

CENTRO INTERNAZIONALE STUDENTI GIORGIO LA PIRA

Down below, the Earth, a wonderful shining white-blue planet. Our human fatherland. From the Moon I can keep the whole planet in the palm of my hand . And from this perspective, there are no whites or blacks, no divisions between East and West, communists and capitalists, North and South. We all form one Earth.

(Astronaut J.W. Young, from On board diary, 1972)

In the 1970s Italy started to become a land of immigration. A new phenomenon for a country that although in the past had seen considerable emigration, was totally unprepared to meet those coming *from afar*. Already then it was possible to understand that as well as the need for Laws mirroring the new social organisation that was shaping itself, many barriers had to be brought down, in order to allow a meeting that could have become, as Pope John Paul II said, *the driving force leading towards a culturally richer, more open and fellowship in its diversity*.

Observing this phenomenon at its beginning, in 1978, the Church of Florence, prompted also by the presence of a characteristic and significant experience of intercultural dialogue taking place in its vicinity, in the small town of Loppiano, in the of Incisa Valdarno Country (born at the beginning of the 1960s and founded by the Focolari Movement), intended to offer some spaces in the centre of Florence, inside the architectural complex of the church of Saints Michele and Gaetano, to create a lively centre for the cultural exchange between people arriving in Florence (mainly university students then) so that they could see that the religious, social, cultural or gender differences could become riches, although not without effort on the part of the peoples involved.

Some members of the Focolari Movement started in the field of voluntary work an experience that, with the passing of years, saw a growing number of both people and institutions. From the very start, the Centre focused its work around the issue of solidarity, but as well as trying to offer simply practical support, it also aimed at starting some kind of workshop, that could stand for a united Europe, open, willing to give and take, learning to learn from everyone. We have an ever stronger need that foreign young people become aware of being the cultural bridges, in a world that is becoming increasingly interdependent.

At its birth the Centre was dedicated to Giorgio La Pira, who had died a few months before. Giorgio La Pira, *adopted Florentine (he came from Sicily)*, who knew, thanks to his genial intuition, how to explain Florence to its citizens; a university professor who had shown great trust in young generations; a Mayor who had managed to promote Florence to the international scene as the city at the centre of the peace making process; a parliamentary member that had clearly sensed the difficulties faced by the Third World countries and who already in the 1950s had understood the connection between choices made in the field of political economy and world peace.

The **priority given to education and culture** was clearly underlined from the very beginning by the Archbishop of Florence, Giovanni Benelli, who, having noted the painful situation, of solitude and bitter disorientation, experienced by the majority of foreign young people in Florence, spoke in favour of the creation of "an information, orientation, meeting centre that would also offer assistance. He wrote a letter to Chiara Lubich, the President of the Focolari: " (...) *Everywhere there are meeting places that point to these students to the external web of our city. Who however will show them its soul? (...). I would like that this delicate attempt to penetrate in the Florentine culture succeed. (...)* We want to put ourselves at the service of these people , meet them, make sure that they feel welcome. We want to put ourselves at their side respecting them and helping them in everything. Starting with them a dialogue that draws from our experience of human beings living today. If Muslims, we will help them to become better Muslims, if Jews to become better Jews..." Following in the steps of the II Vatican Council, the florentine Presule had traced the main guidelines for the intercultural and interreligious dialogue to be realised every day at the Centre la Pira: moving from solidarity to develop one's humanity, starting from a process of mutual knowledge and friendship.

With the passing of the years, the structure, within a social reality that became increasingly more and more intercultural and interreligious, became the meeting point for young people coming from all over the world. Thanks to this presence of foreign students and intellectuals, those who worked at the Centre La Pira could become aware of the significant social changes that are now taking place, by finding themselves involved in a unique human experience that, in some ways, has started and promoted a positive attitude of openness, collaboration, intercultural dialogue, inviting many to overcome the fear of losing their identity when confronting themselves with others.

The study workshops, the conferences, the initiatives in support of the projects for international cooperation promoted and organised in their own countries by ex-students in Florence, coming either from the Italian language school or the one for political formation, the events on the education to world awareness requested by Florentine schools and many other activities, make of the Centre La Pira, for its characteristics, a unique place in Florence. The **Sala Teatina** has become in the city the permanent space containing the highest number of people coming from different countries and a peculiar intercultural workshop. Many representatives of Foreign Communities have learnt Italian in our Centre; many University students in Florence, after returning to their countries, are still in contact with Florence just through our Centre; some have discovered and developed their artistic vocation just here. This ancient room, that has at its Centre the typical stem of the Teatini, the three hills surmounted by a cross, was, between 1989 and 1992, the official gathering and prayer centre for Islamic people and as such was the first mosque in Tuscany. The decision to offer on Fridays an area to the Muslim Community, which representatives had already established a relationship of concrete collaboration with us, sprung from the idea that Florence could support the deepest and truest root of Islam, and contribute to its establishment and diffusion discovering itself in harmony with European values. It was a small gesture that has not been forgotten.

What stimulated us to be aware of to feel the main issues of our era of interest to the international society on a global level was the presence of people coming from so many different countries that make the Centre an original observation point on the planet and not be hostage to the mass media but testifying directly to the international reality and filtered through the eyes, through the life experiences and personal histories of those attending it.

We often asked ourselves how to get Florence to speak more loudly in front of the challenges posed to the whole world by different visions originating from one's own cultural environment, or old selfishly short sighted choices of political economy in the era of interdependence and globalisation.

Florence, European city of culture, city on the top of the hill, as Professor La Pira liked calling it. Florence, the city of humanism, with its centrality of man and its freedom. Christian Florence, with its 39 Saints. Florence symbol of solidarity. Entrepreneurial Florence, the centre of business; still today Guelf and Ghibelline, and sometimes arrogant, but at the same time docile, ready to recognise the value of the *novum* and learn. Florence, unique in the world and harmonious and perfect in its forms; Florence that has celebrated human dignity being the first one to condemn as useless and absurd the death penalty.

More than once we asked ourselves how to reveal its *soul* to the new *citizens*, and ourselves too, who can continue to increase its importance, spreading its ideal and cultural heritage. We have understood that the *soul* of Florence is a treasure that we can only find when meeting all together: it originates from the interpersonal relationship, and the more open we are to each other, the more we love each other in disinterested way, the more we possess it. Certainly La Pira, who came from the outside, had fully understood showing it to the Florentines themselves, what was the soul of the city of the Annunciation; a soul traditionally capable of welcoming man in his wholeness and men in the variety of their characteristics, languages and cultures. In La Pira's utopian vision" (...) *Florence is a city where everyone has his own house, every child, every young person has his school, every man and woman his/her job, where every ill person has a place where to cure himself and every believer a place where to pray*".

So, in the era of globalisation, maintaining itself faithful to its founding principles, the Centre tenaciously tries to follow the guidelines given by Giorgio La Pira and many others that like him,

have started a permanent anthropological revolution that sets itself far reaching goals, *world brotherhood* and peace, and that courageously tries to realise it in its small everyday choices. It is a pragmatic revolution, in which the I and the you constantly interchange their roles in the concrete dynamic of love reciprocity.

Regularly spending time with people coming from different countries helps us live the Earth as the common house of humanity: this sets up a crisis for us as actors in the history of individual people, but nevertheless leads us back from a history made of stories of groups and tribes, to the only great mysterious history of humanity.

The people involved in voluntary work for our Centre and many others willing to offer their professional competence towards the solution of specific problems that continuously emerge within such a complex structure, are the main fuel on which the Association can count. Today the Centre can also count on a large website of relationships with similar voluntary associations present on the national territory and numerous private and public institutions. The Ministry for Education contributes to its intercultural educational activity by assigning every year a permanent teacher; the Regione Toscana, the Provincia of Florence and some Cities in the Florentine area have supported in various cases its development projects; the City of Florence partly covers the management costs for the Italian language courses and thanks to a specific agreement also the legal counselling on immigration office; we have stipulated with the *Università per Stranieri di Siena* an agreement concerning the organisation of courses preparing future Italian language teachers, to obtain the teaching qualification (*Certificazione Ditals*) and the assignment, after passing the relative exams, of a certificate for the competence in the Italian language to non native speakers of Italian; for the past 8 years, some of our collaborators have been editing a special news programme in seven languages on Radio Toscana Network....

So, observing the development of the activities of our Centre we have noticed this: facing the challenges posited by today's social and cultural changes, the Centre proved itself to be a lively portion of our civil society, being capable of adapting itself with plasticity and intelligence to the new needs providing, with minimum financial support, concrete answers to people, always starting from a listening attitude and the willingness to establish quality human relationships. This experience has undoubtedly led to the establishment of *good practices* that are becoming widespread cultural attitudes elicit specific requests of involvement from the politician and the public institutions to provide services for the *common good*.

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