

Bishop Madden discusses goals for interfaith dialouge



Bishop Denis J. Madden celebrates an Oct. 28 Mass at the tomb of St. Francis of Assisi in Italy. (Courtesy Bishop Madden)

Bishop Denis J. Madden, incoming chairman of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, believes great progress has been made in reaching out to other faith leaders and promoting a greater sense of understanding between religions. His goal as the U.S. Church's new point man on ecumenical and interreligious affairs will be building on that momentum and broadening the scope of interfaith cooperation.

"I would like to see us move out in other ways and not just limit ourselves to a meeting where we present our papers – the Catholic view of this, the Methodist view of that and so forth," Bishop Madden recently told me after he returned from an interfaith gathering led by Pope Benedict XVI in Assisi.

"We've made great strides both in our understanding of the sacraments and the recognition of sacraments across denominational lines – and I want to continue that for sure," he said, "but I don't want us to get stuck there."

Bishop Madden pointed out that the Catholic-Muslim dialogue in the United States is one of the only dialogues that features an overnight stay among the participants. Those attending have meals and discussions, in addition to sitting around the conference table, he said.

"That makes a big difference because we get to know each other as friends," Bishop Madden said. "We can laugh and joke with each other in that way."

Bishop Madden would like to see more of that kind of camaraderie. He'd also like to explore new ways for various faiths to work together on common causes.

"I think that when communities begin to work together on issues, they can focus on peace, poverty, care for the elderly, care for children, housing – all those kinds of things," he said. "While we are in dialogue together, if we can work on these kinds of things, it helps the dialogue."

Before he was named auxiliary bishop of Baltimore, Bishop Madden was the Director of the Pontifical Mission for Palestine office in Jerusalem from 1994-96 and director of the Catholic Near East Welfare Association from 1996-2005.

"The Holy Father referred to it as the dialogue of charity," Bishop Madden said. "If people are in need, then you respond not according to creed, but according to need. In the Middle East, the majority of the people who were served were Muslim."

Bishop Madden praised the work of Atlanta Archbishop Wilton Gregory, outgoing chairman of the ecumenical and interreligious affairs committee. Bishop Madden also expressed support for Muslims who feel they have been unfairly portrayed in the media.

"They are trying desperately to say that (terrorists) are extremists," Bishop Madden said. "They are people who are misusing the Quran. We stand shoulder to shoulder with them."

Bishop Madden said Pope Benedict has been every bit the champion of ecumenical and interfaith dialogue as Blessed John Paul II. Three hundred faith leaders from around the world attended Oct. 27 interfaith sessions with the pope – what Bishop Madden called "an amazing turnout of people."

"He really was the unifying factor," Bishop Madden said. "I don't think that anyone else could have called together this gathering. I thought he was the only one that really could do that."