

Building bridges: Muslims, Jews, Christians join forces for peace

VATICAN CITY – The enthusiastic exchange of calling cards and making sure caterers provided kosher and halal food are small yet critical signs of a successful interfaith conference.

Jewish, Muslim, and Christian leaders came together in Rome to share success stories and break bread together at a daylong meeting as bishops from the Middle East gathered across the river at the Vatican for a special synod on the pastoral challenges in the region.

While synod bishops focused on the role the Catholic Church can play in giving witness to the faith in the Middle East, other leaders from all three monotheistic religions were reaching outward toward one another in an urgent call for increased interfaith cooperation to bring peace and hope to the world.

The interfaith meeting, “Building Bridges of Hope: Success Stories and Strategies for Interfaith Action,” was organized by the U.S. Embassy to the Vatican and held at Rome’s Pontifical Gregorian University Oct. 12.

“We believe that interfaith strategies can help solve many of the world’s biggest problems,” Miguel H. Diaz, U.S. ambassador to the Vatican, told participants.

The keynote speaker, Joshua Dubois, head of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships, said the current administration believes interfaith action is “the future of grassroots engagement.”

Every day, brick by brick, men and women of faith “continuously lay the moral and intellectual foundation of our public life and dialogue, and you are the ‘first responders’ when, for various reasons, that foundation is shaken,” he told the religious leaders.

Speakers from Catholic, Muslim and Jewish traditions focused on concrete ways people of faith have already and must continue to work together in promoting

equitable and ethical development, protecting the environment, and preventing conflict.

Trusted religious leaders not only have tremendous influence in their communities, they have the power to persuade people to choose the more difficult and sometimes unpopular path in combating major crises, one speaker said.

For example, when facing the problem of environmental degradation and resource depletion, a politician who tells people “to tighten their belts” and show restraint in consumption will never get elected again, said Fazlun Khalid, founder and director of the Islamic Foundation for Ecology and Environmental Science. Yet religious leaders can persuade people to change, he said.

Businesses that are infused with a philosophy of social responsibility founded upon religious principles also can make an enormous impact, said another speaker.

Adnan Durrani is the CEO of American Halal Co., a food company based in Stamford, Conn., that is based on Islamic values of justice, equity and responsibility toward society, employees and clients, he said.

Values-based businesses can be like “Weapons of Mass Enlightenment, the real smart bomb,” he said.

Businesses are “the most powerful force on earth” because they have the financial resources for carrying out their ideas and they can act on them quickly, said Durrani.

Durrani, who is an investment professional, said he worked for many years on Wall Street where he saw “materialism on steroids.”

Yet he learned a lot about the importance of social responsibility from his Jewish partners, he said, and he strove to build the first socially responsible company in America based on Islamic values.

Hillel Levine, founding president of the International Center for Conciliation in Boston, works with Arabs and Jews in Israel and said he emphasized the need for both sides to talk about their “pained memory.”

Bygones should not be bygones, he said, and the past should be dealt with in order to “siphon off the hatred” and transform shared suffering into a shared bond that leads to understanding and empathy, he said.

Melkite Archbishop Elias Chacour of Haifa, Israel, shared his memory of pain with conference participants.

As Palestinians, he and his family were forced from their homes after the creation of Israel and wandered along the Jordan River for months because even bordering Arab countries didn’t want to take in refugees, he said.

“But thank God I was not born a Christian, I was born a baby. And I don’t know about you, if you were born a Jew or a Muslim, but I look at your hand, I see it is like mine, and I see you were born a baby, too,” he said, looking at Levine.

When tourists express their disappointment with the Israeli security wall, Archbishop Chacour said he tells them, “Do not try to destroy the wall, it’s too strong for you.”

He tells them, “I try to hide the wall with bridges” by creating connections of friendship and understanding between one Jew and one Arab at a time.

The archbishop turned to Levine who was seated next to him at the panel and said, “Convince your Jewish brothers that we are not your enemy. We will never be your enemy.”

Christians, Arabs and other non-Jews are tired of being second-class citizens and “are looking for integration” in Israel, he said.

The two men clasped hands warmly and later stood together holding one another’s hands as conference participants applauded. They only broke their grasp to fish out and exchange calling cards, building one more bridge over walls and troubled waters.