

# A place of refuge and a call forward

Report on ICCJ's 2024 Conference in Salzburg: *Holiness: A Religious Imperative and Moral Obligation?* by Martín de Salterain Samudio

*Complexity.* This is without a doubt the first idea that comes into my mind when I think about Salzburg's Conference. And, if I had to pair it with an adjective, it would be *refreshing*.

All of us are obviously deeply worried about what is happening today, and that includes both the unthinkable things that have stricken and are striking the lives of many people mercilessly, and also all of the deeply troubling things that are occurring around that tragedy. Amidst this dystopic setting which we are attending to, painfully revisiting things that we thought were well past us, there is one particular thing that's been on my mind these couple of months: the alarming lack of complexity that I've encountered when these issues are addressed. Not only information-wise, but also morally-speaking. And I think that, sadly, this might be a systemic problem that exceeds this particular subject.

Don't get me wrong. I intentionally —and maybe almost ideologically— oppose the very much in vogue tendency to look at our current society with fatalistic eyes. No. I won't agree with the people who continuously state that we've lost our values and our way, with the pessimistic prophets that idealize the past. I think my Salesian background shows when I discuss this<sup>1</sup>. I'm on the opposite side of that street. But, as a fundamental optimist who tries its best to advocate complexity and not fall into naivety, I'm not unaware of the many deeply problematic things that are also part of the historical moment we are living. And this conflict has drawn my attention to one that I find particularly alarming: perhaps, as a society, we have lost the capability to address difficult issues with the necessary complexity. And that should scare us.

I'm not going to analyse the possible origins of this situation, blaming social media, our culture of immediacy or the current social fracture, because it is not the aim of this report nor my field of expertise. But I do have the need to point out my perspective on this reality: our collective ability for complexity has drastically reduced. Before going to Salzburg, I must admit that I was starting to become a bit suffocated by the one-dimensional stances I kept meeting, at least in my country.

That's where I was at a personal level when I arrived at this year's ICCJ Conference, and the reason why I say I found it refreshing, a true breath of fresh air in a suffocating context. Finding people who were able to open up and express their internal tensions and contradictions, people who could hold a clear position on a fundamental level, but at the same time address the underlying complexities and problematize these pressing issues with both honesty and intelligence, truly felt like reaching an oasis on a vast and hostile desert. And I have to say that I found this in the speakers on the podium, and also in the

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<sup>1</sup> This refers to the Salesian of St. John Bosco, a Catholic religious congregation with its origins in the 19th century Italy. As a teenager I got to study in a Salesian high school.

people who I shared coffee breaks with (which were many times the same!). At the risk of sounding embarrassingly corny, I truly think that it wasn't only what I needed on a personal level, but what the world is desperately needing right now.

How does ICCJ accomplish this? It's evident: by building a trusting environment through personal friendships. In this simple thing lie the conditions of possibility for such a relevant endeavor. And the interesting thing is that ICCJ has somehow managed to foster an environment that makes even newcomers or strangers fall into this underlying dynamic almost immediately! Because, in my experience, each of the old-timers—even the doyens, of which there are many—are always willing and quick to open the circle up and let you in, whether in breakfast chitchat or in meaningful conversations (which luckily tend to overlap!).

In Salzburg I encountered a truly entertaining and relatively young Jewish man who shared with us his own deep questionings and sorrows about how his views on the conflict had drawn him away from close friends, and an incredible Iranian woman who wittily and sharply managed at the same time to question the problematic aspects of her own country and culture of origin, while also pointing out the flaws and shortcomings of the western society where she now lives. I found a deeply committed and fundamentally dialogical nun who shared with me how she was really concerned about the stance young students were currently taking, but at the same time was outraged by the repressive response they met from authorities. Her capability to find true acts of compromise and care in these young people who, in the end, she felt were to some extent misled, was soothing, and her instinct to focus her criticism mainly on the generation that set the conditions that allowed this to happen, rather than attacking the symptom, felt sensible. I also took a workshop where an Orthodox rabbi explained to us how he and young couples wholeheartedly and creatively challenged themselves to find true and authentic ways to celebrate their marriages, so that they were coherent with how they conceived their relationships in modern standards, but at the same time honored their tradition and the Creator's mandates. On Tuesday, we all got to know the honest and thought-provoking process of a local community which strived to find their own way to denaturalize the problematic aspects of their own history, without simply cutting ties with their past altogether. There weren't any simplistic answers in this Conference, and these are just a few of many examples.

There is also another aspect I found really interesting about this Conference, which also has to do with complexity, but mainly with my own prejudices. I must confess that learning that this year's theme was *holiness* was a bit of a letdown. After profoundly enjoying Boston's take on intersectionality the previous year, where we passionately discussed the nuances of identity and analysed the power dynamics that underly different manifestations of modern discrimination and injustice, holiness first stroke me as a somewhat ethereal subject, not nearly as engaging, grounded or relevant in today's pressing context. I still deeply yearned to be able to participate, but my expectations were lower. Gladly, I was terribly wrong.

Once again, ICCJ lived up to its standards and managed to address the theme of Holiness with theological depth, with an insightful and nuanced approach to its down-to-Earth implications, and with the necessary presence of meaningful personal experiences. Holiness showed to be an issue with cultural, social and political sides to it, or even darker sides, all influencing pressing current events in very concrete ways. Obviously, it was fertile ground for us to find both spaces of difference and sameness between our traditions, as one should always do in interreligious settings. And, perhaps in an even more important level, I think the Conference helped us reconnect with the very idea that holiness is and should be a fundamental aspect in our day to day lives. And I don't mean that in a way in which we set up impossible goals for ourselves, or in a childishly mystic or naive way that doesn't have an impact in our everydayness. What we think and what we believe about holiness should inform us constantly, and in our mainly secular contexts and frenetic paced lives, it's not difficult to lose sight of this fundamental truth. At least in my case. So, for me this Conference had a different feel to it, where it almost seemed a bit like a spiritual retreat.

I truly can't be more grateful to The Association of the Friends and Sponsors of the Martin Buber House for this opportunity, which I wouldn't have been able to be a part of without their support. There's not enough *dulce de leche* in Uruguay to express my gratitude towards them and also the ICCJ for enabling this deeply meaningful experience for me. It was a highly stimulating, thought-provoking, emotionally moving and also fun experience, as I was certain it would be. I enjoyed myself in the most profound sense of the word. But, regardless of all those wonderful things I mention, I do not miss the fact that these were not the things the Application for support asked about. "How will your participation in the ICCJ Annual Conference support your interfaith involvement?" and "Will you be available to work together with other participants following the conference to develop activities and resources for others in your community, building on the theme and work of the conference?" were the specific questions I had to answer in order to obtain this scholarship. And I did so in the most honest and conscious way I could, but alas, the impostor syndrome is always just around the corner, ready to activate your guilt and all your insecurities. So, these questions have been on my mind in the months prior to the Conference, during my time in Austria, and since I got back home.

This was not my first time in an ICCJ Conference. By mere chance, I ended up in the 2014 Conference in Buenos Aires, after participating in the gathering organized by the Young Leadership Council just a few days before in Uruguay. I had never participated in an interreligious activity until then, and I was so excited that I decided to follow my instinct and cross the border to Argentina. It was a fascinating experience, one of which I probably wasn't able to grasp even half of it. Everything was uncharted territory. After that, I connected with other instances of interreligious dialogue, like the *Confraternidad Judeo Cristiana* back home, which I later became a part of, but I kind of lost touch with the ICCJ itself.

Then Covid came, and that meant that the 2021 and 2022 Conferences had to be held online. While tragic, this also enabled me to participate in this program without incurring in costs that I couldn't afford but, also, I didn't have enough experience to really know if it

would be worth it. These doubts quickly disappeared: as I participated in the online workshops and webinars, I started to realize the immense opportunity I was having. I remember now setting my alarm in the middle of the night and struggling to keep myself awake, since the program started with the Australian-led activities from the opposite corner of the world. Though it's strange for a Uruguayan, I'm not much of a football fan. But those days, I felt close to the people who passionately follow the World cup when it takes place in distant lands! Boston was the first chance I had to go to an in-person Conference having at least some experience in dialogue, and, again, it was fascinating. ICCJ generously invited me to be a part of one of the panels, and thus enabled this amazing opportunity. This year I couldn't believe my eyes when I read the email from the FUF Association saying they would support my participation in Salzburg.

The reason I'm narrating this is because I'm not really sure how going to Salzburg's Conference would have enabled me to "support my interfaith involvement" and "work together with other participants (...) to develop activities and resources for others in my community" if it hadn't been part of a broader process. Being, in a way, my 5th Conference (or my second full-experience Conference), meant that I got to text some old friends some weeks before traveling, asking them if I would meet them there. It also meant that some heartfelt hugs were shared when I arrived at St. Virgil, that the ice was broken from the beginning and that I felt I could be myself from moment one. This allowed me to really enjoy myself and quickly become the social catalyst I tend to be in this kind of situation, introducing myself to others and introducing other people to them, making those kinds of jokes that get conversations started and pushing the group just a bit to take part in late night conversations or even going out for drinks. And I have already stated the importance of personal friendships in what we intend to do here.

But this also meant that in these two months I was able to keep in touch with different people from the Conference, either sharing memes, engaging in honest reflection on the state of dialogue in our different contexts or offering my help to a fascinating project I got to know there. I've participated in a couple of organized online meetings that somehow spun off the Conference, and I'm really expecting this network to kick off and thrive. Getting things to move forward back home has proven to be a bit harder, but I have indeed proposed different initiatives which I think are still slowly building up.

No, if I'm being honest, I really can't guarantee a concrete and tangible impact that my participation in Salzburg's Conference will directly translate into. I really hope so, and I'm trying for it to happen, but I can't be really sure of how things will take place. But what I can affirm is that all of this is feeling more and more vocational as I move forward. And I mean this in the deeper sense of the word *vocational*, related to *calling*. As a believer, the ideas of *calling* and *providence* are crucial in my understanding of life and in my decision-making process —this is probably more connected to my Ignatian background<sup>2</sup>—, and I have reached a point in which I can't honestly look back at this journey and not think that something important in my life is unraveling. Something deeply connected to my purpose,

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<sup>2</sup> This refers to the spirituality of St. Ignatius of Loyola, who founded the Society of Jesus in Spain in the 16th century. I made my undergraduate studies in the Jesuit University I now work at.

to my place in society and to my place in my own Church. And that's some clarity I definitely bring back from Salzburg.

I've already said that this particular Conference also felt a bit like a spiritual retreat. And, in a way, I think that a group of people can't spend almost four days together talking, hearing and reflecting honestly about holiness, without actually having an experience of holiness themselves. They were days in which I'm certain I had holy encounters, holy conversations and holy experiences, that spoke deeply to me in this particular moment of my life, relating to very different aspects of it, with lessons and takeaways I'm still unpacking. And I'm sure that I'm not the only one who had such experiences in St. Virgil, as I am also positive that this wasn't exclusive to Salzburg's Conference. I'm certain that G-d spoke to me in Salzburg, as he did in Boston, in Buenos Aires, on my couch when I connected to the online conferences, or in the other many experiences of interreligious dialogue I have participated in in different moments of my life. And I don't say this because I have some mystical delusion of chosenness, but because I'm sure that, in a way, more loudly or more discreetly, like a hurricane, an earthquake, like lightning or, more probably, as a *soft breeze*, the divinity speaks to us all when this family comes together, and that interreligious dialogue is a meaningful source of holiness for those who engage in it. So, even though I'm not certain of how this will keep developing in me, or how this could find its way to really make an impact, I find comfort in the thought that, if He's really on the wheel, we'll surely arrive at interesting and meaningful destinations. And I believe this is also true for this wonderful and pressingly relevant organization that ICCJ continues to be.