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Diversity

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Beyond friendship

In its 1991 "Dialogue and Proclamation," the pontifical council stated, "All Christians are called to be personally involved in these two ways of carrying out the one mission of the Church, namely proclamation and dialogue."

It encouraged Christians to go beyond mutual understanding and friendly relations: "(Interreligious dialogue) reaches a much deeper level, that of the spirit, where exchange and sharing consist in a mutual witness to one's beliefs and a common exploration..."

One Catholic layman in Rochester has perhaps gone further than many others to understand Islam. Curiosity first led George Dardess of Blessed Sacrament Church to Rochester's Islamic Center, where he studied Islam's sacred book, called the Koran or Qur'an.

Then curiosity turned to passion. Learning to chant the Qur'an helped him to give more prayerful attention to Judeo-Christian Scriptures at Mass and in private Bible study. Eventually, he found himself "more joyfully and wonderingly a Christian than before."

Dardess wrote about his experiences for a contest sponsored by the Graymoor Ecumenical and Interreligious Institute. His winning essay was published in the Jan. 13, 1995, issue of *Commonweal*.

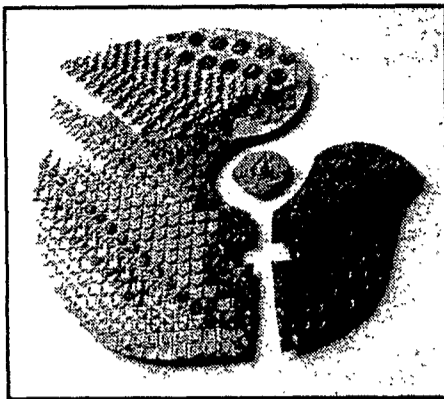
The security afforded by his grounding in the Catholic Church enabled him to approach a study of Islam, said Dardess, who is in his first year of preparation toward ordination as a permanent deacon. Yet study also led the retired teacher to question...

"If, as almost all Christians, including myself, believe, there can be no salvation except through Christ, how can I chant the Qur'an sincerely without assuming — against all evidence — that the Qur'an is also, at some level, the language of the Gospels?" he wrote.

Explaining that his love of Christ "is not reducible to a series of dogmatic declarations," he wrote:

"The risen Christ is present to me, not only at Mass, but at every beat of my heart, in every circumstance. ... Similarly with everyone else, including those who do not know him as risen Lord, or who do not know him at all. Yet my belief in his universality does not entitle me to make claims of superior knowledge. I could never confront (Dr. Muhammad Shafiq the center's executive director and imam — prayer leader) with the statement that, whatever he may think to the contrary, Jesus is with him. Not good manners but humility prohibits my doing so ..."

"My conviction that the language of the Qur'an is also God's language overrides what would otherwise bring me to disagree with it as a mere human utterance."



True encounters

Although the church has issued numerous documents on interfaith dialogue since the Second Vatican Council's *Nostra Aetate* (1965), one sticking point has been the Catholic position on salvation.

Traditionally the church had contended "outside the Church there is no salvation." The new Catechism of the Catholic Church states that "all salvation comes from Christ the Head through the Church which is His Body."

Yet Cardinal Francis Arinze, president of the Vatican body Bishop Fitzgerald runs, recently affirmed it is no longer a question of whether non-Christians can be saved.

"It is theologically certain that they can on certain given conditions," he said Jan. 14 at the Catholic University of America. "The question is how do they attain salvation."

And that question, he said, is left to the theologians.

At the same time, the cardinal reiterated the Catholic position that salvation occurs through Jesus Christ.

"All who are saved, whether they be Christians, Jews, Muslims or others, are saved through the grace of Christ, even when they do not expressly know this or consciously accept Christ as their Savior," he said.

Representatives of various faiths engaged with the Catholic Church in interreligious talks are well aware of the church's position, John Borelli, director of interreligious relations for the National Council of Catholic Bishops, acknowledged in a recent interview. Likewise, those faiths have their own views on how salvation is achieved.

Borelli explained that Muslims believe "Jesus Christ is part of the plan that has now been completed in complete and full revelation given to Mohammed. So they have their own position that is telling us, 'You have a place in our plan.'"

"If you meet with Buddhists, they say, 'Well, you are all doing very good work, you in Christianity, but you're a bit disillusioned because the basic plan is to awaken to the truth, and become enlightened as Buddha was. What you are doing is good and is leading to good karma, and someday you will achieve the position to realize the supreme insight.'"

For these reasons, Borelli said, it is important to build trust and fellowship, before talking — maturely and unargumentatively — about such principles.

Borelli was a featured speaker during the National Workshop for Christian Unity May 3-6 in Rochester. In his session, "All of God's People: Christianity in the Midst of Religious Diversity," he noted that the church considers dialogue to have four components:

- the dialogue of life, with people sharing their joys and sorrows;
- the dialogue of action, in which Christians and others collaborate for the integral development and liberation of people;
- the dialogue of theological exchange, in which specialists work to deepen their understanding of their respective religious heritages; and
- the dialogue of religious experience, in which people, rooted in their own religious traditions, share their spiritual riches, such as prayer and contemplation.

Changed perceptions

Many Catholics are nevertheless confused about what interreligious dialogue means for the church they knew as children.

"A lot of people feel being ecumenically minded is being a traitor to your faith, or is a danger to your own church," remarked J. Patrick O'Connor of St. Louis Church, Pittsford.

But when Pope John Paul II gathered with Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, animists and others at Assisi, Italy, "nobody changed their religion," he noted. "They walked away together."

O'Connor, grand knight of the St. Thomas More Council of the Knights of Columbus, is active with such ecumenical organizations as the diocesan Ecumenical Commission and the Interfaith Forum of Greater Rochester. His curiosity about other faiths was piqued when he worked as a counselor for the Wende Correctional Facility in Alden, where he shared conversation with inmates from various religious backgrounds.

"What happens when you do get together, you very much find much more in common than what you disagree over," he said.

Borelli noted that Catholics have seen a great deal of movement in the interfaith arena during the pontificate of Pope John Paul II.

"He was the first pope since the first century to visit the synagogue of Rome," he noted. "Reflection and dialogues have been going on with Jews on the Shoah (Holocaust) and other things. They hear about interreligious cooperation a lot more but also see it lived out."

While Vatican II set the stage for such cooperation, Borelli said, it has taken a couple of generations for council renewal to make its way into the life of Catholics.

Catholics "certainly understand something new is afoot among Christians and the Catholic Church has made a very strong stand to promote unity among Christians," he observed. "And they know something is afoot in terms of promoting interreligious relations."

"Certainly my children will have a dif-

ferent perspective than my parents had on all of this," Borelli said.

Impetus for dialogue

Getting to know and understand people of other faiths also may protect society in times of crisis, Father John Pawlikowski, OSM, warned in an April 15 talk at Monroe Community College.

"We must fight all efforts to depersonalize people," he said during the MCC talk.

"Unless a certain amount of social bonding takes place in times of social tranquility, it's not apt to happen in times of social crisis," Father Pawlikowski said in a later interview from Chicago's Catholic Theological Union, where he is a professor of social ethics.

Pointing to evidence that people who rescued Jews from the Nazis in World War II had known them in a personal way, the priest observed that personal relationships may have enabled the rescuers to rise above religious bigotry.

"They were not just dealing with stereotypes," he said.

Diana Eck, a Harvard University professor of comparative religions, observed in her 1993 book, *Encountering God* that experiences with others naturally give rise to basic theological questions.

They include, "Who is Krishna? When Muslims pray to Allah do they pray to the God Christians know in Christ? Is there one God whom we all know by different names? Are there different gods? False gods?"

"These are questions that academics and theologians find awkward to address, or want to address only by raising ... interpretive considerations, back-pedaling quickly away from the questions themselves," she wrote.

"Yet to be honest as persons of faith who encounter the religious life of other faiths and are both challenged and enriched by that encounter requires that we ask such questions. ... Our answers fundamentally shape the way in which we think of the cultures and the peoples with whom we share that world."

"Dialogue is not an easy task," Bishop Fitzgerald acknowledged in his Philippines address. "Even at the human level it is hard to keep an open mind, to try to enter into the other's way of thinking and seeing things, to persevere when apparently nothing is being achieved."

Yet persevering in dialogue is particularly important today in the United States, Father Pawlikowski said.

"We are in a significant transition, moving from the old Catholic-Protestant-Jew model into a multi-religious model, and have to understand many of the people who more recently immigrated; who have come to this country at least, in part, have come as a result to desire greater freedom, religious or political," he remarked.

"We have to be conscious of the fact, Americans are becoming more diverse culturally and religiously, and it's going to take some adjustments for people to get used to them," the priest concluded.

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