

Med24 Synthesis

After Bari, Florence and Marseille, the edition of the Mediterranean Encounters MED 24 took place from September 15th to 21st, 2024 in Tirana, Albania. Some forty-five youths from 25 countries, joined later by 15 bishops, bore witness that peace spreads through encounters. Pope Francis introduced the event with a video message addressed to the youths: “The fraternity between the five shores of the Mediterranean that you are establishing is the answer, the best answer we can offer to conflicts and deadly indifference. [...] Unity is not uniformity, and the diversity of your cultural and religious identities is a gift from God. [...] The Mediterranean connects you; it gathers you in like a beautiful garden you are called to cultivate. Preserve the spirit of service in all circumstances, take care of every creature entrusted into your hands.”

This synthesis has two aims: to **recall what we received** as a group, and to **draw lessons for peace**. It is neither an ecclesial orientation, nor a social or political project, but an attempt at a collective rereading that does not replace personal memories.

1. Context

The 2024 Med Encounters hosted by the Diocese of Tirana in Albania partake of a dual heritage: that of the Med Encounters, and that of the Albanian people and Church.

After Bari and Florence, the Med23 in Marseille saw the addition of youths from all over the Mediterranean to the initial gathering of bishops. The format of this successful synodal experience was preserved for 2024. The many latent or deadly conflicts around the Mediterranean pointed to religious dialogue as the central topic, under the heading “Pilgrims of Hope, Builders of Peace”.

As for the choice of Albania to host Med24, it follows in the footsteps of Pope Francis in 2014. After Lampedusa, Albania was his first trip to Europe, no doubt in tribute to the country's religious history. The country's ancient Christian¹ and Muslim² roots, violently attacked by the atheist dictatorship at the end of the 20th century, have survived and been growing in peace and dialogue ever since.

From September 15th to 21st, 2024, forty-five youths from the 5 shores of the Mediterranean assembled for a week of dialogue aimed at building peace. They were joined at the end of the week by 15 bishops from around the Mediterranean.

¹ Orthodox, catholic, and evangelical

² Sunni and Bektashi (Sufi order headquartered in Albania)

2. Process: a weeklong encounter

Over the course of a week, the group “visited” each of the five shores of the Mediterranean through personal encounters. The forty-five youths were divided into small teams of 7, led by Albanian or Kosovar “Team Leaders”. Each day, a group sharing time brought these same individuals together to progress in their inter-knowledge following a three-step scheme. First, present one’s personal story, recognizing how it is rooted in a regional context; next, think back on one’s practice of dialogue with others and with God; finally, discern one’s specific calling towards promoting peace.

2.1. Share personal narratives and discover the history of our host country

These group shares highlight the contrasting realities we experience between countries. Youths from the Black Sea and the Middle East who have experienced and continue to experience war, and who live in fear and uncertainty. Europeans pained by the massive desertion of faith and grappling with issues of integration of immigrant populations. Youths from the Maghreb engaged in activism for the respect of fundamental human rights and seeking pathways to expand inter-religious dialogue. Croatians who see fellow youths abandoning their faith, while young Albanians teach their parents about religion. Youths who deplore when religious intransigence spills over into the political sphere, and others who would like to see religion given more space in the public arena.

These discussions necessarily lead to a shift in perspective, decentering our vision. As one young Israeli put it: “I also have a Mediterranean identity. Sometimes being part of something larger can scatter your identity, but sometimes it allows you to rethink situations and open up your perspectives.”

Within the group, trust grows and jokes fly. “You can speak without fear, we're a family now!” exclaims one, seeing a teammate get emotional.

Having shared their personal narratives, the group was immersed into Albanian history. Together, the youths met with representatives from the Orthodox, Catholic and Muslim communities, academics and Albanian political figures. They discovered a country that has recovered, in the span of thirty years, from a purge that stifled all religious practice in their parents' generation. Better still, since the fall of communism in 1990, the clergy (from the five major religious communities) has been building back on the harmonious foundations dating from before 1944. In the past, explains Prof. Ardian Ndreca, “peaceful coexistence in Albania was rooted in a sense of national unity”. He suggests that new paths must be carved out today.

2.2. Listen to God's voice and reflect on the art of dialogue

The eminent professor then explained, citing Paul Ricoeur, how the world needs God. Rather than live as business partners, humans need to feel like “neighbors” – and this deep sense of brotherhood has its roots in God.

In the Albanian example, interreligious dialogue does not prevent peace, but rather contributes to it. This is also the observation shared in groups: “We can only grow by seeing how others relate to God - and have nothing to lose in trying !” says one; another lists the face of God that appears to her in every religion: humility, joy, prayer, wisdom... “Faith teaches us that we have to listen, and to speak, with others as we do with God. In religious dialogue then we should have this common basis. »

In Singapore, days before the opening of MED24, Pope Francis himself ventured that “All religions are a path to God. They are – this is a comparison – like different languages, different idioms to get there.”

Little by little, each participant begins to reflect on what they are experiencing. Through their discussions, but also thanks to conferences and specifically presentations of the structures for religious dialogue in Albania, the art of dialogue sinks in.

Gradually, thoughts emerge on the benefits of dialogue: “As we navigate the complexities of identity and faith, we are reminded that our stories - though often marked by struggle - also celebrate resilience, connection, and the transformative power of love.” “Every conversation can bridge the divides that separate us.” “Sharing perspectives is a remarkable experience in which dialogue emerges as a crucial instrument for building connections.”

Postures, too, are gradually refined: “We have to be open on both sides and begin by listening. We shouldn't seek out our own interests but focus on meeting a person.” Another young man warns, “The media erodes this trust by dishing out too much information.” A Moroccan plays on transparency, amused: “In regular life, I'm a negotiator. One mustn't confuse dialogue with negotiation. If one side is open to dialogue and the other side seeks out its own interests, you have to stop because you're in danger. In all honesty, this week I've learned the spirit of fair dialogue”.

The main difficulty in interreligious dialogue is not theological; conflicts arise when religion is used as a basis for politics and authority, as the prime minister of Albania reminded us. As guidance, Pope Francis has provided three fundamentals for dialogue: the duty to respect one's own identity and that of others, the courage to accept differences, and sincerity of intentions.³

³ Address of his Holiness Pope Francis to the participants in the International Peace Conference - Cairo, April 2017

2.3. Hear the cry of the world and of our brothers and sisters

Throughout the week, immersed in the history of Albania and their shared stories, the participants become aware that “Peace is not just something that happens, but something that is built. For peace is possible, as some of our stories show, but it must be chosen, again and again.” Similarly, adds a young Palestinian: “Peace cannot be built without justice.” “Nor without development,” adds a young Malian. A young Armenian notes: “Religious diversity is often not a problem in times of peace. But when war comes, dialogue can be shattered. An Italian bishop recounts, “I’ve observed that even very tight-knit groups have been able to open up and stop their xenophobic actions after experiencing true encounters.’

In one group, the transverse views of youths from different countries led to this triptych as a condition for peace: “Leaders fulfilling their role (their closeness and dialogue with their people, often undermined by corruption), the building of fraternal bridges between communities and the development of the country”. Faith can help: “You have to see how many names of peace God bears in each religion,” notes an Italian bishop. “Common faith in one God gives rise to brotherhood, since we are all His creatures.”

These exchanges protect us from the “fanaticism of indifference” that Pope Francis castigated in Marseille. Fr. Alexis agrees: “Hearing the voices of others makes us less indifferent to situations and lives that are not my own. It also allows me to detect the fanaticism of my own heart. Radicalism gives rise to inner violence, which cannot be eviscerated and is later expressed through political and military means.” And a Greek bishop in turn, speaking to a small group: “We have to triumph over our indifference, because otherwise, everyone sticks to their ideas and become inaudible.” In another group, a young Kosovar summarized: “It begins by courageously diagnosing the root of our challenges, breaking down the barriers that divide us, and embracing empathy by stepping into one another's shoes.”

2.4. Move forward together and rediscover fraternity

Various concerns and aspirations were discussed during a one-day workshop with fourteen Mediterranean bishops: “The light and dangers of religion in the field of education, communication (social networks and media), and the environment.” Several proposals emerged.

- Communication is the starting point for human connection, but it's been distorted by an overuse of social media. An Italian priest expounds : “We have grown with our smartphones [rather than human relationships]. To some, news of war features like a distraction”. The story of human relationships does not make headlines, while religion is often used to garner political support.
- Working groups on the environment highlighted several initiatives and institutions. Inter-religious rapprochement can draw on the Christian idea of “guardians” of God's creation, the concept of *khalifah* (guardianship) in Islam and respect for nature in Hinduism, Buddhism and indigenous spiritualities, to solve an environmental problem. For example, the rehabilitation of the Jordan River by EcoPeace Middle East, or the Alliance of Religions and Conservation* (ARC). A simple idea shared by a French participant : “Following in Adam’s footsteps, we must learn to name once more the things which surround us. Naming things gives them value. Man will be more inclined to protect species

and things that he knows by name.” A young Algerian adds: “Indifference is the most dangerous aspect, when one feels unconcerned by environmental issues”. But others counter that “the situation in Syria is such that talking about the environment seems a luxury”. A bishop concurs : “Where there is no peace, we cannot build”.

- Education turned out to be the central theme. One must dispel the fear of the Other, and begin by taking an interest in his culture, his religion, and his language in order to understand him. It is important that religious communities have some shared spaces, to enable children and youths to meet freely. Many communities live walled off from each other. The example of Al Safina (“Noah’s Ark”, a center dedicated to promoting peace, justice, and the arts in the small village of Balansora, Egypt.) shows how such a dream can become a reality for youths longing to come together.
“Education also involves presenting different perspectives on historical events, and striving to separate facts from ideas.” “Religious education must foster a relationship with God, not only knowledge.” “We don’t educate with words alone, but with actions.”

Even (and perhaps especially) the informal times are a source of learning. Countless games were played in the evening, over meals or during bus trips. On the occasion of a birthday, the group livened up downtown Shkodër with their spontaneously launched songs and dances. Young people from the Levant in particular take every opportunity to brighten up the atmosphere. The Albanian Prime Minister, whom we met on Friday September 20, confessed that he felt “at home” in Lebanon - not only because of the chaotic road traffic, but above all because of the slightly “messy” state of mind, which refuses to anticipate everything. Between cultures, we recognize common sensitivities and talents, and that brings us closer together. Conversely, when we recognize each other’s divergent sensitivities, they can enrich us, provided we are open to dialogue.

Finally, let us pay tribute to the Albanian people, by mentioning two striking aspects: first, the edifying hospitality of the Albanians who opened their doors (sometimes within their own families) and gave of their time and their hearts. Second, the many talents of the young Albanians - first and foremost in song and dance. Many were impressed to see how Albanian culture is preserved by youths dancing in traditional costume.

Through their joy and hope, they embody the *raison d’être* of these Rencontres Méditerranéennes: fraternity.

3. Outcomes: a school of peace

In addition to the proposals put forward by each group and the ideas that have emerged, it appears that what we have experienced this week is the first and main fruit. The Rencontres Méditerranéennes project teaches us that encounters are in themselves transformative. We have experienced that, to quote Cardinal Aveline, meeting one another “face to face” makes a story worthy of being listened to and taken into account. The commitment to genuine encounters is the first lesson – wisdom that must be deployed.

The approach, or process, proposed by Med24 is a model that we can replicate in many situations, so that the encounter, experienced in dialogue, is not sterile but actually transformative. This approach takes the form of a journey that follows the following stages:

- 1) **Welcome and be welcomed.** Being hosted as guests and welcoming others as they are. Being welcomed by a people and a local Church, and being served by that community, will inspire us to serve in our turn. This also encourages us to dive deeply into the heritage and message of the place.
- 2) **Speaking and listening to personal stories.** Telling and listening to our personal stories and how they fit into and are influenced by history. Sharing these stories requires a small group that allows for formal exchanges, included in a larger group where informal exchanges can unfold, regularly nourished by outside contributions (visits, meetings, conferences, etc.).
- 3) **Learning about the art of dialogue.** These discussions allow us to reflect on the art of dialogue: its demands, pitfalls, and benefits... Hearing personal stories calls for expressing our reactions.
- 4) **Interiority, or retreating within one’s self.** Looking inside ourselves and realizing that what the other person is telling me conveys something of the cry of the poor, the cry of the earth, and that his or her story implicates me.
- 5) **Brotherhood reborn to heed the cry of the world** - From this encounter, from our dialogue and from hearing the expression of injustice, becoming aware that fraternity can be born anew. Opening this treasure up to others, and in particular social, political and ecclesial authorities: for fraternity is at the service of peoples, nations and Churches.

The friendships created are like seeds of peace that youths will carry back on pilgrimage to their homelands.