



WASHINGTON, DC

The Meeting? “Unity of culture, truth, and experience,” in the words of Justice Alito

by Marco Bardazzi

The celebration of the 30th Anniversary of the Meeting for Friendship Among Peoples in Rimini, Italy, also arrived in the United States, in the form of a presentation on June 3rd by a panel that included Supreme Court Justice Samuel Alito and Mary Ann Glendon, former U.S. Ambassador to the Vatican.

Justice Samuel A. Alito is a member of one of the most exclusive clubs in the world. Together with eight colleagues of the U.S. Supreme Court, in Washington, all elected for life, he is one of the guardians of the Constitution of the United States and of the other texts upon which the very idea of America is based—a figure who has a certain familiarity with important documents. This makes it all the more impressive to see the care (almost affection) with which the Associate Justice has conserved the program book for the Meeting of Rimini 2007, which he attended as a guest. It's one of those little booklets that are distributed by the ton in the exhibition rooms of the Rimini Expo Center. Alito brought it with him to the Italian Embassy in the U.S. capital, and used it as a tangible sign, the point of reference in his talk to a select public of about a hundred Americans, to explain what the Meeting is.

Not an easy undertaking. Sharing the task were Mary Ann Glendon, a Harvard Law Professor and former American Ambassador to the Holy See, the jurist Joseph Weiler of New York University, the art expert Jane Milosch of the Smithsonian Institution, and Martha-Ann Alito, wife of the Justice and fan of the Rimini event. Washington was a new stage in a series of international presentations that the Meeting has organized this year to celebrate its 30th anniversary, recounting the three decades of history and friendship in the UNESCO headquarters in Paris and in various places in Brazil as well.

Alito related that he'd arrived in Rimini well prepared, having read before his departure both Fr. Giussani's *The Religious Sense* and Msgr. Lorenzo Albacete's *God at the Ritz*. “But what I found far exceeded my expectations,” he explained. The themes, the titles of the encounters, and the list of people

involved “struck me deeply and enabled me to understand the importance an event of this kind has for the cultural life of Europe.” More than the program, however, he was most impressed by the volunteers, escorts, and exhibit guides. “The Meeting visibly incarnates what I’d read before going,” recounted Alito. “It is a place that, above all, demonstrates a great sense of unity that we’re in serious danger of losing. Unity of culture, of truth, of human experience.”

America still knows little of the Meeting, but has much to gain, according to Dr. Glendon, from the experience of a place populated “with people who aren’t afraid to ask themselves questions,” in an event that has become “a special place for reflection.” Or, as Jane Milosch summarized it, “a place where you find yourself asking questions like, ‘Who am I? Am I alive or not?’”

With the enthusiasm of a scholar fascinated by a discovery, former Ambassador Glendon told the American audience, among other things, how T.S. Eliot’s *Choruses from the Rock* re-emerged at the Meeting, and of the forceful relevance it has for today’s society.

The Meeting can be a living proposal that brings continual newness because “it doesn’t have the problem of preserving something or creating a ‘new Catholic culture,’” emphasized Paolo Carozza, Law Professor at the University of Notre Dame and Commissioner for the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. Carozza guided the itinerary of testimonies in the course of the evening at the Embassy, organized in collaboration with the Crossroads Cultural Center and accompanied by the welcoming words of Ambassador Giovanni Castellaneta and Minister Sebastiano Cardi. What nourishes the Meeting, affirmed the Italian-American jurist from Notre Dame, isn’t anything abstract, but “the passion for something you have right in front of your eyes, a sense of culture that springs from the gusto for life.”

Dr. Weiler indicated for the audience what, after attending several Meetings, he believes he has identified as the real DNA of “an event that has no equal in the world.” Sustaining everything “are the spirit of Fr. Giussani and the reality of CL to which he gave rise. I’ve read a lot of Fr. Giussani and I’ve read a lot about CL, but in Rimini you truly experience Giussani and the Movement.” As a Jew, Weiler explained the importance, for America as well, of a Christian proposal like this, “based on the Presence.”

Like always, when it’s a matter of explaining the Meeting, in Washington, DC, too, it was no simple task to put it in a nutshell, or to find a comparable example for those who’ve never experienced it. Marco Aluigi, Congress Manager for the Meeting, spoke of the history, the numbers, and the protagonists, with the help of a video dedicated to the 30-Year Anniversary.

Justice Alito offered, without a doubt, the most original comparable example, evoking the experience of the Chautauqua Movement, from the Native American name of a lake in New York state: a reality of great popularity in America in the years bridging the 19th and 20th centuries, a mix of culture, education, and entertainment that brought a wave of initiatives throughout the U.S. and was praised by President Theodore Roosevelt as “the most American thing there is in America.”

But, in the end, what probably describes the Meeting better than any other example is “the sensation of happiness, of real joy, every time I think about it,” confessed by Martha-Ann Alito. “My experience was that of a continual celebration of God,” the Justice’s wife told the audience, “and my wish for you is that you can go there to experience, like me, the possibility of throwing your heart wide open.”