

Inside TEDx ViadellaConciliazione

By Barrie Schwartz

I returned home to Colorado from my eight day lecture tour in Indiana on the evening of April 15, 2013. After nearly two months of non-stop traveling and lecturing, I had come to the last major trip of my spring itinerary, and, after only one day at home, left early on the morning of April 17, 2013, for Rome, Italy.

In addition to teaching my annual course on the Shroud at the Pontifical Seminary, I had also been invited to speak at the TEDx ViadellaConciliazone conference in Vatican City being held on April, 19, 2013. The topic of this independently organized TED event was Religious Freedom Today and, because of my work on the Shroud, I was asked to speak about my personal experiences as a Jewish man directly involved in the research of this most important Christian relic. The topic I was asked to speak on was Religious Freedom in Scientific Research.

Without doubt, this was truly a great honor, and one that I took very seriously. However, I was also in the midst of a busy travel schedule and would only be permitted to speak for eighteen minutes, so I had to write the presentation well in advance, as a written speech rather than the longer, extemporaneous talks I give regularly. The speakers also had to provide their written text to the organizers in advance, since the talks would all be given in English and simultaneously translated into Italian during the event and they needed the text for the translators.

This made me very uncomfortable, since my talks are usually spontaneous and unscripted, but with such a short time to speak, I realized I would have to use my written script on stage. I never get nervous when I lecture about the Shroud, as it is a topic I am thoroughly familiar with, but this was different. I must admit, I was feeling some pressure as the event approached and was happy the organizers had planned a rehearsal day on April 18, 2013. Due to my travels, I had not even looked at my speech for many weeks.

I arrived in Rome the morning of the 18th (without having slept on the plane) and was picked up at the airport by two seminarians of the Legionaries of Christ, the order that administers the university and seminary in Rome. The entire TEDx conference was the brain child of Fr. Hector Guerra, L.C., a former Provincial in the order and my good friend. I checked into the hotel around 11:00 am that morning and, still without sleep, was picked up at 2:00 pm and driven to the rehearsal at the ViadellaConciliazone auditorium where the event would take place the next day. And that is where I first met many of the truly amazing and talented individuals who would be speaking at the conference.

Probably the most well known speaker was Gloria Estefan, the singer, composer, actress and entrepreneur known as the “Queen of Latin Pop,” who crossed over into the mainstream music world to become a true global superstar. She was there with her husband, Emilio, and would be speaking on Forgiveness and Reconciliation, a poignant presentation in which she shared the story of her near fatal accident in the 1990’s that left her nearly paralyzed with a broken back. It was a great story of courage, faith, dedication and recovery. As we waited our respective turns to

get on the stage and test the microphone levels and preview the PowerPoint slides or videos that were to be part of our presentations, we had a great conversation about the Shroud! She and Emilio both showed a strong interest in the subject and we continued the conversation later that evening as we sat together at dinner.

While at the rehearsal, I was also able to meet and talk with a number of the other speakers, including Brian J. Grim, a senior researcher at the Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life. Brian is a leading expert on global religion and religious freedom and supports his research with credible statistical and sociological data. It was great to hear his view on global issues.

I also spoke with 7' 1" tall Vlade Divac, former NBA basketball star from Yugoslavia (who played with the L.A. Lakers) and the impact the war in his country had on his life and career. In the end, it led him to start a foundation that helps children victims of all wars.

The organizers planned some short breaks during the rehearsal, and suggested that, after each break, the speakers return and sit in different seats so we could meet one another. After one break I sat next to Sheikha Hussah Sabah al-Salem al-Sabah, the princess of Kuwait and we talked about the importance and value of preserving cultural and artistic heritage. She is currently Director General of the DAI (Dar Al-Athar Al-Islammiyah) Museum in Kuwait City.

I spoke briefly with several more of the speakers, including Chief Rabbi David Rosen from Israel, Brother Guy Consolmagno, Planetary Scientist at the Vatican Observatory and Daniel Libeskind, international architect and designer and Master Planner for Ground Zero in New York. Where else in the world could someone meet such a diverse and accomplished group of brilliant and successful individuals? It was truly overwhelming and humbling and an amazing moment in my life.



Gloria Estefan, Barrie Schwartz, Emilio Estefan and Fr. Hector Guerra, L.C. after the ViadellaConciliazone rehearsal with St. Peter's in the background

We left the rehearsal that evening and were taken to a beautiful banquet room in the Boscolo Hotel Exedra, where a wonderful dinner was held for the speakers. I sat with Gloria and Emilio again (at her invitation) and happily answered her many questions about the Shroud. After dinner, we adjourned to our hotels and I finally got some sleep for the first time in more than 40 hours! The next day was the *big* day.



Vlade Divac is introduced (he really is that tall)

We arrived at the auditorium a bit early the next morning and found it was already nearly full. By the time the program actually began, every seat was filled. Truthfully, I was feeling a bit nervous, but since my presentation wasn't until the afternoon, I could only sit back, relax and enjoy the presentations of the other speakers. I will not go into a detailed description of the presentations themselves, because complete videos of all the presentations are now available on the [TEDx ViadellaConciliazone YouTube Channel](#).

Instead, I will just include a few photographs of the event. Frankly, I was so intently listening to each speaker that I only made a few photographs during the entire day. However, one of the presentations, that of British aerosol graffiti artist Mohammed Ali, was truly unique and highly visual and was the only exception. It was as much a performance as it was a presentation. He started on the stage with a bare canvas and some spray cans with an ethereal musical soundtrack playing in the background. He almost appeared to be dancing in front of the canvas as his hands flew around like a wizard waving a wand, and in about ten minutes he had created a beautiful artwork, which he donated as a gift to the new Pope. The Arabic inscription on the painting means "Freedom" and that is St. Peter's Basilica in the background. As it states in his bio, "(Ali) has been melding together street-art and Islamic script and patterns for the past 10 years, combining meaningful messages that connect people of all faiths in multicultural cities across the globe." It was truly amazing to watch Mohammed in real time and my still photographs really don't do him justice, so watch the video if you can. (See photos next page)



Mohammed Ali creates artwork on stage

At around 5:00 pm, the amazing day came to a close and the final presentation was made. Speakers and audience members alike gathered in the lobby of the auditorium and spent the next hour greeting each other, mingling and discussing the day, until the auditorium security folks politely asked us to vacate the premises so they could lock the building. It took another fifteen minutes, but they finally got everyone out and locked the doors. The conference was over, but that was not the end of the activities.

The speakers and staff of the conference had also been invited by the Corporal of the Guard to visit the Swiss Guard's quarters and armories at the Vatican for a guided tour. However, I remained in front of the auditorium for another hour in conversation with several others and missed that visit.

All of the speakers had been invited to come to a nearby restaurant later that evening to celebrate the day and have a pizza dinner with the staff and crew that produced the conference. At least forty of us crammed into one room of the pizzeria and filled several long tables. It was informal and fun and the conversation, food (and wine) were excellent!

The next morning, Saturday, April 20th, the participants were treated to a private guided tour of the Vatican Museums, led by Art Historian Elisabeth Lev, who also happened to be another of the TEDx ViadellaConciliazone excellent speakers.

That evening, we were treated to a wonderful banquet in the dining hall of the Center for Superior Studies of the Pontifical Seminary, with most of the speakers and over 400 seminarians in attendance.



Photo by Br. Benjamin Meza - ©2013 Legionaries of Christ

The speakers, conference organizers and seminary leaders were seated at a long table at the front of the dining hall. As soon as I entered I noticed a small orchestra ensemble was set up in the front of the hall, so I knew the seminarians had some entertainment planned for us. I quietly whispered to Gloria that she would probably not escape the room without singing at least one song for us and she quickly smiled and agreed.



Shortly thereafter, the performance began with the brothers playing and singing for us. I was deeply moved by a song written and performed by my dear friend (and recently ordained) Fr. Andrew Dalton, L.C., (left) who I have known since he was a seminarian. He has become an avid Shroud scholar and now gives tours at the Shroud exhibit sponsored by the Legionaries on permanent display at the university. In my opinion, it takes a lot of courage to get up and perform

in front of a superstar like Gloria Estefan, but he did it without hesitation. He later confided in me that it was his task to ask Gloria to perform that evening, and he felt that it would be easier to ask (and harder for Gloria to say no) if he performed first. And it worked perfectly.



Gloria sings! Photo by Br. Benjamin Meza - ©2013 Legionaries of Christ



After the entertainment was over, everyone pulled out their cameras and smart phones and the picture taking began! That evening I finally had the opportunity to speak with “Aerosol Arabic” graffiti artist Mohammed Ali and his friend Khyle Raja (left), who both sat across from me during the dinner. There had been no opportunity for us to talk at the conference itself, or at the dinner at the pizzeria, so we took advantage of the time that evening to share our differing points of views and all three of us wound up doing more talking than eating. It was both enlightening and enjoyable.

At one point, all of the speakers were asked to gather for a group photograph. When Vlade Divac (7’ 1” tall) stood next to Gloria Estefan (perhaps 5’ 4”) we all laughed out loud. The disparity between them was so dramatic that Gloria grabbed a chair to stand on so she could look Vlade in the eye! The resulting photograph (below) is my favorite of the entire event. Even standing on a chair, Gloria was still shorter than Vlade!



(Left to Right) Conference organizer Daniele Buzzurro, Emilio Estefan, Fr. Hector Guerra, Vlade Divac, Gloria Estefan, Barrie Schwortz, Pilar Mateo, Mohammed Ali, Brian Grim Photo by Br. Benjamin Meza - ©2013 Legionaries of Christ

That evening marked the end of the formal activities and everyone agreed the event had been an enormous success. We were all very grateful to Fr. Hector Guerra, L.C. for inspiring the TEDx event and to the many people of the organizing committee and staff who made it a reality, along with the many brilliant speakers who graciously came together from around the world to share their points of view. It was truly an honor to be a participant!

By all means please visit the [TEDx ViadellaConciliazione Website](#), where you will find more information about TED, interviews with some of the speakers, info on the program and conference staff and much more.