

Scripted interreligious encounter sparks spontaneous remarks

WASHINGTON - After Pope Benedict XVI addressed about 200 interreligious leaders at the Pope John Paul II Cultural Center in Washington April 17, the scripted encounter with the pope turned into something resembling a town-hall meeting.

As scheduled after his official address in the cultural center's atrium, Pope Benedict personally greeted 10 representatives of the five main religions present. But when he went into a separate room to give Passover greetings to Jewish representatives, three Muslims and a couple of other interreligious leaders told the remaining audience what they said to the pope during their brief encounter with him.

Though the informal remarks were calm, the spontaneous scene startled those who had settled down after the pope left for the closed-door session with the Jews.

Sayyid Syeed, national director of interfaith and community alliances for the Washington-based Islamic Society of North America, was the first to stand up and share.

"People would have gone home with a curiosity (and not knowing) what we said" to the pope, Syeed told Catholic News Service April 18.

Syeed said he told the pope "interfaith dialogue has become a way of life" in America and that the 10-year dialogue between American Catholics and Muslims was successful and productive.

"I told him that we should jointly pray (and) that none of us should commit any action that could in any sense hurt this process of bridge-building," he said.

Mazammil Siddiqi, chairman of the California-based Fiqh Council of North America, said during his improvisational remarks that he told the pope "American Muslims would like to also have a special audience with you (the pope)."

Siddiqi urged the pope to use his influence to find a president for Lebanon.

Lebanon's presidential post, which is constitutionally reserved for a Maronite Catholic, has been empty since November. The pope responded that he'd do his best, Siddiqi told the crowd.

Syed invited other representatives to speak, and a few others, including Dr. Uma Mayasekhara, the Hindu leader who greeted the pope, did.

After the event, Syed told CNS he was happy that about 60 Muslim representatives from around the country attended the event.

Several other interreligious leaders talked to CNS about their impressions of the event.

David Michaels, the New York-based director for intercommunal affairs for B'nai B'rith International's Center for Human Rights and Public Policy, told CNS he spoke to the pope after the separate meeting with the Jews.

Michaels said he whispered to the pope that Jews and Catholics must "avoid relativism in dialogue and avoid the danger of triumphalism."

Mr. Michaels, who was one of the five young people who presented Pope Benedict with a symbol of peace in the atrium, said he was referring to the pope's revision of the Good Friday prayer, which is used only in the liturgy celebrated according to the 1962 Roman Missal, or Tridentine rite. Mr. Michaels said the prayer's language could encourage Catholics to proselytize to Jewish people.

There is a "tremendous risk for misunderstanding (for the Catholic faithful) in the absence of clear guidance from the Holy See," he said.

Rabbi Leonard Schoolman, director of the Center of Religious Inquiry at St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church in New York, said the pope "certainly made a great effort to reach out to the Jewish community" in the larger and smaller meetings.

"No one here who is Jewish takes this as a pro forma thing," he said.

Rabbi Craig Miller appreciated the pope putting his message of interreligious dialogue in an American context. He said he called his 14-year-old daughter so she

could hear the pope's speech over the phone.

Arvind Vora, chairman of interreligious affairs for the New York-based Federation of Jain Associations in North America, said he was impressed that the pope took the time to greet the five young people as he entered the atrium.

Describing it as a "very subtle way to give a message that we all must work together," he said the greeting "makes a big difference" for many observers that "his actions follow his words."