

Pope meets interreligious leaders, says dialogue discovers truth

WASHINGTON – Pope Benedict XVI encouraged interreligious leaders to work not only for peace but for the discovery of truth.

The pope told about 200 representatives of Islam, Jainism, Buddhism, Hinduism and Judaism gathered at the Pope John Paul II Cultural Center in Washington April 17 “to persevere in their collaboration” to serve society and enrich public life.

“I have noticed a growing interest among governments to sponsor programs intended to promote interreligious dialogue and intercultural dialogue. These are praiseworthy initiatives,” Pope Benedict said. “At the same time, religious freedom, interreligious dialogue and faith-based education aim at something more than a consensus regarding ways to implement practical strategies for advancing peace.

“The broader purpose of dialogue is to discover the truth,” he said.

In a ceremony in the two-story main lobby of the cultural center, Milwaukee Auxiliary Bishop Richard J. Sklba, chairman of the U.S. bishops’ Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, introduced the pope to the interreligious leaders, who wore traditional garments to identify their faiths. To the pope’s right were the five symbols of peace presented to him at the end of the ceremony.

The motorcade from The Catholic University of America to the Pope John Paul II Cultural Center did not last long; the two institutions are across the street from each other, although the pope’s meeting with educators at Catholic University was on the far side of its campus.

Upon the pope’s arrival at the cultural center, Cardinal Adam J. Maida of Detroit, a driving force behind its construction, got down on one knee and kissed the pope’s ring.

The pope said that in their attempt to discover commonalities, religious leaders perhaps “have shied away from the responsibility to discuss our differences with

calmness and clarity.”

But by continuing to search for answers to questions such as what constitutes good and evil and what is humanity’s destiny, dialogue “will not stop at identifying a common set of values, but go on to probe their ultimate foundation,” he said. “We have no reason to fear, for the truth unveils for us the essential relationship between the world and God.”

Pope Benedict said that “only by addressing these deeper questions can we build a solid basis” for peace and security.

When people find the truth ““they naturally seek out the path of peace,”” he said, quoting his message for the 2006 World Day of Peace.

Today, Pope Benedict said, religious leaders have a duty to place these truth-seeking questions “at the forefront of human consciousness” and “to make space in a frenetic world for reflection and prayer.”

The pope also invited religious people to see dialogue as a means to serve society at large.

“By bearing witness to those moral truths which they hold in common with all men and women of good will, religious groups will exert a positive influence on the wider culture and inspire neighbors, co-workers and fellow citizens to join in the task of strengthening the ties of solidarity,” the pope said.

He noted the positive impact religious communities make on society. For example, he said, faith-based schools help “young people learn to respect the beliefs and practices of others,” which enhances civic life.

Meanwhile, the pope emphasized the protection of religious freedom.

“Protecting religious freedom within the rule of law does not guarantee that peoples – particularly minorities – will be spared from unjust forms of discrimination and prejudice,” the pope said. “This requires constant effort on the part of all members of society to ensure that citizens are afforded the opportunity to worship peaceably and to pass on their religious heritage to their children.”

Passing on religious traditions to the next generation preserves a heritage and “nourishes the surrounding culture” today, he said.

“The same holds true for dialogue and between religions; both the participants and society are enriched,” he said. “The world begs for common witness” to shared ethical values.

Pope Benedict discussed religious freedom in America, noting its tradition of valuing “the ability to worship freely.”

“In urban areas, it is common for individuals from different cultural backgrounds and religions to engage with one another daily in commercial, social and educational settings,” the pope said.

“Today, in classrooms throughout the country, young Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists and indeed children of all religions sit side by side, learning with one another and from one another,” the pope said. “This diversity gives rise to new challenges that spark a deeper reflection on the core principles of a democratic society. May others take heart from your experience, realizing that a united society can indeed arise from a plurality of people.”

After his speech, five young adults presented Pope Benedict with symbols representing peace, while a harpist played 16th- and 17th-century Italian and German music. The original manuscripts to some of the music are in the Vatican Secret Archives.

David Michaels, director of intercommunal affairs at B’nai B’rith International, the oldest Jewish humanitarian organization, presented the pope with a silver menorah, symbolizing the validity of God’s covenant of peace.

Saman Hussain, a Pakistan-born Muslim and student leader, gave the pope a silver-bound edition of the Quran, the holy book of Islam that Muslims teach proclaims God’s message of peace.

The young representative of Jainism, Aditya Vora, gave Pope Benedict a metallic cube. The cube represents the Jain principles of respect for diversity of viewpoints as the way to peace through self-discipline and dialogue.

Hindu representative Ravi Gupta, an assistant professor of religion at Centre College, Danville, Ky., gave the pope a gilded brass incense burner with the sacred syllable om.

Masako Fukata, a Buddhist youth leader, gave Pope Benedict a Korean monastic bell. In several Buddhist cultures, the bell's sound invites meditation, which they believe leads to inner peace.

Bishop Sklba then introduced 10 Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu and Jain leaders to the pope.

"They are truly our partners and cherished friends in the work of building a civilization based on true human values," Bishop Sklba said. Each interfaith representative received a small gift from the pope.

After the ceremony, the Jewish representatives met separately with Pope Benedict in the Polish Heritage Room for a special Passover greeting and address.

While the pope was meeting with the Jewish representatives, those who met with the pope took the microphone and started telling the remaining crowd what they had said when they met with the pope.

Hassan al-Qazwini, religious director of the Islamic Center of America, said he asked the pope "to lead the efforts to establish permanent dialogue between Muslims and Catholics."

"They are in desperate need to have dialogue," he said.

Contributing to this story was Mark Pattison.