

Plenary in Chicago brings together Catholic-Muslim regional dialogues

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Bringing members of three Muslim-Catholic regional dialogue groups together for their first national plenary session in Chicago was a groundbreaking event, but its members agreed that the dialogue must move forward.

The "Living Our Faiths Together" plenary, held Oct. 3-5 at Catholic Theological Union, included a retrospective look at Muslim-Catholic dialogue, keynote talks by both Catholic and Muslim speakers, and opportunities for members to share what they have done so far and what direction they think the dialogue should take in the future.

The meeting took place in the aftermath of the killing of J. Christopher Stevens, the U.S. ambassador to Libya, and the uprisings throughout the Arab world that participants say are a response to a YouTube video that was highly offensive to Muslims.

But members of the dialogue groups said that it's important for all to remember that Muslims and Christians have lived in peace with one another far more than they have lived in conflict, and that neither group should make the mistake of blaming the other for the actions of a few.

Muslim keynote speaker Jamal Badawi said the short answer to whether Muslims and Catholics can live their faiths together is, "Yes, we can. We did it in the past and we are doing it right now in this blessed gathering."

Badawi is an Egyptian-born Canadian who has the distinction of having served on both management and religion faculties at St. Mary's University in Halifax, Nova Scotia, and has written extensively about Islam.

Jesuit Fr. Tom Michel, who was secretary of the Jesuit Secretariat for Interreligious Dialogue in Rome for 12 years, said the first request he received to speak at the gathering gave the title as "Living Our Faith Together," and he preferred the idea of discussing Muslims and Christians as sharing different branches of one faith in a single creator God to whom people will be called to account for their deeds.

Both men spoke of their faith traditions' common heritage, displayed in the submission and faith of Abraham, and both shared how the hospitality Abraham showed to strangers provides a model for how Christians and Muslims should treat those of different faiths.

But Badawi keyed in on passages of the Quran that clearly teach that Muslims are to treat Christians with "more than justice." Indeed, he said, the Arabic word used by the Quran is the same that describes how Muslims are to treat their parents.

Those who advocate abuse of non-Muslims are engaging in a "cut-and-paste" reading of the Quran, Badawi said, even if they sincerely believe what they are doing.

Michel spoke of "Nostra Aetate," the Second Vatican Council's Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions.

"The church regards with esteem also the Muslims," the document says. "They adore the one God, living and subsisting in himself; merciful and all-powerful, the creator of heaven and earth, who has spoken to men; they take pains to submit wholeheartedly to even his inscrutable decrees, just as Abraham, with whom the faith of Islam takes pleasure in linking itself, submitted to God."

He also told a story about the nature of hospitality. When he was in Cairo doing his studies in Arabic, he said, he was walking the streets and enjoying the unusual quiet as the sun was about to set during Ramadan, a holy month for Muslims. During Ramadan they fast from dawn to sunset, and break their fast in the evening with prayer and a festive meal called "iftar."

As his feet and his mind wandered, he was accosted by a man who ran out of his house, grabbed the priest by the arm and tried to bring him inside, saying, "Hurry! It is almost time for iftar."

Michel explained that he was Christian, not a Muslim in need of a place to break his fast, and the man only urged him to come in all the more, saying: "It is a great blessing from Allah to have a guest at our iftar table."

So Michel went in and shared the meal with the family and learned, he said, how true hospitality elevates the dignity of both host and guest.

The first of the three dialogue groups at the meeting, the Midwest dialogue, was convened in 1996 and is now co-chaired by Auxiliary Bishop Francis R. Reiss of Detroit and Sayyid Syeed of the Islamic Society of North America. The second, the mid-Atlantic dialogue, was first convened in 1998 and is now co-chaired by Auxiliary Bishop Barry C. Knestout of Washington and Talat Sultan of the Islamic Circle of North America. The West Coast dialogue was convened in 1999 and is co-chaired by Muzzamil Siddiqi and Imam Mustafa al-Qazwini and Bishop Carlos A. Sevilla of Yakima, Wash.

Retired Seattle Archbishop Alex J. Brunett, former chairman of the U.S. bishops' Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, recalled the work of getting the dialogues started. His office looked for Islamic groups that could serve as dialogue partners, and then organized annual retreat-type meetings with them and representatives of Catholic dioceses in the region.

Each group decided what areas it would like to discuss, leading to conversations so far about the nature of revelation in the Midwest dialogue; Catholic and Sunni Muslim perspectives on marriage in the mid-Atlantic dialogue; and the relationship of Catholics and Muslims as friends rather than adversaries in the West Coast dialogue.

Oblate Fr. John Crossin, executive director of the U.S. bishops' Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, said that the first success of the plenary is "that they all came," because it wasn't easy bringing together people from all over the country from many different communities.

The next success, he said, would be to promote awareness of interfaith dialogue among both Muslims and Catholics.

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