

## Research Notes

---

### “Turning the Poison into Medicine”: Soka Gakkai in Italy and COVID-19

Massimo Introvigne

*CESNUR (Center for Studies on New Religions)*

maxintrovigne@gmail.com

**ABSTRACT:** Soka Gakkai’s remarkable success in Italy went through a difficult test when COVID-19 hit. In the first half of 2020, Italy had both more casualties and stricter quarantine measures than any other European country. The paper explores how the National Council of the Italian Soka Gakkai reacted to the pandemic, and how its decisions were received by the members. The National Council was more cautious, and acted earlier, than the Italian government itself. Not all members agreed. In retrospective, however, the measures probably contained the effects of COVID-19 among the Italian members and prepared a successful transition back from online to in-person activities, preserving Soka Gakkai from problems other religions experienced in the country.

**KEYWORDS:** Soka Gakkai, Soka Gakkai in Italy, Religions and COVID-19, COVID-19 Pandemics in Italy, COVID-19 Quarantines in Italy.

#### *Introduction*

The growth of Soka Gakkai in Italy has been unique among Eastern religious movements that came to Western Europe. Soka Gakkai started operating in Italy in 1961, and was formally established there in 1963, but the first members were expatriate Japanese. The first Italian member joined in 1966. In 1993, members were 13,000, and they reached 90,000 in 2019 (Introvigne 2019). They were 96,100 at the end of 2022 (CESNUR 2023).

Soka Gakkai attracted the attention of Italian media as among those who joined were well-known soccer stars, actors, and singers. Its activities for peace and

against nuclear weapons attracted an even larger audience, despite controversies generated by a few vocal ex-members. In 2015, Soka Gakkai entered the elite club of religious minorities that signed a concordat (“Intesa”) with the Italian government. It was ratified by the Parliament in 2016 (Introvigne 2019).

I have explored elsewhere the reasons of this extraordinary growth, by comparing Soka Gakkai with other Japanese religious movements who tried to make inroads into Italy. My conclusion was that Soka Gakkai, while maintaining a loyalty to its Japanese sources, successfully managed to present its message as universal and part of Buddhism, a global religion, rather than “Japanese,” “Asian,” or “exotic” (Introvigne 2019, 2021). Soka Gakkai is now perceived in Italy (except by a few stubborn opponents) as a legitimate part of the Italian religious landscape, and a benevolent organization well-known for its campaigns against nuclear weapons (Šorytè 2019; Pellecchia 2022).

This paper tests these conclusions with respect to the years 2020–2021, when the Italian branch of Soka Gakkai was confronted with COVID-19 and the long quarantines imposed by the Italian government. This was, of course, a problem of all Italian religions (Consorti 2020; Maciotti 2020), and of all branches of Soka Gakkai, including in Japan (Fisker-Nielsen 2020).

Maria Immacolata Maciotti (1942–2021), Italy’s main academic scholar of Soka Gakkai, devoted a paragraph to how the Buddhist organization was reacting to COVID in an article she published in 2020 (Maciotti 2020, 103). She summarized there the answers she had received from Roberto Minganti, one of the Italian leaders of Soka Gakkai. Unfortunately, Maciotti’s death in 2021 prevented her from further elaborating on the matter. Minganti, however, kept a copy of his 2020 answers and kindly put it at my disposal. I have also interviewed in 2023 other local and national leaders of the Italian Soka Gakkai, including Minganti himself.

### *A Prompt Reaction*

All my interviewees insisted on the fact that Soka Gakkai, guided by the principle that “the health of our members, and of all human beings, is our first concern” (Maciotti 2020, 103), acted *before* the Italian authorities compelled it to take certain restrictive measures. In the Italian context, this should be compared

to the resistance put up by other religions, including some Evangelical churches and Catholic groups (although not the Catholic Bishops' Conference) against implementing the measures the government had introduced as mandatory.

Italy started discussing COVID-19 as a possible threat in December 2019, when reports came from China of a cluster of pneumonia cases of unknown origin. During the month of January 2020, these reports became more and more alarming. On January 30, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared a state of international emergency.

The first Italian measures concerned those who had traveled to China. On January 30, Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte announced that flights from and to China will be suspended. On January 31, the government appropriated funds for implementing precautionary measures based on the indications of the WHO, set up a Civil Defense Operations Committee, and declared a national health emergency.

The first Italian citizen who had never been to China and tested positive to COVID-19 reported to a hospital in Codogno, in the northern region of Lombardy, on February 17, 2020. By the beginning of March, there had been more than 3,000 confirmed cases and more than 100 deaths.

The Decree of the President of the Council of Ministers (DPCM) of February 23, 2020, authorized the government, and in case of urgency the local authorities, to impose a strict quarantine on the areas affected by the pandemic, including by closing the schools and prohibiting “public events and all forms of public gatherings.” The Decree also affected the Catholic Mass and other forms of religious worship, although its application was local, mostly in municipalities of Northern Italy, and exceptions were granted.

The Italian Soka Gakkai reacted to the news about the pandemic before the DPCM of February 23. Until January 2020, its National Council had continued to meet in person, in Rome or Florence. In February, it switched to meetings (and votes) via Zoom. It also kept in close contact via Zoom with Soka Gakkai in Japan, which in turn was implementing anti-COVID measures before the Japanese government made them mandatory (Fisker Nielsen 2020, 31).

Minganti reported that,

From the National Council's early discussions, it became clear that the sacredness of life and thus the preservation of the health of Soka Gakkai members would be the basis for

any subsequent decision: no member or family member was to fall ill as a result of religious activities.

Not only were the in-person meetings of the National Council suspended, but also the visits of the national leaders to local chapters and any travel for Soka-Gakkai-related activities.

On February 21, 2020, the Italian Soka Gakkai discontinued all in-person activities and closed its centers. All employees were put on smart working status, and already scheduled interfaith dialogues, book presentations, lectures, and exhibitions were cancelled. Maciotti reported that this was less problematic for Soka Gakkai than for other religious organizations, because its key practice is a personal relationship with the *Gohonzon*, the object of worship, which members keep at home (Maciotti 2020, 103). This is certainly true. However, the individual practice receives an important support from the *zadankai*, i.e., the monthly meetings of members in each area or neighborhood. Members had also built an intensive network of home visits and informal meetings. The Soka Gakkai groups of men, women, young women and young men, also had regular meetings; and members in general liked to gather to pray together, even outside scheduled activities.

The Italian Soka Gakkai operates through both individual and collective practice. New members receive their *Gohonzon* in ceremonies that are a crucial part of the Soka Gakkai experience both for them and their friends. They were also suspended in Italy on February 22, 2020.

On February 23, 2020, when the government had already announced its first DPCM, but some hours before it was signed by the Prime Minister, the Italian Soka Gakkai issued its first COVID-related communiqué (see Appendix 1). The National Council confirmed that “all Buddhist meetings in homes, centers, cultural centers, and anywhere else” will be suspended and all Soka Gakkai centers will be closed. As for personal behavior, the National Council asked members to follow the indications of the Ministry of Health.

The National Council was aware that renouncing the *zadankai* and other in-person meetings would be painful for the members. It added that,

The National Council apologizes to all members for the consequences and inconvenience this decision entails, and thanks for everyone’s understanding and cooperation.

In fact, several members complained, as did those who had eagerly expected to receive their *Gohonzon*. This was not an unusual reaction in Italy. In February, there were still those who regarded the measures against what they considered “just another seasonal flu” as exaggerated. By March, this position will become untenable.

### *The Dramatic Month of March 2020*

While in the early period of COVID-19, before the DPCM of February 23, 2020, those who died in Italy because of the virus were around one hundred, between February 20 and March 31 they were in excess of 13,000. This was the highest percentage of COVID-related deaths with respect to the general population in the world, and all main international media showed the images of military trucks transporting hundreds of coffins out of Bergamo, the most affected among Italy’s large cities.

The government’s reaction was draconian, although in retrospective some regarded it as not quick enough. All schools and universities were closed on March 4. On March 9 and 11, two DPCMs closed restaurants, most shops except those selling essential products such as medicines and food, most businesses and factories apart from some deemed essential, and even the most sacred Italian institution, which for many is not religion but soccer.

The March 11 decree also explicitly prohibited religious ceremonies. It ordered Italians to stay home, except for some limited and essential activities. On March 22, the government specified that, at any rate, citizens were not authorized to leave the territory of their own municipality. Surprising foreigners who were accustomed to a somewhat relaxed relationships between Italians and the law, the measures were strictly enforced. Less tragic than the coffins of Bergamo, the most iconic images of the period are of Italians singing together from their balconies, as they were prohibited to leave their apartments, and of young men (they were all males) intercepted by police helicopters while they were running on deserted and even private beaches and arrested or heavily fined.

It was clear to all Italians that this was an exceptional, unprecedented, and unforeseeable situation. It was also clear to the leaders of Soka Gakkai. Minganti reported that the National Council adopted an emergency way of operating.

Before, there were monthly in-person meetings that lasted two days (Saturday and Sunday morning) with trips to Florence or Rome of representatives who came from various regions. Now the meetings were moved online but they were organized every week. Each lasted two or three hours.

But in fact the same emergency mode was adopted locally, Minganti said,

at all levels of the *sangha*: from regional meetings up to the *zadankai* organized on Skype or Zoom. Also, the “home visits home” meetings between two or three practitioners were moved online. Thanks to the online platforms, it was possible to keep together a complex *sangha* that had some 94,000 members. The editors decided to publish, in addition to the regular magazines *Nuovo Rinascimento* [New Renaissance] and *Buddismo e società* [Buddhism and Society], a free newsletter.

The first was published on March 11, and it continued throughout the year 2020. The National Council believed that in exceptionally difficult times the regular magazines were not enough, and members needed weekly encouragement through the newly created *NR Newsletter* (NR referring to the name of the magazine *Nuovo Rinascimento*). The first article of the first issue opened with these words:

In this time of special difficulty due to the spread of the coronavirus, the Soka Gakkai Italian Buddhist Institute has decided to disseminate periodically this *NR Newsletter*, which will also be published on the website [sgi-italia.org](http://sgi-italia.org). It is a collection of encouragements from Master Ikeda, of insights and news. There will also be testimonies from various areas of Italy on how our fellow believers are facing this challenge. With a desire to offer closeness and support to each person, we hope that this newsletter will be a source of inspiration and encouragement for all. As Master Ikeda writes: “Whatever happens, we continue to ‘turn poison into medicine’ through the power of the Mystic Law” (*NR Newsletter* 2020).

On March 7, all regional leaders joined the national leaders in a video conference. The result was a second communiqué, published on March 9. It repeated the Buddhist formula of “turning poison into medicine.” It informed members that all religious activities “including home visits” will continue to be suspended until April 3, and that Buddhist study exams, which in Soka Gakkai measure the members’ progress in their lifelong study of Buddhism, were postponed to October 18 (see Appendix 2).

Based on my interviews, by then members were learning how to continue to keep in touch through local Skype or Zoom meetings and through frequent personal phone calls. All efforts were made to overcome the unavoidable sense of

loneliness connected with the lockdown. Eventually, the Italian experience came to be seen as a model for other European branches of Soka Gakkai. Minganti reported that,

Our decisions found immediate positive feedback at an international level. Messages of approval and encouragement came from Japan, with a continuous support from Master Ikeda. At the center of the Soka Gakkai's world prayer is a famous passage from [the Medieval Japanese monk] Nichiren Daishonin [1222–1282]: “If you worry even just a little about your personal safety, you should first of all pray for the order and tranquility of all four quadrants of the country.” The pandemic was also an opportunity to practice for a collective worldwide purpose. The other Soka Gakkai branches in Europe after a while followed the same Italian methodology. At the same time, they also adopted a style of activity that members had developed during the 2003 SARS epidemic in Asia. It is called “1-2-3”: first, one hour of [chanting] *daimoku* per day; second, at least twenty minutes of study per day of the *Gosho* [the teachings of Nichiren Daishonin] and Master Ikeda's writings. Third, speaking on the phone with and encouraging at least three fellow believers or friends each day.

These were not the only measures taken by the Italian Soka Gakkai. Because of the concordat with the Italian state (Intesa), the Soka Gakkai Institute shares in the percentage of 0.8% of their taxes (in Italian, “Otto per mille”) that all Italian citizens should devote either to one of the religions that signed an Intesa or to the cultural and charitable activities of the government. With a third communiqué, dated March 25, 2020, the National Council announced that it had decided to devote the entire amount of its share of Otto per mille payable in June 2020 to the Civil Defense to support its efforts against the pandemic (see Appendix 3). Waiting for the Otto per mille payment in June, Soka Gakkai immediately transferred 500,000 euros to the Civil Defense.

### *Life Slowly Resumes*

In April and May 2020, the number of infections and deaths slowly decreased with respect to the terrible month of March (although, when the end of the pandemic was declared in 2023, the total number of Italian COVID-related casualties had been in excess of 187,000). On May 18, together with the restaurants, churches and other places of worship were also allowed to reopen, although face masks and distancing remained mandatory in all services. Four days before, on May 14, Soka Gakkai had joined the World Day of Prayer for Humanity originating from an appeal of Pope Francis and other religious leaders.

On May 15, Soka Gakkai was among the signatories of a Protocol of Understanding for the Resumption of Worship Activities of Non-Catholic Religions with the government.

However, the National Council decided that it was better to err on the side of caution. It kept online activities that after May 18 it would have been legally possible to hold in presence. A new communiqué of May 17 (see Appendix 4) informed the members of these restrictions. Only the ceremonies for handling the *Gohonzon* to new believers and others who had requested it were resumed, but a further communiqué of June 22 imposed very strict conditions. These ceremonies should be held only in Soka Gakkai centers, preferably outdoors, in a shorter form than usual and without the presence of friends and relatives. New members receiving the *Gohonzon* should be accompanied by only one person chosen by them.

That the new *Gohonzon* might be delivered was the most pressing request of members, and ceremonies were held in July in Florence, Rome, Milan, Falconara, Palermo, Catania, Bari and Thiene. The centers, however, remained closed. They were opened exceptionally only for these events.

After the summer of 2020, when many had used the relaxed measures as an opportunity to move around the country for holidays, the COVID-19 situation in Italy became worse again. New restrictions were imposed in October. On November 3, a new DPCM divided Italy into “red,” “orange,” and “yellow” areas based on the number of COVID-19 cases and other parameters. In January 2021, a “white” classification was added for low-risk areas. The quarantine was almost as strict as in March–April 2020 in the “red” areas, and progressively milder in the “orange,” “yellow,” and “white” areas.

Italians became accustomed to listen every evening through radio or television to bulletins about the number of infections and deaths in the different regions, provinces, and municipalities, hoping to end up in a “white” area but afraid their municipality or region would be declared “red,” thus severely limiting their possibility of moving outside of their homes and living a normal life.

In 2021, with the start of the vaccination campaign and the introduction in August of the European Digital COVID Certificate, called in Italy “Green Pass,” the distinction became personal rather than geographical. Those who had been vaccinated or could prove they got sick with COVID but were cured, got their



certificates and were able to enter restaurants, board trains and flights, and perform several other activities from which those who did not have a “Green Pass” were excluded. The number of activities requiring a “Green Pass” increased during 2021, and decreased only in the spring of 2022, when the need of showing the certificate was progressively eliminated in Italy and remained only for traveling to or from certain foreign countries.

The “Green Pass” was never popular in Italy and was perceived by many as a tool of control and surveillance going beyond what was reasonably needed to fight the pandemic. This perception had an influence on the 2022 general elections, which were won by the only party that had not joined the large coalition supporting Prime Minister Mario Draghi and had not voted for its “Green Pass” measures. Others went one step further and adopted a conspirationist narrative, casting in doubt the effectiveness of the vaccines if not the reality of the pandemic itself.

The Italian Soka Gakkai accompanied the ups and downs of 2020 and 2021 by telling its members to respect the law and follow the instructions of the government. It continued to be, if anything, more cautious than the law would have requested in delaying or cancelling public activities, keeping open only the shops selling books and religious artifacts in Rome and Florence, two cities that were in the “yellow” rather than “orange” or “red” areas (Communiqué of November 6, 2020; see Appendix 6).

Not all members were persuaded. Through my interviews, I discovered that the Italian Soka Gakkai, as other religions and the general population in Italy, did have its percentage of “anti-vax” and “anti-Green-Pass” members. The National Council decided to adopt a conciliatory policy, based on the principle of *itai doshin*, “being of the same mind, even though we are many in body,” i.e., with different opinions on politics, science, or medicine. The policy was effective in avoiding divisions and keeping within the same fold members with different attitudes, until the controversy somewhat subsided with the end of the “Green Pass” era.

On the other hand, the Italian Soka Gakkai as an organization respected all the government’s prescriptions and, if anything, was slower than other religions in switching back from online to in-person activities. When it did, however, according to my interviewees the transition was more successful. In the Italian Catholic Church statistics are still missing, but the fear is often expressed that a

sizeable percentage of those who became accustomed not to go to the Sunday Mass during the quarantines did not return to the churches when the pandemic ended. Soka Gakkai, at least according to my interviewees, also has members somewhat “lazy” in switching back from online to in-person activities but the transition seems to have been more effective than in other religions.

### *Conclusion*

According to my interviewees, the years 2020 and 2021 were dramatic and difficult for Soka Gakkai members as they were for all Italian citizens. The National Council acted with extreme prudence and caution, running the risk of being criticized by some members but keeping the rate of COVID-related deaths in the movement probably lower than among Italian citizens at large (in 2020, only four casualties due to COVID among members were reported to the National Council, although it is possible that there were other unreported cases).

On the other hand, several leaders and members insisted that these were years of soul-searching, which allowed them to examine what was essential in their Buddhist practice, and the relationship between the joy of being part of a vibrant and growing community and the essentially individual nature of the “fusion of reality and wisdom” (*kyochi-myogo*) that each member may experiment by chanting in front of the *Gohonzon*.

Caring for the weakest and the sick members was also a great experience of solidarity and growth. Looking back to these dark years, many Italian Soka Gakkai members would probably find them depicted as they were by the famous words of Charles Dickens (1812–1870) in *A Tale of Two Cities*:

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair... (Dickens 1859, 1).

They would also add that whether the time brought foolishness or wisdom did not depend on the time but on the women and men who lived through it. Some were indeed capable of “turning poison into medicine.”

## **Appendix 1. Communiqué of the National Council, February 23, 2020**

[Italian text]

In seguito alle misure straordinarie adottate dalle autorità italiane rispetto alla diffusione del virus COVID 19 (CORONAVIRUS), l'Istituto Buddista Italiano Soka Gakkai ha deciso di sospendere temporaneamente tutte le riunioni buddiste nelle case, nei Centri culturali e in qualunque altro luogo, fino a data da definirsi, per tutelare il più possibile la salute e la sicurezza della popolazione.

I corsi nelle strutture esterne e gli eventi dei giovani in commemorazione del “16 marzo” sono posticipati fino a data da definirsi. I Centri culturali saranno chiusi al pubblico.

Il Consiglio Nazionale si scusa con tutti i membri per le conseguenze e il disagio che questa decisione comporta, e ringrazia per la comprensione e la collaborazione di tutti. Chiediamo di inoltrare questa comunicazione a tutti i membri e simpatizzanti dell'IBISG [Istituto Buddista Italiano Soka Gakkai] e a tutti coloro che offrono le case per le nostre attività. Grazie infinite per la collaborazione!

Riguardo ai comportamenti da intraprendere a livello individuale rimandiamo alle indicazioni ufficiali del Ministero della Salute, sviluppando saggezza e senso di responsabilità, ed evitando ogni allarmismo.

[English translation]

Following the extraordinary measures taken by Italian authorities with respect to the spread of the COVID 19 (CORONAVIRUS) virus, the Soka Gakkai Italian Buddhist Institute has decided to temporarily suspend all Buddhist meetings in homes, Cultural Centers, and anywhere else until a date to be determined in order to protect the health and safety of the population as much as possible.

Courses in outdoor facilities and youth events in commemoration of “March 16” are postponed until a date to be determined. Cultural Centers will be closed to the public.

The National Council apologizes to all members for the consequences and inconvenience this decision entails, and thanks for everyone's understanding and cooperation. We ask that this communication be forwarded to all members and

sympathizers of IBISG [Istituto Buddista Italiano Soka Gakkai, Soka Gakkai Italian Buddhist Institute] and to all those who offer homes for our activities. Thank you very much for your cooperation!

Regarding the behaviors to be undertaken at the individual level, we refer to the official guidance of the Ministry of Health, developing wisdom and a sense of responsibility, and avoiding any alarmism.

## **Appendix 2. Communiqué of the National Council, March 9, 2020**

[Italian text]

Cari compagni e compagne di fede,

grazie di cuore per gli sforzi che state facendo in questo periodo così complicato. Sicuramente tramite l’incoraggiamento reciproco riusciremo a superare questa grande difficoltà e a trasformare il veleno in medicina.

Sabato 7 marzo i responsabili di tutte le regioni e i responsabili nazionali in video conferenza hanno avuto modo di ascoltare report di esperienze e iniziative da ogni zona d’Italia.

A seguito di queste riunioni l’Istituto ha deciso quanto segue:

1) La sospensione di tutte le attività religiose, comprese le visite a casa, prosegue fino al 3 aprile p.v. in linea con le ultime disposizioni del Governo italiano.

2) Gli esami di Buddismo di primo e secondo livello sono posticipati al 18 ottobre 2020.

3) Le redazioni delle nostre riviste invieranno una Newsletter settimanale per incoraggiare tutti i compagni di fede che stanno affrontando questo periodo difficile.

Per quanto riguarda i comportamenti individuali, poiché l’espansione del coronavirus continua a diffondersi nel nostro paese, è importante seguire le indicazioni del Ministero della Salute e dell’Organizzazione Mondiale della Sanità, sviluppando saggezza e un forte senso di responsabilità verso se stessi e gli altri.

Grazie infinite per la collaborazione.

[English translation]

Dear fellow believers,

Thank you from the bottom of our hearts for your efforts during this complicated period. Surely through mutual encouragement we will be able to overcome this great difficulty and turn poison into medicine.

On Saturday, March 7, the leaders of all regions and the national leaders gathered in video conference to hear reports of experiences and initiatives from every area of Italy.

As a result of these meetings, the Institute decided the following:

1) The suspension of all religious activities, including home visits, continues until April 3 in line with the latest provisions of the Italian government.

2) First and second level Buddhism examinations are postponed until October 18, 2020.

3) The editors of our journals will send out a weekly newsletter to encourage all fellow believers who are facing this difficult period.

Regarding individual behaviors, as the expansion of the coronavirus continues to spread in our country, it is important to follow the guidance of the Ministry of Health and the World Health Organization, developing wisdom and a strong sense of responsibility towards ourselves and others.

Thank you very much for your cooperation.

### **Appendix 3. Communiqué of the National Council, March 25, 2020**

[Italian text]

L'Istituto Buddista Italiano Soka Gakkai ha deciso di devolvere in favore dell'emergenza Coronavirus l'intera somma dell'8xmille che riceverà dallo Stato per la prima volta il prossimo giugno. Ha inoltre deciso di destinare subito 500.000 euro alla Protezione Civile quale immediato contributo in questa prima fase di interventi, attingendo ai propri fondi.

L'Istituto Buddista Italiano Soka Gakkai partecipa alla ripartizione dell'8xmille a seguito della Legge di Intesa approvata all'unanimità dal Parlamento Italiano e

pubblicata sulla Gazzetta Ufficiale n. 164 del 15/07/2016. A decorrere dal 1° gennaio 2016, infatti, i contribuenti hanno avuto per la prima volta la possibilità di destinare l’8xmille del gettito IRPEF in favore dell’Istituto.

Con lo spirito del Maestro Daisaku Ikeda, continueremo uniti a pregare per le vittime di COVID-19, per la salute di tutti i cittadini italiani, per il personale medico e paramedico e per tutti coloro che in questo momento stanno facendo ogni sforzo per fermare l’epidemia in corso.

È pratica della Soka Gakkai proteggere e preservare la vita di ogni essere umano.

La nostra preghiera è innanzitutto rivolta a salvaguardare la vita di ogni singola persona, in Italia ed in tutto il mondo, con la consapevolezza che ciò inevitabilmente contribuirà ad uscire al più presto da questa grave crisi.

[English translation]

The Soka Gakkai Italian Buddhist Institute has decided to donate in favor of the Coronavirus emergency the entire amount of the Otto per mille [0.8% of taxes, which Italian citizens may assign to either one of the participating religious organizations or the state] it will receive from the state for the first time next June. It has also decided to immediately allocate 500,000 euros to the Civil Defense as an immediate contribution in this first phase of intervention, drawing on its own funds.

The Soka Gakkai Italian Buddhist Institute participates in the distribution of the Otto per mille following the Intesa (concordat) unanimously approved by the Italian Parliament and published in the Official Gazette No. 164 of 15/07/2016. Effective January 1, 2016, in fact, taxpayers had for the first time the opportunity to allocate 0.8% of their taxes in favor of the Institute.

In the spirit of Master Daisaku Ikeda, we will continue unitedly to pray for the victims of COVID-19, for the health of all Italian citizens, for the medical and paramedical personnel, and for all those who are making every effort at this time to stop the ongoing epidemic.

It is the practice of the Soka Gakkai to protect and preserve the life of every human being.

Our prayer is first and foremost to safeguard the life of every single person, in Italy and around the world, with the knowledge that this will inevitably help to get out of this dramatic crisis as soon as possible.

#### **Appendix 4. Communiqué of the National Council of May 17, 2020**

[Italian text]

Care compagne e compagni di fede,

un ringraziamento sincero per tutti i vostri nobili sforzi nel trasmettere speranza, coraggio e gioia a ogni persona, e nel cercare di riprendere il ritmo delle nostre attività attraverso le telefonate e le piattaforme online.

Il Decreto-Legge 16 maggio 2020, n. 33 (di seguito DL) prevede un ulteriore allentamento delle restrizioni finora imposte. Tuttavia il Consiglio nazionale, ritenendo prioritaria la salvaguardia della salute di ogni singola persona e considerato che in Italia abbiamo un numero significativo di nuovi casi quotidiani di Covid-19, dopo essersi confrontato con la SGI ha deliberato quanto segue:

– **ATTIVITÀ:** anche con l'entrata in vigore del nuovo DL, le attività mensili dell'IBISG (settimana degli incoraggiamenti, settimana dello studio, settimana delle riunioni dei 4 gruppi, settimana dello *zadankai*, incluse le visite a casa) proseguiranno per telefono e su piattaforme online, fino al 30 giugno 2020. Dopo questa data, si valuterà l'andamento della situazione.

– **CENTRI CULTURALI:** anche i Centri culturali rimarranno chiusi fino al 30 giugno 2020, salvo che per le cerimonie del Grande Voto.

– **CERIMONIE DEL GRANDE VOTO:** stiamo preparando le procedure per poter riprendere queste cerimonie nei Centri culturali. Appena sarà possibile verrà comunicato ufficialmente.

In base al Protocollo con le confessioni religiose firmato il 15 maggio 2020 con il Governo italiano (e disponibile sul nostro sito al seguente link: <https://www.sgi-italia.org/firmaprotocollo-palazzo-chigi/>), in una prima fase predisporremo le Cerimonie soltanto nei Centri culturali, nel rispetto delle procedure di distanziamento previste. Successivamente valuteremo come fare nelle regioni dove non ci sono Centri culturali.

Il 6 maggio c.m. il maestro Ikeda ci ha incoraggiato con queste parole: “Le cause che mettiamo nel presente determinano gli effetti che raccoglieremo nel futuro. Le azioni di ogni persona stanno contribuendo a creare il futuro dell’umanità”.

Attraverso un Daimoku ancora più profondo, facciamo emergere sempre di più la saggezza del Buddha inerente in ognuno di noi, affrontiamo la prossima fase con un forte spirito di responsabilità sociale e divulghiamo con ancora più forza la filosofia della sacralità della vita attraverso il nostro esempio positivo nella vita di tutti i giorni.

[English translation]

Dear fellow believers,

Sincere thanks for all your noble efforts in conveying hope, courage, and joy to each person, and in trying to guarantee the pace of our activities through phone calls and online platforms.

The Law Decree No. 33 of May 16, 2020 (hereafter DL) provides for further relaxation of the restrictions imposed to date. However, the National Council, considering the protection of everyone’s health as a priority and considering that we have a significant number of new daily cases of COVID-19 in Italy, after discussions with SGI [Soka Gakkai International] has decided the following:

– **ACTIVITIES:** even with the entry into force of the new DL, the monthly activities of IBISG [Istituto Buddista Italiano Soka Gakkai, Soka Gakkai Italian Buddhist Institute] (encouragement week, study week, 4-group meeting week, zadankai week, including home visits) will continue by phone and online platforms, until June 30, 2020. After this date, the situation will be evaluated.

– **CULTURAL CENTERS:** Cultural Centers will also remain closed until June 30, 2020, except for Great Vow ceremonies.

– **GREAT VOW CEREMONIES:** we are preparing procedures so that we can resume these ceremonies in the Cultural Centers. As soon as possible, this will be officially announced.

According to the Protocol with religious denominations signed on May 15, 2020 with the Italian government (and available on our website at the following link: <https://www.sgi-italia.org/firma-protocollo-palazzo-chigi/>), in a first phase



we will prepare the ceremonies only in Cultural Centers, in compliance with the planned distancing procedures. Subsequently, we will consider how to organize them in regions where there are no Cultural Centers.

On May 6, Master Ikeda encouraged us with these words, “The causes we put into the present determine the effects we will reap in the future. The actions of each person are helping to create the future of humanity.”

Through an even deeper Daimoku, let us bring out more and more of the wisdom of the Buddha inherent in each of us, face the next stage with a strong spirit of social responsibility, and spread the philosophy of the sacredness of life even more forcefully through our positive example in everyday life.

## **Appendix 5. Communiqué of the National Council of June 22, 2020**

[Italian text]

Cari responsabili di regione,

vi ringraziamo per il prezioso confronto avuto con tutti voi, dal quale sono emersi suggerimenti preziosissimi e posizioni molto eterogenee circa la possibilità di ricominciare ad affidare i Gohonzon.

Tutte le vostre considerazioni sono basate su un forte senso di responsabilità, sia verso la salute dei membri e dei loro familiari, sia verso il desiderio sincero dei principianti che vogliono ricevere il Gohonzon.

Dopo gli incontri con tutte le regioni, abbiamo avuto un nuovo confronto sia con la nostra casa madre in Giappone, sia con la SGI europea. Hanno lodato la serietà con cui, tutti noi insieme, stiamo affrontando questa emergenza, e hanno approvato, in via del tutto eccezionale, la possibilità di consegnare i Gohonzon nei Centri culturali, individualmente e possibilmente all’aperto, mantenendo al minimo gli staff coinvolti.

In considerazione di ciò il Consiglio Nazionale ha deliberato di consentire, a partire dal 18 luglio e fino al 31 luglio, l’organizzazione delle consegne individuali dei Gohonzon, nel rispetto di tutte le procedure di sicurezza e distanziamento fisico da adottare. Le cerimonie saranno tenute all’interno degli spazi dei Centri culturali, ove possibile all’aperto, da un ministro di culto, un assistente e con il supporto degli staff, nel numero minimo indispensabile.

Non si svolgerà né Gongyo né Daimoku, ma solo un breve incoraggiamento da parte del ministro di culto. La persona che riceve il Gohonzon sarà accompagnata da una sola persona a sua scelta, salvo eccezioni per disabili.

Alle regioni che non dispongono di un Centro culturale chiediamo di avere ancora pazienza perché stiamo aspettando nuove disposizioni governative che ci consentano di affittare sale per svolgere la consegna dei Gohonzon.

Sarà cura di ogni Regione, confrontandosi con gli altri livelli di responsabilità e conoscendo il numero dei richiedenti, stabilire la data o le date necessarie a soddisfare le richieste da parte di principianti e/o dei già membri che debbano ricevere il Gohonzon, avendo grande cura dei seguenti punti, prima della consegna:

- incontrare uno per uno “virtualmente”, assieme ai loro responsabili, tutti i principianti che abbiano espresso il desiderio di ricevere il Gohonzon, per approfondire il significato di entrare nel Sangha della Soka Gakkai e l’importanza del voto e della gioia che deriva da questa decisione, affinché possano sviluppare una consapevolezza ancora più profonda sull’importanza di questo momento unico nella loro vita;

- preparare la lista nominativa di questi principianti e del loro unico accompagnatore/accompagnatrice;

- organizzare con i principianti e gli accompagnatori degli incontri online al fine di fornire una preparazione accurata che includa la spiegazione pratica di come si svolgerà la consegna e le relative misure di sicurezza, oltre alla possibilità di rispondere alle loro domande, nonché spiegare come aprire da soli il Gohonzon a casa utilizzando il tutorial;

- organizzare una riunione con i ministri di culto, con gli staff (nel numero minimo indispensabile), e il preposto del Centro culturale che spiegherà a tutti come si svolgerà la cerimonia e le relative misure di sicurezza.

In aggiunta al Comunicato a tutti i membri in cui si conferma la sospensione temporanea delle attività religiose fino al 31 agosto 2020 precisiamo quanto segue:

**CENTRI CULTURALI:** anche i Centri culturali rimarranno chiusi fino al 31 agosto 2020, salvo che per le suddette consegne dei Gohonzon.

CONSEGNE DEI GOHONZON: sulla base del Protocollo con le confessioni religiose (di seguito P.C.R.) firmato il 15 maggio 2020 con il Governo Italiano, abbiamo predisposto un Protocollo Interno Nazionale (di seguito P.I.N.) che indica le linee guida per poter svolgere in sicurezza e in via del tutto eccezionale, le consegne nei nostri Centri culturali nella modalità individuale su indicata.

Ogni preposto, con il sostegno dei responsabili di regione e nazionali, predisporrà l'Appendice 3 al P.I.N., inserendo le informazioni specifiche per ogni Centro culturale. Sarà cura dell'Istituto organizzare venerdì 26 giugno alle ore 19:00 una riunione nazionale online con i soli preposti al fine di sostenerli nella predisposizione dell'Appendice 3 al P.I.N. e allo scopo di approfondire ogni aspetto necessario.

In base al P.C.R. le consegne dei Gohonzon potranno svolgersi soltanto nei nostri Centri Culturali, nel rispetto delle procedure di distanziamento previste.

Ripetiamo nuovamente che ci siamo già attivati per richiedere la possibilità al Governo Italiano di estendere il P.C.R., consentendoci l'affitto di sale per poter organizzare le consegne dei Gohonzon anche in quelle regioni prive di Centri culturali.

[English translation]

Dear Regional Leaders,

We thank you for the valuable discussion with all of you, from which precious suggestions and very different positions have emerged about the possibility of starting to deliver the Gohonzon to new members again.

All your considerations are based on a strong sense of responsibility towards both the health of members and their families and the sincere desire of beginners to receive the Gohonzon.

After the meetings with all the regions, we had a new discussion with both our leaders in Japan and the European SGI. They praised the seriousness with which, all together, we are dealing with this emergency, and they approved, as an exception, the possibility of delivering the Gohonzon in our Cultural Centers, individually and possibly outdoors, keeping the staff involved to a minimum.

In view of this, the National Council resolved to allow, from July 18 until July 31, the organization of individual Gohonzon deliveries, subject to security and

physical distancing procedures to be adopted. The ceremonies will be held within the spaces of the Cultural Centers, wherever possible outdoors, by a religious minister and an assistant and with the support of staff, in the minimum number necessary.

Neither Gongyo nor Daimoku will be held, but only a brief encouragement by the minister. The person receiving the Gohonzon will be accompanied by only one person of his or her choice, unless exceptions are made for people with disabilities.

For regions that do not have a Cultural Center, we ask for patience, since we are waiting for new government regulations that will allow us to rent rooms to conduct the Gohonzon delivery ceremonies.

It will be the responsibility of each Region, after discussions with the other levels of responsibility and knowing the number of applicants, to determine the date(s) necessary to accommodate requests from beginners and/or existing members who need to receive the Gohonzon, taking great care of the following points beforehand:

- meeting one by one “virtually,” together with their leaders, with all beginners who have expressed a desire to receive the Gohonzon, in order to deepen their understanding of the significance of joining the Sangha of the Soka Gakkai and the importance of the vow and the joy that comes with this decision, so that they may develop an even deeper awareness of the importance of this unique moment in their lives;
- prepare the name list of these beginners and their one-time chaperones/escorts;
- organize online meetings with the beginners and chaperones to provide thorough preparation that includes a practical explanation of how the delivery will take place and related safety measures, as well as an opportunity to answer their questions, and explain how they may open the Gohonzon themselves at home using the tutorial;
- hold a meeting with the ministers, staff (in the minimum number necessary), and the Cultural Center’s provost who will explain to everyone how the ceremony will be conducted and the related security measures.

In addition to the Communiqué sent to all members confirming the temporary suspension of religious activities until August 31, 2020, we specify the following:

**CULTURAL CENTERS:** The Cultural Centers will also remain closed until August 31, 2020, except for the Gohonzon deliveries.

**GOHONZON DELIVERIES:** Based on the Protocol with Religious Denominations (hereinafter P.C.R.) signed on May 15, 2020, with the Italian Government, we have prepared a National Internal Protocol (hereinafter P.I.N.) that indicates the guidelines to be able to safely and exceptionally carry out the deliveries in our Cultural Centers in the individual mode indicated above.

Each person in charge, with the support of the regional and national leaders, will prepare the Appendix 3 to the P.I.N., including the specific information for each Cultural Center. It will be the responsibility of the Institute to organize a national online meeting on Friday, June 26, at 7 p.m. with only the principals in order to support them in preparing the Appendix 3 to the P.I.N. and for the purpose of delving into all necessary aspects.

According to the P.C.R., the Gohonzon deliveries can only take place in our Cultural Centers, subject to the stipulated distancing procedures.

We repeat again that we have already taken steps to ask the Italian Government for the possibility to extend the P.C.R., allowing us to rent premises where we may be able to organize Gohonzon deliveries even in those regions without Cultural Centers.

## **Appendix 6. Communiqué of the National Council of November 6, 2020**

[Italian text]

A fronte dell'aggravamento della situazione epidemiologica in tutto il Paese, il Governo ha emanato il DPCM del 3 Novembre che ha validità fino al 3 Dicembre.

Il Consiglio Nazionale, in accordo con le parole di Nichiren Daishonin: “Come ti ho già detto, devi essere cento, mille, diecimila, milioni di volte più prudente di prima” (RNSD, 2, 741), ha deciso di recepire, oltre alle indicazioni del decreto, lo spirito in esso contenuto, volto alla massima prudenza ed alla minima esposizione al rischio di contagio.

Si ritengono pertanto rinviate tutte le attività di culto (DPCM: Art.1. par.9 p, q; Allegato 5) e quindi le cerimonie del Grande Voto previste per i giorni 14 e 15 Novembre, ad una data successiva, in cui la situazione generale dei contagi ci possa permettere di poterle effettuare su tutto il territorio nazionale.

Rimandiamo quindi tale valutazione al 3 Dicembre, data di scadenza della validità del DPCM. Restano aperti, negli orari previsti, soltanto i negozi della Creacommercio presenti nelle regioni gialle e che quindi non rientrano in quelle a rischio alto o intermedio (Roma e Firenze).

Questa attività di commercio al dettaglio (DPCM: Art.1, par.9 ff; Allegato 11) si svolge con presenze individuali estremamente scaglionate.

[English translation]

In the face of the worsening epidemiological situation across the country, the government issued the Decree of the President of the Council of Ministers of November 3, which is valid until December 3.

The National Council, in accordance with Nichiren Daishonin’s words, “As I have already told you, you must be a hundred, a thousand, ten thousand, a million times more prudent than before” (RNSD, 2, 741), has decided to incorporate not only the directions of the decree but also the spirit contained therein, aimed at maximum prudence and minimum exposure to the risk of contagion.

We are therefore postponing all worship activities (DPCM: Art.1. par.9 p, q; Annex 5) and therefore the Great Vow ceremonies planned for November 14 and 15, to a later date when the general situation of contagions may allow us to be able to carry them out throughout the country.

We therefore postpone this evaluation to December 3, the date when the validity of the DPCM expires. Only the Creacommercio stores that are present in the yellow regions and therefore do not fall into the high or intermediate risk regions (Rome and Florence) will remain open during the scheduled hours.

This retail activity (DPCM: Art.1, par.9 ff; Annex 11) will take place with extremely spaced-out individual attendances.

## References

- CESNUR. 2023 [last updated]. “La Soka Gakkai.” *Le Religioni in Italia* [online encyclopedia], edited by Massimo Introvigne and PierLuigi Zoccatelli. Accessed June 6, 2023. <https://bit.ly/3NX7djl>.
- Consorti, Pierluigi, ed. 2020. *Law, Religion and COVID-19 Emergency*, Pisa: DiReSoM.
- Dickens, Charles. 1859. *A Tale of Two Cities*. London: Chapman & Hall.
- Fisker-Nielsen, Anne Mette. 2020. “The Response of Soka Gakkai to the COVID-19 Pandemic: Personhood, Interiority, and a Civil Society in Crisis Mode.” *The Journal of CESNUR* 4(4):25–48. DOI: 10.26338/tjoc.2020.4.4.2.
- Introvigne, Massimo. 2019. “Soka Gakkai in Italy: Success and Controversies.” *The Journal of CESNUR* 3(6):3–17. DOI: 10.26338/tjoc.2019.3.6.1.
- Introvigne, Massimo. 2021. “Soka Gakkai in Italy: Periphery or Center?” *The Journal of CESNUR* 5(5):3–13. DOI: 10.26338/tjoc.2021.5.5.1.
- Maciotti, Maria Immacolata. 2020. “Seconda fase coronavirus: le religioni e le loro reazioni.” *La critica sociologica* 215:99–104.
- NR Newsletter*. 2020. “NR Newsletter: per essere vicini a ogni persona.” Special edition 1, March 11:1.
- Pellecchia, Enza, 2022. “Senzatomica: Transforming the Human Spirit for a World Free of Nuclear Weapons.” *The Journal of CESNUR* 6(5):50–58. DOI: 10.26338/tjoc.2022.6.5.4.
- Šorytė, Rosita. 2019. “Soka Gakkai’s Campaigns for Nuclear Disarmament.” *The Journal of CESNUR* 3(6): 18–31. DOI: 10.26338/tjoc.2019.3.6.2.