

Cultural Diplomacy as a Tool for Conflict Resolution and Prevention

Professor Marco Lombardi, director of the Department of Sociology at the Catholic University of Milan

Carlo Zonato: Good afternoon. We have reached the seventh meeting of our Think Tank series and, more specifically, the fourth meeting focused on specific issues.

Today we focus on a very significant topic, which in many ways is in line with the vision that UPF promotes, and that is cultural diplomacy.

We often have discussed cultural diplomacy with Marco Lombardi; therefore, I am very curious to hear a more articulate and comprehensive treatment. Marco Lombardi is the director of the Department of Sociology at the Catholic University of Milan and is also the director of the ITSTIME research center; he is a member of the scientific committee of the Master in Cultural Diplomacy in the Rome branch of the Catholic University and is still the director of the school of journalism.

But I also would like to mention that Marco is among the first Ambassadors for Peace, a recognition received in Korea in 2000 just on the occasion of Rev. Dr. Moon's 80th birthday. Incidentally, before we met at the university, Marco had already contributed to *Voices of Peace* with his article on Kashmir. We then shared together the wonderful experience of the 2020 World Summit in Seoul, as Marco was part of the Italian delegation. He is now with us to entertain us on

the topic of "Cultural Diplomacy as a Tool for Conflict Resolution and Prevention." Marco—the floor is yours.

Marco Lombardi: Thank you. I am among friends, and so it's nice to address a topic that is all in the making. I speak about it very frankly and also with respect to what is the specific approach that we are using, as one does in a university, with what are the scientific references, those that make it an academic paper. It doesn't start out that way, though.

Giorgio [Gasperoni, the *Voices of Peace* editor], when you recalled an article of mine in *Voices of Peace* about 15 years ago on Kashmir, you already mentioned one of the reasons why it then came to be called "cultural diplomacy," in the sense that it is not what we are talking about today, different to my path.

I have always dealt with crises and emergencies, especially emergency management. We are used to looking at crises on the local level, so my close work with civil defense. When you go to manage these things internationally, you realize that they often intersect with even broader dimensions, which have to do with criticality or crisis, but not necessarily with the stress that generated it.

I cite, for example, my activities in Sri Lanka at the time of the tsunami around 2004, rather than the earthquake in Haiti around 2011. My activities are generated by my specific expertise in "crisis management." Then, when you find yourself managing the effects of the tsunami or the earthquake in those two countries, you realize that actually crises emerge in contexts that have characters that hark

back to, well, to other kinds of stresses or conflicts—for example, interethnic Sri Lanka with the clashes that were happening there. Or Haiti, where earthquake management was closely overlaid with the sociopolitical disaster that characterized and continues to characterize that society. Or Kashmir, which had had a rather severe earthquake in 2005 that overlapped with the long-standing conflicts between the Pakistani Free Kashmir and the Indian side.

I have been on both sides. So starting with my interest in crisis management due to natural phenomena and then so-called man-made disasters, there was a realization that internationally this led to having to consider the situation with respect to much broader and often sociopolitical variables that characterized the crisis.

One reflection, which came later, is that those crises were being addressed by us, who came from the outside, with a perspective that did not take into account at all what were already the characters that enabled those local populations to be so resilient with respect to stress or not. So cultural diplomacy was born well after these experiences of mine in the field, at least in the perspective that I am proposing to you.

It was born around 2015, and it started to take shape, to take a more, let's say, theoretically and politically argued connotation from 2016, 2017 onward.

Because actually, when you find yourself talking about cultural diplomacy, you are referring to a well-established history that refers to something else. If you Google, first of all, it takes you back to the idea of diplomacy through sport.

Under the label of cultural diplomacy there is an institute in Berlin that has been doing cultural diplomacy for many years. It takes the story right back to the Olympics. If you like, it starts with Olympia when it all stopped.

But what we know is the meeting of Mao and Nixon on February 21, '72. So let's go back quite a bit, about 50 years, if you remember. Promoted by what? By a series of preliminary meetings. At least, that's the narrative between some players from Maoist China and America during the Olympics.

The story tells of a more-or-less chance meeting due to a bus ride by an American table tennis player who got stuck in the compound and was given a ride in the Chinese bus. From there arose the narrative that led to a series of invitations, first between teams that then expanded to an audience including political ones, until the meeting with Mao precisely.

But this line, which is that of sports, went far beyond that. You remember that in 2018 there were the Winter Games in Korea. North Korea and South Korea paraded under the same flag, and they had a women's ice hockey team that was mixed four years ago. Sports has always been a kind of conflict suspension area, and this mode has been incorporated into cultural diplomacy.

Another strand of cultural diplomacy that we Italians are familiar with is that which has to do with national branding. A kind of cultural diplomacy that goes through the lending of works of art, that is, through the dissemination of national culture as a tool for people-to-people relations. More and

more, I would dare to say, as a tool more than a cost-free relationship, of promoting one's brand. In the last four to five years we have talked extensively about national marketing, local marketing and so on.

These are the traditional strands that certainly link the diplomatic effort to culture passing mainly through these points: sports and precisely, the other culture, that of works of art. Actually, the reflection that we have started to do is different and starts from the consideration that each local community has its own culture that often shows resilience in the crisis situation.

I give an example of the tsunami in Sri Lanka. That was in 2004. We, as a Catholic university, had been operating for about a year in the Matara area, about 200 kilometers southeast of Colombo, just the tip of Sri Lanka. The fashion for emergency psychology was emerging a little bit. We had teams of psychologists going on site to deal with the psychological issue, especially PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder), which is an important issue but has its own problems when you try to deal with it from a cross-cultural perspective; starting with the fact that you don't know either the language or the culture of the person you're trying to go and help with the tools of psychology, in itself a pretty complicated thing. However, especially in those years there was a lot of fervor to jump in, spearhead, to help these people.

With me was a dear friend who was a psychologist with whom I got along very well; we did six of my eight missions in Afghanistan together, so we shared a lot. And also a

firefighter and psychologist. We were in Sri Lanka, and we were invited to one of the schools that we knew, about seventy kilometers from Matara, to the northeast. It's called Dikwella, and there we participated in a number of activities, including a final one, a big play organized by the students.

There were more than 500 students, a small number of whom were on stage. It was of great interest, because it revolved around the traditional pantheon of the colorful and very diverse culture among the Sri Lankan ethnic groups. They had brought on stage the boys dressed in the different tribal clothes of the different ethnic groups; they had brought on stage this play, in which the pantheon deities, together with the different ethnic groups, confronted the rabid sea deities who, because of rage, had come in great waves to devastate the coasts. That is, the tsunami had its own reason for breaking the rules, evidently breaking the Heaven and Earth covenant and between communities.

These are all people who watch satellite television, so we can't make fun of them, but they are also people who have a strong anchorage to what is their tradition handed down from their grandparents, for which it doesn't necessarily mean believing in it in thaumaturgical terms, but it means being able to use those traditions to overcome those unfathomable and unexplained problems that constituted that widespread unease in getting back on the sea after what had happened.

That is, a representation that, in a kind of mass expiatory collective ritual, had become a catharsis of emergencies and had recomposed the balance between communities and

the supernatural world, leading children to be calm, but especially fishing communities to resume sailing on the sea, that is, in Dr. Fred's face. Dr. Fred is a famous cartoon from the 1970s that pokes fun at Freud.

So there we began to think about what and how references to one's own culture can be useful. Not necessarily references to myth, but also references to practices. It is not the first time that when you go to face an emergency abroad, you realize that that community already has faced it. It has faced it and overcome it. That community is there, and it has shown skills in dealing with the critical event.

Now I am not saying that therefore aid is useless, but I am saying that cultural diplomacy, which arises in crisis contexts to deal with conflict, assumes that there are skills sedimented in the communities that have faced these crises and that we should not, first of all, that in the solidarity network that goes to work together to deal with these crises, place ourselves in the attitude that says, "Here is the savior of the homeland; think of nothing; we are the ones who save you."

In this perspective, saving oneself becomes an effective and strategic relationship between those who bring aid and those who are helped. I am not saying anything new, just declining it at a different level. Any of you who may have worked in social work know that in that dimension of social solidarity that is one-on-one, face-to-face or small groups, one of the biggest difficulties is that those who are victims feel victimized and are willing to be helped. And that a

positive relationship is created between helper and helped, so that that relationship becomes collaborative.

This is an old story at the micro relationship level. It never was at the macro level; the attempt is to say, "Don't think of anything; we'll take care of it." At the end of the day, when you work at these levels, you are obviously moving on extremely complex organizational dimensions. So a certain strong statement in terms of even not sharing command has its justification on the organizational level, but it is turning out that it is not necessarily always functional.

Let's add one more thing: Functionality has always been used strategically by those who supported emergency response. This is a practice that has become significantly established over the past 15 years. For example, it has become well established that every critical event, every conflict, promotes an unintended situation for change, that is, an opportunity for change.

Excuse me for trivializing the example: If your house fell down in an earthquake, you count on rebuilding it just the same as before; but while you're at it, you improve it. Right? That's the mechanism; you would never tear it down. But while it's gone down, you do this. So every critical and conflict event is an opportunity to change. The last 15 years have made this change a penetration strategy by those organized systems that have brought aid to crisis areas.

Another example, which takes us back to Sri Lanka, when for the first time this strategy was formalized. Back then, for example, the European Union was subsidizing the reconstruction of facilities, mainly schools and hospitals, if,

following the reconstruction of the school and the hospital, there was an organization of that facility that, for example, incorporated in its management an equal component of men and women in governance where the governance was inspired by democratic principles. This was not necessarily provided for in the old hospital, but the logic was: You want the hospital, you want the school? Fine. But I also teach you how to govern it now. And among the governance options that I give you is this one that is mandatory.

So men and women in governance and democratic management of the organization. All this started, for those who were dealing with crisis, the quest to go beyond, even just to knowledge aimed at strategic use of local characteristics; but trying to understand how local characteristics can be a pathway to stronger alliance between those who help and those who are helped. That is, the prerequisite for rebuilding without the rebuilding becoming something necessarily different from the system that was stressed before. We say that.

The return to normalcy must necessarily include the fact that the stressed system can be described by the same variables, by the same factors, that described it before. That is, there can be a discontinuity; however, normality must provide for a discontinuity, but not a radical caesura. That is, we are not talking about the destruction of the dinosaurs, whereby an ecosystem no longer exists after that stressful event with the characters it had before. We are talking about trying to provide for strategies that also provide continuity in terms of rehabilitation of that system, something that facilitates the restoration of so-called normality.

Now we have begun to think precisely in terms of diplomacy that goes to work in post-conflict, conflict, crisis situations, precisely in terms of cultural diplomacy in the sense, however, that I am telling you: that of starting from the knowledge of the cultural characteristics of the community under stress to try to understand what the points of continuity are.

Another example? You know that we are working in different crisis areas. For example, in [the Ethiopian state of] Oromia. Ethiopia is in great difficulty today. The first actions we did were in Oromia, a few years ago around 2017, south of Ethiopia, borders with Kenya, borders with Somalia, an area as big as all of Ethiopia. Ethnic conflicts with the Amhara being the dominant population, further north [other ethnic groups]; they have always suffered from major internal conflicts and shootings. It was never talked about in Italy, but in the normal times we were going on hundreds of deaths a year from interethnic conflicts in Oromia.

Well, we started working in that area. What did we find out? We Westerners knew very little about it: The Oromians have had a system for hundreds of years called *Gadaa*. You can find it on Google and also on Wikipedia. It is also on Italian Wikipedia, but it is completely misleading what is written on Italian Wikipedia. You have to see it on English Wikipedia, which is described correctly. It is a system of Oromo self-government that in itself incorporates many of the characteristics that we attribute to a democratic system. It is a system of political, economic, social and religious rules. It serves to regulate these spheres and provides for the

election of Oromo representatives who serve eight-year terms, male only.

We could start arguing here, but we are talking about a system that provides for the election for eight years of wise men who govern the political, economic, social and religious spheres of a community. And it fits. All in all, we are talking about Oromia, which started this way 100 years ago. But not only that. This system includes the fact that when the elder dies, he is not replaced by someone else, but he is replaced by his wife. That is, the elder, an elected man in that system who dies before the end of the term, passes the scepter of leadership to his wife. So there is no exclusion of the wife.

There is a simplification, if you will, in the choice that converges on the one who is in charge of the family, but it presupposes the involvement of the wife, behind the elder, who formally assumes precisely the role, should that be lacking. Here, this system today is part of the intangible cultural heritage, as UNESCO has been saying since 2016 onward.

And interestingly, we have tried to revalue it. Why? Because very often—and this, in my opinion, is part of cultural diplomacy—the local people themselves lose some awareness of the treasure they still have hidden among their roots. They lose it a little bit, because we also have helped them to lose it. I am not saying that we have done it maliciously, but perhaps in that spirit that very often has been that of: "Be quiet; don't do anything; we will help you." This kind of attitude, which is what made halogen models penetrate in a devaluing way, let's say, even into local

cultures, was what then at some point made the locals take care of it. Things work, and we throw it all away.

So a mechanism just of not being aware with respect to the treasures that you have, in the face of a strong pressure in a state of need like that of conflict and crisis in which an external actor strong in its ability to intervene is inserted.

The interesting thing is that in the activities we did to support the Oromo at that time, the University of Bole in Oromia launched a master's program for studies in the Gadaa system area. So, after forgetting it, the Oromo university rediscovers its own normative system that will serve to regulate life. But not only that. In particular, it had been kept active precisely to regulate conflicts.

And, lo and behold, the Gadaa rules provided for greater involvement of women precisely when crises and conflicts were to be regulated. We can almost say that it was more women's responsibility than men's to decide the state of war rather than the state of peace.

I am not emphasizing an Asian culture rather than an African culture. I am emphasizing the fact that, more and more, we are in a reticular society that has not gone down the path of homogenization envisioned by the globalization processes that we thought. I have to say, fortunately, that globalization has not been, as was thought 20 years ago, the cause of reticularization.

There are two processes that coexist with a certain autonomy. Reticularization has gone on today, producing an increasingly dense network, but with actors that are

sufficiently autonomous from each other. So the transition is not that. Globalization does not lead us to manage homogeneity, but it leads us to manage diversity. The path we have to take today is to manage a diverse network society between nodes. So we manage the differences in potential among the nodes, not the tension to become equal among the nodes. It is a reversal from 15 years ago.

In this perspective I am not, when I talk about local societies, identifying someone who is different from us. We are different from them. They are different from us. We all have the same characteristics, which is to lose very often what are interpretive models of reality, which are anchored in our traditional cultures and which can come in handy. The work, obviously, on this is open.

I will finish with another example that I already have mentioned to you. Do you remember when we went to Syria in 2018? There we artfully did this operation.

Let's think, first of all, about culture. What does it mean to think about culture? It means intervening in a crisis situation by having as the first objective the reconstruction of local community ties before the infrastructure of the local community. Clearly, crisis management in the first impact has needs. Culture disappears if biological carriers disappear. So feeding and drinking gives them a roof and so on. But the moment you go back to rehabilitate the whole social system, then you have to start thinking differently. The food of the local community is its pieces of culture. I feed the biological organization that I am helping.

Each of us needs energy, but the local community, in order to survive, needs an energy that is cultural energy, the relationship or relationships that are what constitute and maintain local societies. These are relationships that are based on communicative exchange.

Relationship, which is communication, depends on a shared cultural system; otherwise you go nowhere. It is the providing nourishment and providing water and providing security to individuals. It is a game vis-à-vis systems that are singularities—the biological ones, obviously. But once you get to that, you need to connect them together. These systems make up the community. Then there is a question there, that of dealing with the cultural characteristics of that community.

I already have told you we were in Ma'lula; what was done? It was now a year and a half since it had been left by the [Al-Nusra Front], who had occupied it for a year, destroying everything, doing all kinds of things, starting with destroying the churches, as I had told you.

Ma'lula is important because it's the site of [the convent of] St. Thecla, it's the site of St. Paul, just so you know, 80 kilometers north of Damascus. We were there in 2018; in Ma'lula is the oldest church that they destroyed. There was this famous icon that I told you about, which was the landmark for the whole community. It was a strange representation of the Last Supper, to be understood of an ancient Syriac icon that went missing; it was resting on an early Christian altar. What was done by us? The icon was brought back to it.

The problem at that time in Ma'lula was not about eating. It was the problem of how we go about managing a community that no longer has itself because it is leaving. That is, those who lived in Ma'lula no longer found the point of being there. But what did they want? They wanted buses. They wanted the trucks to take people every day to go 80 kilometers south of Damascus, to go 100 kilometers north of Homs, but leaving that center that had been devastated, around whose early Christian altar there was no longer what was the place that made me recognize as part of the community there.

We brought it to them. They didn't expect much. Imagine the priest there. The council leader had put an old photocopy of the Koran there. The fact is that we brought one that was indistinguishable from the original. No one knows where the original went, but we brought one that was identical to the original in the sense that it was made by an icon master, written by an icon master, because they write themselves, they are sacred objects. It went through the legitimization process through the head of the Syriac Church who is in the Vatican, brought here to Milan by our bishop. Through all these steps, brought to the rector of the old temple of Dionysius and Bacchus in Ma'lula. This one here, when he saw it coming, he didn't understand it anymore, because he felt like he was holding the old icon. Especially arrived through the knowledge of all the signs that had brought it.

What was the result? After the consecration done there and the exposition, the next day we found ourselves with the mayor, the elders, the citizens of Ma'lula who at that point were saying, "The icon is back, it's back in Ma'lula. At this

point we can no longer leave. At this point we don't need the buses and the trucks anymore. We need the schools, we need a gathering place.”

As a result of that, we are in fact rebuilding those common areas that had been destroyed, but also simply the café where everybody was, the school where everybody was growing up. At that point the community decided to stay. That is, we helped it come together around what was their principle of unification.

This was very interesting to us and was a turning point of reflection from 2018 onward, which led to writing a series of papers that we published and convinced us to move forward on this path. We are working now in nowhere, in [the Mustang district of Nepal] on the borders of China and Tibet. We are working in parts of Central Asia, in five Central Asian countries.

We have been convinced that we need infrastructure. We think, first of all, about the cultural infrastructure. Because I, when I think of a community legitimately, I can think in terms of cultural infrastructure, that is, those systems of signs that enable the relationship, which is what then justifies the need for the infrastructure understood as a system of stones that sit on top of each other.

This is, if you like, the idea of cultural diplomacy that we are using and that we find particularly effective precisely in situations of crisis and emergency. I will close with this.

Maybe it helps to better understand why crises and emergencies are perceived by each of us as a situation of

uncertainty. So anchoring especially to shared cultural models and interpretive models of reality is a most effective response at all levels, micro and then individual, group and community. It is a most effective response to expel uncertainty.

Expelling uncertainty means regaining visibility about the future. As long as you are uncertain, you cannot decide. As long as you can't decide, you don't have a vision of the future, you don't know what path to take. So you don't say it yourself, but it helps to expel uncertainty by providing the cultural patterns that you have to discover with them within their cultural roots. Maybe I should have said this earlier, but this is the theoretical premise on which this idea of cultural diplomacy is built today. I hope I have been clear enough in explaining to you what we do, the reasons and why.

It is about working to restore identity. Identity is a collective identity that makes you recognize yourself as belonging to a community. That is why we start with culture. Today there is no longer a radical difference between what used to be said between emergency and war.

Today the theory talks more about crisis. And, in fact, we talk about crisis management for a number of reasons. Because perceptually or relationally, a crisis factor that can be a war, that can be a tsunami, that can be several things, has effects. The effects of a stressor are similar in a way that is independent of its characteristics to be able to define crisis management more broadly than the previous view. And just because you talked about identity, that happens a lot in war.

Let's remember that one of the operations that was done in the Balkans, as elsewhere, was that if you survived, the first thing they did, if they left you alive, was to kick you out of the house, split up the family and tear up the documents. That is, the meaning was really that of deprivation of the relational system in which you always lived. One is sent one way, and one is sent the other. It means breaking the relationships that give you identity and, on the other side, breaking the documents means expelling you from the community.

So you see just like in war, also a widely used strategy in the last decades has been just that: If I don't kill you biologically, I kill you socially, which is a widely used strategy in so many war contexts. So crisis management reassembles precisely a more unified view than in the past.

Having a global gaze does not mean giving up having the local gaze. That is the point. I mean, until 40 years ago that was the line. Until 20 years ago that was kind of the trend. It was played by substitution. When I said reticularization increases, but it doesn't increase homogeneity, rather it increases diversity, that's what I mean, which is the awareness of playing in the network and therefore that we are all part of the same ecosystem, which is now becoming a digital ecosystem, but carrying diversity. This is more difficult.

So the same things are not good for everybody, but we have to stay together by ensuring diversity; so diversity management. When we say, "Let's not be Euro-centric or America-centric," in my opinion, it means not forgetting the

roots, but consciously bringing them into confrontation with all others.

I am convinced that this issue of cultural diplomacy is an extremely important issue for UPF. To me, UPF is one of those few large entities that globally has a tension that connects heaven and earth very well. That is, we work here to improve ourselves and improve others, but always with a vision that goes far beyond that. So it has a spiritual dimension, a political dimension and a cultural dimension, in my opinion. UPF is an organizational dimension, and, I would add, it has a vocation. In my opinion, UPF could definitely be one of those global bodies that, to address the critical global issues of the world, in this perspective, it could be part of its ropes. That's why I really like to talk about it in our context.