

## “Giorgio La Pira” Centre in Florence.

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*Down there, I can see Earth, a blue and white planet, beautiful, shining, our human homeland. From up here on the Moon it can all fit in the palm of my hand. Through this perspective there are no whites or blacks, no division between East and West, communists and capitalists, North and South. We all form one Earth.*

(Astronaut John W. Young, “Diary on board” 1992)

In the seventies, Italy started being considered as a land of immigration: a new phenomenon for a country, which though a land of migrants itself, ended up being totally unprepared to welcome whoever came from afar. One could immediately realise that adequate laws were needed to address the social reality that was taking place, and many other obstacles had to be overcome, in order to render possible an encounter that was to become, as was described later on by Pope John Paul II, “a culturally enriched society, increasingly fraternal in its diversity”.

Observing this phenomenon from the outset, in **1978**, the Church in Florence was moved to act above all by the presence of a characteristic and significant experience of multicultural dialogue that stood at its doors (in the nearby town of Loppiano, which the Focolare Movement started in the beginning of the Sixties, located in the municipality of Incisa Val d’Arno,). The Church of Florence started offering several rooms in the historical part of Florence, inside the St. Michael and St Caetan building, to create a place for sharing and cultural exchange, where youths arriving in Florence (at that time in Tuscany they were mostly university students) could experience that differences in religion, social status, culture or origin could, through dialogue, become an enrichment (though, of course, not without overcoming difficulty).

Some members of the Focolare Movement started offering voluntary help which through the years developed and spread among numerous other collaborators and institutions.

The Centre soon became known as a place of solidarity, but besides simply giving assistance, it aimed at becoming a laboratory that would show Europe as being open to all, ready to give and to receive, to learn from everybody. In this way foreign youths would soon realize that they could become **cultural bridges** needed by all, especially in today’s world, which is interdependent at all levels.

The new Centre was dedicated to Giorgio La Pira, who had passed away some months before. A Florentine by choice, through his genial intuition he knew how to speak of the reality of Florence to his fellow citizens. He was a university professor who showed great trust in young generations, and was a mayor who succeeded in making Florence known internationally as a city promoting peace. He was also a member of parliament who understood deeply the difficulties suffered by Third World people, and in the Fifties he had already spoken openly on the correlation between certain economic policies and world peace.

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The need to give priority to formation and culture to the centre was soon clear, as one can see from the words of Cardinal Giovanni Benelli who, having sensed a reality of difficulty, of solitude and bitter disorientation amongst foreign youths residing in Florence, had proposed setting up an “Information Centre, offering orientation, meetings and necessary help”. He wrote to Chiara Lubich<sup>1</sup>, saying: (...) There are meeting places everywhere which show these students all that our City offers. Who will reveal its soul though? (...) I wish to see the success of this delicate attempt at penetrating into the world of culture (...). We want to serve these youths, to know them, to make them feel welcomed. We want to be respectfully at their side and help them in every way. We want to enter into dialogue with them about living in today’s world. If they are Muslims we will help them to become better Muslims, if they are Hebrews we will help them to be Hebrews<sup>2</sup> (...).

In the footsteps of Vatican Council II, the Cardinal of Florence had drawn out the basic principles so that intercultural and inter-religious dialogue could become a daily reality at the La Pira Centre: by moving from solidarity towards the development of one’s own humanity, through knowing each other and through friendship.

Throughout the years, as the surrounding social reality became increasingly multicultural and multi-religious, the Centre became a meeting place for youths from all parts of the world. Thanks to the presence of foreign students and intellectuals, those who were running the La Pira Centre received first hand experience of the great changes which social life was going through, becoming involved in a unique human experience which in a way preceded and encouraged positive attitudes of friendship, openness, mutual understanding, and intercultural dialogue, helping many to overcome the fear of losing their own identity in a serene encounter with others.

Many things make La Pira Centre a truly unique place in Florence: the study groups, seminars, initiatives in aid of international cooperation projects carried out by ex Florence students in their country of origin, the school for Italian language as well as that for political education, the lectures on education for international awareness requested by schools in Florence and many other activities.

The Teatina Hall has become a permanent intercultural workshop in the city due to the great concentration of persons coming from various parts of the world. Most of the leaders of the various foreign communities learnt to speak Italian at this Centre; several youths who returned to their homelands after their education period kept in touch with Florence through the Centre; some developed an artistic vocation in Via de’ Pescioni<sup>3</sup>

This old Hall, which at the centre of its vault carries the emblem of the Teatini family, a cross raised over three hills, was moreover the official meeting and prayer hall for Muslims from 1989 to 1992, thus becoming the first Mosque in

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<sup>1</sup> Honorary citizen of Florence since 2000.

<sup>2</sup> In: AA.VV. *In Cardinale Giovanni Benelli*, Studium, Roma 1992, p. 192.

<sup>3</sup> The Teatina Hall is the seat of “Giorgio La Pira” Centre in Florence; *Via de’ Pescioni* is the street where the Giorgio La Pira Center is located.

Tuscany.<sup>4</sup> It was not by chance that the Centre chose to offer a place to Muslim faithfuls on Fridays, whose leaders had built a very good relationship with the Centre. This resulted from the idea that Florence could support the true and profound roots of Islam, and contribute with its tradition of openness to consolidate and spread these roots, and help to discover the link that exists with Europe's own values. It was a small gesture that will always be remembered.

The presence of people from so many countries makes the Centre a unique observation post on earth, where these people are not hostages of mass media, but first line witnesses of the true international reality, filtered through the eyes, the experiences and life stories of those who frequent it. This made us feel close to the major events of the time that are of international interest and are leaving an impact on society all over the world.

We often asked ourselves how we could raise the voice of Florence when faced with challenges that show the whole world different visions, originating from a particular cultural environment, or outdated and selfishly short-sighted economic policies, when today we live in an era of interdependence and globalization.

Florence, a European city of culture, a city on a mountain as Professor La Pira loved to call it. Florence: full of humanism, where man and his freedom are at its centre. Christian Florence, with its 39 saints. Florence: symbol of solidarity, of sharing.

Industrious and enterprising Florence; where contrasting parties still exist, arrogant at times, yet tame at the same time, ready to discover the value of all that is new and to learn. Florence: unique in the world, a peaceful city, harmonious and perfect in its structure. A city that has exalted human dignity, the first city to have declared that capital punishment is useless and absurd. Several times we asked ourselves how we could reveal its soul to new citizens, and to ourselves, so as to continue making it a great City, and to spread its cultural heritage. And we understood that the soul of Florence in reality is a treasure which we can only discover together: it comes forth from interpersonal relationships, and the more one is open to others, the more one loves disinterestedly, the more one gets to know it. And surely La Pira, who came from far away, understood this well, showing the citizens of Florence the soul of the City of the Annunciation; a soul capable of embracing all people completely, with all their characteristics, their languages and their cultures.

In the utopia of La Pira "(...) *Florence is a city where everyone has a home, every child and youth has a school to go to, where men and women have a place to work, where all sick have a place where they can be cured, and every believer has a place where to pray*"<sup>5</sup>.

And so, in the era of globalization, remaining faithful to the ideas which lead to its birth, the Centre tries hard to continue in the footsteps of Giorgio La Pira and of several others who gave rise to a permanent anthropological revolution, which looks ahead, at brotherhood, at peace, and courageously seeks to put this into

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<sup>4</sup> See Allievi Dassetto, *Il ritorno dell'Islam*, edizioni Lavoro, Roma 1993, p. 81.

<sup>5</sup> G. La Pira; *Appunti*, (Unpublished manuscript held at the Giorgio La Pira Foundation of Florence) Florence 1957.

practice in everyday life. It is a pragmatic revolution, in which “I” and “you” exchange roles constantly in their concrete reciprocity of friendship and love.

Living everyday life with people coming from different countries helps us to live in the world as in one home for all humanity. This could provoke a crisis within us, as actors in the history of singular nations, however it brings us back from a history of groups and tribes to the one great, mysterious story of humanity.

Those who carry out voluntary work at Via de' Pescioni, and all those who are ready to offer their professional competence to solve the specific problems which crop up in everyday life in such a complex reality as that of the Centre, represent the fuel which gives success to the Association. But today, the Centre has a vast network of collaboration, with links to similar national voluntary associations, as well as links to several private and public entities.

The Ministry of Education contributes towards its intercultural educational activities, by annually providing a teacher. The communes of the region of Tuscany, those of the Province of Florence and other centres in the city have many times given their support for the development of its various projects.

The commune of Florence partly covers the costs of teaching of Italian and offers legal assistance in immigration problems. The University for foreigners of Siena entered into an agreement with the Centre to offer courses to its teachers leading to a diploma to teach Italian (DITALIS Certificate) and to provide a certificate to non-Italian speakers who take an exam in Italian (CILS certificate). For eight years our helpers have been running radio news in seven languages through a Tuscany network. Considering the progress of activities at our association, we can say that: in the face of the ever changing social and cultural realities of our time, the Centre has shown that it forms a living part of society, knowing how to adapt dynamically and with wisdom to new needs, giving, even though with scarce economic resources, concrete answers to people based on listening to others and the search for qualitative human relationships. This has helped to give rise to good practices that in turn stimulate specific requests for commitment from politicians and public bodies who are called to offer a service for the common good.