th year of its international interreligious conferences to which leaders of the world’s major religions are invited as active, vocal participants, the Community of St. Egidio this year managed to gather together in Rome nearly 200 panellists from all areas of the globe. Attended by approximately 5000 people, the three day meeting entitled “The Courage to Hope”, with its 33 panels and its impressive final Peace ceremony on Rome’s Capitol Hill (Campidoglio), saw the largest Jewish participation to date.

Begun in 1987 with a first meeting in Rome aimed at furthering the ground-breaking tradition begun by John Paul II in 1986 when he called the world’s religious leaders to come to Assisi to

pray for peace, the St. Egidio Community annually synergizes the spiritual energies of these leaders in encounters held in different international cities, with a multitude of panel discussions on the most important issues of the day. Religious leaders from the world's trouble spots thus have opportunities to share eyewitness reports and in-depth analyses.

At the opening ceremony, Rabbi David Rosen, International Director of Interreligious Affairs for AJC (the American Jewish Committee) invited St. Egidio to reconvene a multi-faith conference in Jerusalem to follow up on the one held there a decade ago.

"Now, more than ever before St. Egidio can serve as an inspiration for politicians" said Rabbi Rosen, "as it sets an example by affirming the Divine Image in people from diverse religions and cultures."

"In the Middle East in particular", he holds, "religion must be part of the solution".

In all panels, the international religious representatives took stands against their own extremist factions and condemned the misuse of God's Name to justify killing and war. It was in this interreligious consensus that many saw a glimmer of hope for the future. The Syrian conflict cast a dark shadow over discussions. A panel on the Middle East Crisis with political, media, diplomatic and religious experts from Italy and the Islamic and Christian Arab world, included Domenico Quirico, "La Stampa's" correspondent taken captive in Syria and only recently released.

Quirico and the other panellists agreed that the international community had waited too long to intervene to help the fledgling forces of democracy of the Arab spring, thus allowing Islamist extremist formations such as Al Qaeda to grow and gain strength. The desperate humanitarian situation in Syria and other Arab countries was described. Mohammad Sammak, a leader of the Christian-Arab dialogue in Lebanon stressed the impellent need to invest in education, pointing out that one third of the Arab world is illiterate, and more money was spent on beauty products than books. Italian Ambassador Roberto Toscano referred to the "Arab Human Development Reports" to support these conclusions with statistics.

Among the nearly 200 international panellists, over a dozen were Jewish leaders and rabbis from Italy, Israel, the U.S., Argentina, Germany and Belgium. They too called for religions to summon their highest spiritual resources to counter the wave of barbaric, evil acts sweeping all over the world today, many of which are committed in the name of religion.

The Jewish representatives spoke on many topics. They included "The Value of Life and Vulnerability" (Oded Wiener, Director General of the Chief Rabbinate of Israel), "Religions respond to violence against Women" and "The Suffering of Peoples and Paths to Peace" (Rabbi David Rosen), "Old Age as a Blessing" (Riccardo Di Segni, Chief Rabbi of Rome), "Latin America and Pope Francis (Rabbi Abraham Skorka, Buenos Aires, Argentina)," "God Loves the Poor", (Rabbi Israel Singer, Touro University, USA), "Poverty and the Environment: Eco-Sustainability"(Rabbi Shmuel Goldin, President of the Rabbinical Council of America), "The Power of Prayer throughout History"(Rabbi Avichai Apel, Dortmund Germany), "Hope Today" (Lisa Palmieri-Billig, AJC Liaison to the Holy See, Italy), "The Imperative Need of Family" (Riccardo Pacifici, President of the Rome Jewish Community), "God is Mercy" (Rabbi Elia Richetti, President of the Assembly of Rabbis of Italy), "Terror in the name of Religion" (Rabbi Joseph Levi, Chief Rabbi of Florence), "Is Violence Inevitable?" (Jakob Finci, President of the Jewish Community of Bosnia and Herzegovina), "The Courage to Hope" (Sandro di Castro, President of B'nai B'rith, Italy) and finally, Rabbi David Brodman of Savyon, Israel, a Holocaust

survivor whose heartfelt talk at the Aula Magna of the Lateran University as a "Witness to Peace" to 3000 high school (liceo) students in two separate sessions, moved his young audience deeply.

Rabbi Brodman, a white-bearded gentleman with a cane, accompanied everywhere by his 14 year old grand-daughter, Tamar, spoke of his early years as a deportee in the Theresienstadt Concentration Camp. His memories reflected the sensibility and suffering of the small child he was then.

Recently, he accompanied over 500 university student members of the Communities of Sant'Egidio in Eastern Europe to Auschwitz on a pilgrimage of "Young People against Racism and Anti-Semitism."

"It is always painful to recall those events" Rabbi Brodman said, "but my friendship with the Community of Sant'Egidio persuaded me to take this step". His simple message of peace is contained in the sentence, "We must create a world without violence."

"So many young people came up to me after my conversation with them at the Lateran University" he said, "They told me 'You have changed my life. Thank you!' Some asked what they could do to accelerate the coming of the Messiah. I told them they must work on changing this world, beginning with their families. Peace begins at home."

Similar statements on peace, forgiveness, and the importance of memory were delivered by another Holocaust survivor, Rita Prigmore, a member of the Sinti Community in Germany. She recalled the Shoah of the gypsies at the hands of Nazi Germany. "I always say to young people 'You are not responsible for what happened, but you bear the responsibility of preventing that all this happen again.' And quite simply, I tell them my story."

Her story, in brief, is that as a newborn child she and her twin sister were torn from their mother at birth by the Gestapo. Both were subjected to horrible medical experiments by Dr. Heyde, a disciple of Dr. Mengele. Her sister died as a result, and Rita still suffers their consequences.

"I am shaken to the bottom of my heart at the growth of radical Right groups in many European countries" she says, "and when I see gypsies insulted with the same words as in the past, or when they are told that 'the Third Reich forgot to gas you.' "

"But I want to say to you that nothing can be built through hatred except for more hatred... I am convinced that only forgiveness can build a future, and hatred must be relegated to the past. The future can be built only through reciprocal understanding. And reciprocal understanding is an active process: one must show interest in the other, speak to him, meet him and force oneself to understand him."

Oded Wiener, Director-General of the Chief Rabbinate of Israel attended this annual St. Egidio meeting for the tenth consecutive year. In the course of these annual encounters, he has established contacts with many Muslim and Christian representatives from Arab countries. "When you meet one another, face to face, things change", he said. "The other is no longer an unknown stranger. This is the beginning of reciprocal understanding."

Rabbi Rosen remarked on the coincidence that the audience of the religious leaders with Pope Francis "who has generated openness and engagement with the other religions of the world", took place on September 30 – on the same day as the announcement of the forthcoming canonization on April 27 of John Paul II and John XXIII, "two great heroes of Jewish-Christian reconciliation."