

# Muslim-Catholic document hailed

Rob Cullivan/Catholic Courier

Leaders of the Diocese of Rochester and the area's Muslim community have scheduled a gathering to celebrate the first anniversary of their "Agreement of Understanding and Mutual Cooperation." The event was slated for Monday, May 3, at 7 p.m. at the diocesan Pastoral Center in Gates.

Muslim and Catholic leaders, including Bishop Matthew H. Clark, signed the agreement on May 5, 2003, in ceremonies at the Islamic Center in Rochester. Believed to be the only one of its kind in the world, the agreement pledged the diocese and the Council of Masajid (Mosques) of Rochester to affirm rights of free speech, thought, conscience and religion; reject religious and ethnic intolerance; promote and encourage a deeper knowledge of and respect for the history, traditions and sensitivities of the two faiths; promote collaboration in providing services to those in need in the Rochester community; and implement the agreement jointly.

In a statement marking its anniversary, Bishop Clark noted the agreement's role in fostering interfaith understanding.

"This unique agreement — and the ongoing work to implement it — is a testament not only to the historic cooperation and harmony between our two faith communities, but also to the firm commitment by people of two different faiths to explore their similarities, rather than dwell on their differences," Bishop Clark said.

During the May 3 celebration, members of the Muslim-Catholic Alliance, an 18-member group of representatives from both faith communities, were slated to update participants about their work over the past year. Alliance members have discovered that Islam and Catholicism have much in common, according to Deacon Thomas Driscoll, chairman of the alliance and director of community education at St. Bernard's School of Theology and Ministry. Both religions value family; the sanctity of life from conception to death; and aiding the poor and the oppressed; he said.

"We represent some of the biggest religious groups in the world, and it's important to have conversation," Deacon Driscoll added.

He said the alliance has met five times over the past year, and has planned a number of initiatives, in-

cluding a series of presentations over the next several months on such topics as how Islam and Catholicism view conception, childhood, youth, marriage, aging, death and the afterlife. Other presentations will cover such issues as each faith's prayer practices and views on women and gender. Deacon Driscoll added that the alliance has found there's a tremendous need for Catholics to do presentations about their faith at mosques so that Muslims can better understand Catholicism.

Alliance members J. Patrick O'Connor, a parishioner at St. Louis Church in Pittsford, and Dr. Aly Nahas of the Islamic Center of Rochester, noted that the alliance sponsored presentations by Nahas and Deacon George Dardess at Rochester's Roman Catholic Community of the 19th Ward in January. The presentations, which focused on the agreement, took place at St. Monica's, St. Augustine's and Our Lady of Good Counsel churches.

Both men added that the alliance has cemented feelings of mutual concern between diocesan Catholics and area Muslims that existed before the agreement was signed. O'Connor added that while adherents of each religion don't agree on everything, they believe that individuals must be free to seek God's truth for themselves.

"When you find truth, regardless of its source, you're discovering divinity," O'Connor said. In that spirit, Nahas said he hopes to eventually set up an ongoing relationship between a Muslim family and a Catholic family. He added that the Muslim-Catholic agreement was an important public gesture.

"We felt that we had to have something on paper to reflect our true feelings toward each other," he said of the diocese and the Muslim community.

EDITOR'S NOTE: To learn more about Islam, visit [www.stbernards.edu/islam.htm](http://www.stbernards.edu/islam.htm).

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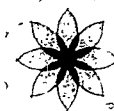
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