

Muslims, Catholics must teach other's faith accurately

ROME – Muslims and Catholics in the United States need to develop educational programs that will give all of their faithful an accurate picture of the beliefs of the other, said two clerics experienced in Muslim-Catholic dialogue.

Father Francis V. Tiso, associate director of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, and Imam Mohamad Bashar Arafat, president of the Islamic Affairs Council of Maryland, participated in a March 8 videoconference organized by the U.S. Embassy to the Holy See.

Officials from the U.S. and Canadian embassies, the Vatican Secretariat of State and religious orders attended the conference in Rome.

Imam Arafat told participants that while Catholic and Muslim leaders in the United States had been involved in dialogue for decades, it was not until the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks that most Muslims and Catholics began to see the importance of understanding each other.

"There were obstacles to overcome, including from within the Muslim community," he said. "That changed after 9/11 when people realized we needed to reach out."

Until recently, the imam said, members of both communities focused almost exclusively on their differences, rather than on their belief in the one God, the importance of prayer, shared moral values and the obligation to live upright lives.

"The important thing to me is how I should live with my Jewish neighbors and my Christian neighbors, and how we can make a better society," he said.

Imam Arafat said one of the priorities now is to broaden the dialogue, ensuring that all Christians and Muslims – not just those preparing for ministry – learn about the beliefs of the other.

Father Tiso said one result of the dialogue initiated by the U.S. bishops' conference 20 years ago "is that now at least 200 Muslim and Catholic leaders know one

another well and have a direct and detailed knowledge of how each community of faith interprets its own traditions.”

Catholic and Muslims leaders “share a great hope: that Muslims will teach about Catholic Christianity based upon accurate knowledge of the Catholic faith and that Catholic Christians will teach about Islam on the basis of accurate knowledge about Islam.”

Members of both communities also have seen that there is no alternative to dialogue, he said.

“We have already seen where nondialogue leads: to bitterness, hatred, warfare, reprisals and the habit of mutual misrepresentation,” Father Tiso said.

In addition, he said, both communities recognize that because of past violence committed in the name of faith, “religion is seen today by many people as a source of societal discord and injustice that must be repudiated or placed under severe state supervision.”

Understanding each other’s teachings and building on the values they share, while also learning how to “agree to disagree” on certain ideas, Father Tiso said, Christians and Muslims can show society that faith is a blessing and not a threat to peaceful coexistence.