



Getting to Know Our Neighbors: A Catholic/Muslim Dialogue



On Sunday, February 28, our Parish hosted a Catholic/Muslim Dialogue. There were about 200 people in attendance, and it was a joyous afternoon that brought our two communities together. I am hoping that this event will be the beginning of a deepening relationship between us. The following were my opening remarks. I have included them for your reflection.

On behalf of our entire Faith Community of St. Thomas More, I want to warmly welcome Imam Yassir Qassim of the Mosque in Vista and all the members of his congregation who are present here today.

St. Thomas More Parishioners, let us show our support and welcome with a round of applause...

Also we welcome all who are with us from other faith communities and faith traditions, and we welcome all who may not claim a faith tradition. All are welcome!

My background is Polish, with both sets of my grandparents being born in Poland. In Polish, we have a saying, "Gosc w Dom; Bog w Dom." It means "A guest in the house is God in the house."

Imam and friends, you are our guests today and we acknowledge that because of your presence God is with us in a special way! It is always good for neighbors to become familiar with each other, to get to know one another. This is how a community of people is built. It is how strangers become family.

This notion of family is more important today than ever before, because of our life in the United States of America. We are a nation built on immigration, built on people coming from all over the world to find a better life here, to seize the moment in this country to create new opportunities for ourselves and for our children and grandchildren. This is what my grandparents did. This is what so many of your parents and grandparents have done.

And many of you, especially our Muslim brothers and sisters, here present today, are the ones who have begun this journey into the fabric of our nation.

We all have this in common, because we are a nation of immigrants. This is what has and will continue to make us a great nation, a beacon of hope and light, for all who seek a better way of life.

Coming together today, as we do, is more crucial than ever! In the climate of our nation today, there is great fear regarding the immigrant, and the newcomer.

And this fear is being nurtured by many of our political leaders and those who wish to become political leaders. This nurturing of fear,

this "be wary of the immigrant," is not only anti-religious, but maybe even more importantly, it is anti-American, and this notion is undermining the very foundations of our nation.

Sr. Joan Chittister recently said, "We are a nation undergoing an identity crisis." We are forgetting who we are, and what makes us who we are. What makes us who we are, and who we have been as a nation, has been to welcome the stranger, the needy, the oppressed, to welcome those who seek a better life.

So what is our purpose today? It is to get to know our neighbors—to lose fear through knowledge... to come to realize that the "other" is no different than the "us." We may be packaged differently, but under the packaging we are all the same.

So what is our purpose today? For us as Catholics, it can best be summed up in the Opening Paragraph of the Catholic Update that is available to you:

"As time progresses, we Catholics are going to rub shoulders more and more with Muslims, those who follow the Islam religion. After all, there are 1.2 billion Muslims, compared to about 1.5 billion Christians, one billion of whom are Catholic.

The Muslims we hear most about in the news are fundamentalists who in no way represent the Muslims living in our communities.

Our challenge as Catholics is to get to know more about our Muslim brothers and sisters. As the bishops of Vatican II wrote, 'Although in the course of the centuries many quarrels and hostilities have arisen between Christians and Muslims, this sacred Synod urges all to forget the past and to strive sincerely for mutual understanding.'

So, once again, what is our purpose today? It is the desire of Imam Yassir and me that today we do not focus on the few who are causing havoc in our world today, the few who are doing more harm to their own Muslim brothers and sisters than to Christians and people of other religions, and people of no religion.

Remembering our past as Christians, (let us be mindful that we Christians, in the past, fought wars over Christian Doctrine and killed each other in the name of Jesus), today our goal is first and foremost to get to know one another.

Imam Yassir and I are praying that today will be the beginning of a fruitful relationship between our congregations and that as time goes on, and as we get to know each other better, and trust each other more, we then can share the vulnerabilities of our religions, both in the past and in the present.

—Fr. Mike Ratajczak