

Unity week highlights what religions have in common

SAN FRANCISCO – The commonality that religious faiths share goes back thousands of years, and Jesus' intent was for the different faiths to work together, said a San Francisco priest.

The annual Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, observed Jan. 18-25, offers an opportunity for religions to celebrate what they have in common and to promote dialogue among them.

The weeklong observance was started in 1908 by Father Paul Wattson, founder of the Atonement Friars, said Father Gerard O'Rourke, who recently retired as director of the Office of Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations for the Archdiocese of San Francisco.

"Dialogue between and among the different faiths has been the focus of the friars and the week of prayer gives fuel to the effort each year," he told Catholic San Francisco, the newspaper of the archdiocese.

Ecumenism means getting along even with differences of opinion, Father O'Rourke said. "The unity Jesus talked about didn't mean conformity and lock stepping and marching down through life. The spirit of ecumenism includes that we are able and committed to work together. That was Jesus' intent when he says, 'That all may be one,' in John's Gospel."

Father O'Rourke also pointed out that in their faith systems Christians, Jews and Muslims trace their origins to the biblical Abraham, "the father of faith."

Ordained in Ireland in 1950, Father O'Rourke said his coming from a country divided by faith has given him a special understanding and approachability to ecumenism and interfaith work.

"If I did not consider that an asset, I would think myself blind," Father O'Rourke said. "I was inspired even back to childhood. My town was largely Catholic but I was

impressed with how my parents respected a neighbor family who were not Catholic and how that family returned that respect.”

The religion Jesus gave to us is not a religion without risks,” he said with a laugh, “and trying to work with one another across all kinds of fences presents risks. But if we are not willing to do it we are not following the will of Jesus.”

“The biggest expectation and hope of the week of prayer is that we will deepen our relationship with each another as Christians and see this was really close to the heart of Jesus,” Father O’Rourke said. “He wanted us to reach out to other Christians.”

The week can be a time to “not defend our faith but to live our faith and give ourselves and others permission to be the way we are,” he said.

“There is an extremist element in us humans and it shows up in individuals and sometimes in institutions and a fertile area for it seems to be religion,” Father O’Rourke said about what is being witnessed today in the Muslim world. “This is what the Muslims are having to contend with in their own religion – an extremist group literally gone wild.”

Father O’Rourke said the world has to be careful to “not condemn a religion because of the evil of some person within that religion.”

Pope Benedict XV, who served at the beginning of the 20th century, was a “pope of peace who saw the need for all Christians to work together,” Father O’Rourke said, noting that Pope Benedict XVI has chosen an appropriate model in that regard.

“This work will continue to be a challenge for us,” Father O’Rourke said. “We need to open our ears to the voice of Jesus and look at how he lived on earth with people of other faiths and how inspiring that can be.”