

DIALOGUE

Interfaith youth camp in Scotland

'A unique and amazing experience' summed up what many of us felt at the end of the first Scottish Interfaith Youth Camp 2018 (SIYC), held in Aberfoyle, near Stirling, on 7-9 September 2018. **Claudia Melis** reports.

Participants expressed different expectations before the camp began but a recurring theme was: 'I would really like to spend some quality time in an interfaith environment with other young people! I hope there will be fun activities, educational workshops and the right atmosphere for debate and discussion.'

The idea of a SIYC developed from the *Wings of Unity* project, a collaborative initiative between Dr. Mohammad Shomali, director of the Islamic Centre of England, and the Sophia University Institute of Loppiano, Florence, Italy. (See New City August/September 2018)

Wings of Unity in Scotland

When Dr. Shomali was in Glasgow last November, he met Archbishop Emeritus Mario Conti, chair of the RC Bishops Conference of Scotland Committee for Interreligious Dialogue, other members of this committee and several Muslim leaders. On that occasion, Dr. Shomali shared his hope that an experience like *Wings of Unity* could be repeated in Scotland.

This hope was shared by the four Scottish young people (two Shi'a Muslim and two Christians from different Churches) who had attended the *Wings of Unity* summer course in Italy in August 2017. They and several others enthusiastically contributed to it becoming a reality.

The Golden Rule

During the camp in Scotland, they spoke warmly about the impact *Wings of Unity* had made upon them. Maya

Conway, a physics student and member of the Episcopal Church from Edinburgh, also introduced a 'motto' to put into practice during the weekend: this was the Golden Rule present in all main religions. The Islamic and Christian scriptural quotations were shared:

'In everything, do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets' (Matthew 7: 12).

'No one of you truly believes until you wish for others what you wish for yourself' (The Prophet Muhammad, Hadith).

At the end of the weekend Maya told us: 'I always come away from interfaith dialogue with a new passion for my own faith, as well as more knowledge of others.'

Becoming brothers and sisters

The youth camp was prepared by a small group of Shi'a Muslims led by Azzam Mohamad, Director of Ahl Al Bait Society Scotland and four members of the Focolare community in Glasgow.

Working together, sharing ideas with one another created a strong relationship of trust among all the members of the organisational team. Sonia Allam expressed this well when she said that after all our planning meetings, living this weekend together really 'sealed our relationship as brothers and sisters'.

A workshop on 'dialogue as a lifestyle' began our programme. The young people got into pairs to get to know somebody new and practised their listening skills. Edward Duncan, leading the workshop, explained how it is important to be 'empty of oneself' in order to really receive the gifts of the other.



Fr. John Convery, second from left, Dr. Mohammad Shomali (middle) and Dr. Lorna Gold (next to him on the right) with the participants of the Scottish Interfaith Youth Camp 2018.

The earth cube

Our main speakers, Dr. Shomali and Dr. Lorna Gold (head of policy and advocacy and climate change campaigner for Trocaire, Ireland) shared stories of their faith journeys. Dr. Gold spoke about ecology as something we could live together and work for, caring for ‘our common home’ in thinking of the human family and future generations. Dr. Gold was recently involved in the organization of the ‘Interfaith Reflection and Prayer for Our Planet’ event during Pope Francis’ visit to Ireland, during which the ‘earth cube’ was offered to all.* The young people at the camp also received a cube: the phrases written on each side challenged them to look at nature in a new and different way during one of their outings.

Learning from one another

We were led in reflection about Christian–Muslim dialogue by Dr. Shomali, who affirmed that unity with God and unity among us are inseparable. He stated that we tend to want to ‘possess’ God, instead the more we leave ourselves ‘to be possessed’ by God, the more we grow in unity with one another. Dr. Shomali encouraged everyone to always learn, going deep within ourselves and following those questions we have inside, in our search for truth. He also highlighted the importance of always being open and humble in front of each person and the fact that we can always learn from each other.

As well as these moments of deep reflection, we

didn’t miss out on fun and enjoying the beautiful surroundings of Aberfoyle! It was natural for the young people to get to know each other and build friendships either around the camp-fire or while launching themselves from high trees in the adventurous ‘Go Ape’.

A sign of hope for the future

An experience which struck many was being able to observe one another’s worship – in the Muslim Prayers and the Catholic Mass. An introduction was given before each of the moments of worship, respectively by Dr. Shomali and by Fr. John Convery, member of the RC Bishops Conference of Scotland Committee for Interreligious Dialogue. For many of us it was a ‘first’ to witness those of another faith at worship and it became a true moment of God.

At the end of the camp, Lina Morcos, a Christian from Jordan who lived for 13 years in the Focolare in Jerusalem and 4 years in Syria, commented: ‘A sign of hope for the future, seeing all these Christian and Muslim young people gathered together in a peaceful atmosphere of unity.’ Everybody agreed that we want to repeat this experience next year! 🍷

* The Earth Cube is a motivational tool for supporting a healthy and sustainable planet. More information at: <http://theearthcube.org/>