

THE RIGHTEOUS OF OUR TIME CAN SAVE EUROPE *speech by Gabriele Nissim*

In May 2012, Gariwo, the humanitarian foundation I run, accomplished a small miracle in this Parliament.

It got a Written Declaration approved, signed by 388 deputies, to set up European Day of the Righteous, taking as a reference point the experience of Yad Vashem in Israel – teaching us to remember all those who have bravely opposed genocide and rescued human lives.

I would like to emphasise the fact that this has been a brave and innovative decision.

For the first time, Europe sought to remember the revolutionary force of good that unites all women and men who have the strength to go against unjust laws in the gloomiest times for the humanity, and take up personal responsibility to go to the rescue of other human beings.

The great novelty in this European Day is the will to highlight that the concept of “Righteousness” has a universal value, and thus in all genocide cases, dictatorships and totalitarian regimes there are Righteous people who deserve being remembered.

The construction of democratic Europe, after Nazism and Communism, is the outcome of the moral courage of these people.

What is the purpose of the **European Day of the Righteous**, that has been celebrated in over 50 towns and has witnessed the creation of a hundred Gardens of the Righteous and the mobilisation of thousands youths and teachers at schools?

This Day does not seek to deliver political directives, nor even less to suggest solutions to Europe's problems, but it is a means to **awaken the consciences** of the community.

Have you in mind Socrates' maieutics? The Greek philosopher sought through his teaching to awaken the consciences of the Athenians. Well, I can imagine on this Day there is a Socrates inside every citizen's soul, inviting him to take up moral responsibility in the difficult times we live in and urging him or her to follow the example set by the behaviour of the Righteous.

The example of good is catchy.

But who are **the Righteous people**?

Let us get immediately get rid of any possible misunderstanding: they are neither saints nor heroes, but have a peculiar feature that in different ways always presents itself in history. **They turn up on the public scene anytime there is a void**; they act when the institutions not only prove themselves powerless, but also take a dangerous route; they show up countering the trends of the public opinion, when the latter is prone to fall prey to fear or indifference or even hate ideology and resolve to fight an enemy.

The genesis of their deeds does not stem from an idea of revolution, or a project of world change. On the contrary, very often they are not even aware of the extent of their actions. They are driven by a **spontaneous feeling of compassion**, and a kind of an instinct of good that prompts them to perform deeds that they had never even dreamt of doing before. They suddenly find a courage and strength that they probably had never realised to have. Until the previous day they had been absolutely common people, who like anyone would put their own lives and wellbeing first and would do only what strictly needed for the others, or for common good. Suddenly, something **miraculously human**

is sparked in them. They do not want that unjust acts are performed around them and they do not accept that a process of political, social and human destruction starts in their surroundings.

Fortunately, these people do not belong only to the past, but are also in the first row when it comes to defend the moral identity of Europe and our human civilisation.

They are the ones who commit to resisting terror and totalitarian and murderous Islamic fundamentalism, those who refuse let themselves be carried away by hatred against the migrants, who fight against fences, who lend their helping hand and provide rescue to the boats of the migrants, who try to build experiences of dialogue and coexistence with people from different cultures and faiths.

We can call all the whole of them as **the Righteous of our time**.

I would like the European Community to promote on this Day the value of their deeds and make its citizens aware of their moral example to be followed.

These moral figures are numerous. I will just mention some.

Let us think of the courage of three Muslims who had the strength and courage to rescue some Jews and Christians from the murderous fury of terrorists: **Lassana Bathily**, whom I had the chance to meet and talk with some days ago, not only rescued the customers of the Kosher supermarket of Paris, but today has become a testimonial of the struggle against terror, and explains in his conferences that you shall not kill in the name of a God that belongs to the whole humanity; **Mahadi ben Abdessalam**, the Tunisian guide who during the terror attack against the Museum of Bardo hid some thirty Italian tourists in the basement. To him we are going to dedicate a tree in the Garden of the Righteous that will be born next Summer at the Italian embassy in Tunis; **Salah Farah**, the Kenyan Muslim, teacher and deputy principal of a school, who paid with his life for refusing to obey the order of the terrorists of al-Shabaab, who during an attack against a bus wanted to split the Christian from the Muslim passengers in order to massacre them as infidels.

And to those who, today, in Europe, try to present all Muslim immigrants as potential terrorists for their own political purposes, it is important to remind of the extraordinary figure of **Antoine Leiris**, the journalist of *France Blue*, who after losing his wife to the massacre of Bataclan had the courage to say he would never accept to let himself be carried away by hatred against foreigners and the believers of other religions. If the French had gone down that route, they would have lost the moral dignity of democracy that makes the difference between them and the terrorists.

Moreover there are great experiences of Righteous people who in **Lampedusa, Malta** and on the Greek island of **Lesbos** are committed to the rescue of the migrants who land on the coasts of the Mediterranean and who, without their aid, would be headed to a sure death.

In Milan there has been a relevant experience of solidarity of the greatest symbolic value. Together with the community of Sant'Egidio, our **Holocaust Memorial**, which is just a few steps away from the Central Station, has put its premises at the public disposal to shelter the refugees. The message was of absolute clarity. If you want to remember without hypocrisy the indifference against the Jews during the Nazi period, you shall not close the doors to migrants.

People like these are the **Righteous of our time** and might stop the drift that the European community is taking.

Today Europe, which is more and more divided and selfish, is unable to respond to the political and social crises that are tearing apart Africa and the Middle East; it proves indifferent to the extermination of the Syrian people, caught in the grip between the ISIS and its dictator Assad; it is unable to become a moral reference point for those who, in the Arab world, rebel against Islamic fundamentalism and dictatorships.

It seems paradoxical, but if yesterday's forms of nationalism in Europe saw in the Jews the enemies of the humankind, today's breeds of nationalism see instead in the most suffering people of our planet, fleeing drought and criminal regimes, the new enemies from whom we should protect ourselves.

Those who ask us for help and assistance, instead of inspiring feelings of love and solidarity, are presented as the greatest danger for our existence.

The xenophobic movements manage to gain consensus in the public opinion by feeding fear and the feeling of uncertainty towards the future that is widespread among so many people who apparently are losing their confidence in the European institutions. They draw their strength from Europe's void.

Can we then defeat fear and work for a new route?

These experiences of the Righteous, who make up for the shortcomings of politics and fill the aforementioned void, can light on hope again and show us that **solidarity** can represent **Europe's rescue**.

This is why I am demanding the Members of the European Parliament to promote the following measures:

- 1) Inviting the national Parliaments to ratify the adherence to the European Day of the Righteous through laws or motions of support;
- 2) Demanding the European Parliament to pass a recommendation inviting the member States to recognize and celebrate this recurrence and develop an educational process at schools and in cities in order to bring about these moral examples. The Day was in fact approved by the preceding Parliament, and it would be important that every newly elected member assumed a responsibility to reaffirm the ethical value of this recurrence in the difficult situation Europe is living;
- 3) Opening a budgetary line to encourage the cultural initiatives and the promotion of Gardens of the Righteous in the European cities. In the absence of a dedicated budgetary line, the Parliament's decision to establish the Day runs the risk of remaining a mere affirmation of a good intention devoid of the necessary means;
- 4) Promoting a Parliamentary information agency that through the creation of a dedicated site shall make EU citizens aware of the stories of the Righteous, the moral and human experiences of those who have stood up to stem fanaticism and commits to welcoming and dialogue, promoting on the Net all those educational activities that are created around the celebration of the European Day of the Righteous.