

Pope to gather with 200 religious leaders at interfaith prayer service

WASHINGTON – When Pope Benedict XVI comes to the Pope John Paul II Cultural Center in Washington for an early-evening interfaith prayer service April 17 with Buddhists, Hindus, Jews, Muslims, Sikhs and representatives of other religions, space will be at a premium.

There will be room for only about 200 people, according to Father James Massa, executive director of the U.S. bishops' Secretariat of Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs. Of those, about 50 will be reserved for Catholics, he added, with the rest allotted to representatives of the non-Christian religions participating in what is expected to be a 45-minute service.

Among those expected to be invited are representatives of major religious organizations that either work with the Catholic Church in areas of common interest or are in dialogue with Catholic representatives.

The pope also will gather with leaders from other Christian denominations at an ecumenical prayer service at a Catholic church in New York April 18.

Father Massa, in an interview with Catholic News Service, said that while ecumenical dialogue is aimed at bringing about unity among Christians – a difficult task even after 40 years of efforts – the goal of interfaith dialogue brings with it its own difficult task: peacemaking.

In the United States, Christian, Jewish and Muslim leaders have banded together to form the National Interreligious Leadership Initiative for Peace in the Middle East, and have issued periodic pleas to President George W. Bush, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and other leaders to use U.S. influence on the different nations with stakes in the Holy Land and the areas it borders to bring about peace.

Father Massa said his hope for the Washington interfaith prayer service is that “it will lead to other efforts among the participants in which the thought of peacemaking becomes the central topic of discussions.”

Peacemaking also was on the mind of Rabbi Nancy Fuchs-Kreimer, professor of religious studies at Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in Pennsylvania.

"I would beg the pope to take the arm of the next president of the United States and together, along with the chief rabbi and a chief imam that they could find, to get their bodies over to Jerusalem as fast as they possibly can and get some kind of peace that includes a two-state solution. Because without a two-state solution, our people don't have much of a rosy future," Rabbi Fuchs-Kreimer told CNS in a telephone interview.

"There will not be peace unless there is a two-state solution. It's unrealistic to think the Palestinians are going to give up," she said. "If that's not going to happen, what else is going to happen?"

Sayyid Muhammad Syeed, national director of the Washington-based Islamic Society of North America, said, "The practitioners of religion ... have the tremendous potential of looking at their traditions, looking at their faith and using their faith in promoting peace and harmony among themselves."

Mr. Syeed, looking at his adopted homeland, noted the favorable conditions accorded to Muslims living in the United States.

"It's an ideal situation here because this is a very new, emerging community" of Muslims, Mr. Syeed told CNS in a telephone interview.

U.S. Catholics serve as role models for Muslims, he added, because "Catholics in America have carved out a very positive role for themselves here" after generations of mistrust by non-Catholics.

Mr. Syeed said there are "core values that are dear to both Catholics and Muslims and they are under attack, and we need to reinforce those values." He said later he was referring to the regard both faiths have for the "family as a sacred institution" and "our aversion to exploiting sex and gender and our aversion toward obscenity."

Still, "you have stories every day here or there" about anti-Muslim discrimination in the United States, Mr. Syeed said. "Somebody with a job has been discriminated (against), our own children in schools and people in different workplaces. But that's

not a dominant paradigm here. Because over decades, people of other faiths, people of other communities have struggled ... , defining sensitivities.

“But it’s our struggle now and we are cooperating now with other faiths. That is our hope and we see with our own eyes that things can change,” he said.

Rabbi Fuchs-Kreimer said she understands the difficulties U.S. Muslims encounter.

“For me, as somebody who’s been part of a group of the Jews who were a minority who had their issues about becoming a part of the West, (being) accepted as part of American and Canadian societies, I feel a great deal of compassion and concern for Muslims in that situation,” she said.

Muslims in North America, the rabbi added, “are in many cases refugees from Islamist regimes” and not themselves fundamentalists, jihadists or terrorists. “Don’t lump them all together and think that the guy next door is in some way related to the terrorist who blew up the World Trade Center,” she added.

In making her case for dialogue and education, Rabbi Fuchs-Kreimer said, “The country is woefully ignorant about Islam. I don’t know about the Catholics, but I know the Jews don’t understand.”

What Mr. Syeed said he would like to hear from Pope Benedict is “reinforcing commitment to pluralism and respect for diversity.”

Paraphrasing the pope, Father Massa said, “religion cannot be used to justify violence against another. Religiously motivated violence is violence against religion.”

“That,” added Father Massa, “is a very important thing that needs to be brought up again and again.”

The peacemaking agenda, according to Father Massa, includes:

- Respect for human rights, human freedom and human dignity.
- Forethought in how clergy of one faith preach and teach about the other.
- Helping foster an appropriate spiritual tolerance in efforts to educate the young.

Religious education resources are a critical matter, Father Massa said. Certain Islamic textbooks used recently in Saudi Arabia had painted other faiths in an unflattering light.

“We have our own past,” Father Massa added. “We have used catechetical materials that have sometimes spoken disparagingly” about other faiths.