

Remarks: 2015 Interfaith Iftar

Thirty Years of Catholic-Muslim Relations in Chicagoland

Thomas A. Baima
Prayer Center of Orland Park
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To the Chairman of the Council of Islamic Organizations of Greater Chicago, Dr. Kaiseruddin, to the imam of this Prayer Center of Orland Park, Sheik Kifah Mustapha, to chairpersons of the Interfaith Committee, Dr. Shakir Moiduddin and Azam Nizamuddin, to my fellow clergy and brothers and sisters of the churches gathered here, and to the Muslim community of Chicagoland, I bring you the greetings of His Excellency, the Most Reverend Blase Cupich, Archbishop of Chicago and those of the Catholic Church in Cook and Lake counties.

The first message I need to bring you from Archbishop Cupich is to state again what Dr. Kaiseruddin has already told you. The Archbishop would want me to express his great disappointment upon learning that the organizers of his European travel altered his schedule after he had already accepted this and several other invitations. The second message would be to repeat Archbishop Cupich's first statement to the interfaith community at the conclusion of our gathering for the Interreligious Observance on the Death of Francis Cardinal George. Sheik Mustapha and Dr. Moidouddin were there and will remember that the Archbishop spoke of his gratitude for the depth of interfaith relations which his predecessor had developed and that he

publically stated his promise to sustain and extend them. Tonight was to have been his first encounter with the Muslim community. We are working on arranging a visit with the leadership of the CIOGC as soon as His Excellency's schedule will allow.

While I am a poor substitute for Archbishop Cupich, I am grateful for the opportunity to address you tonight because 2015 marks an important anniversary in our relationship. It was thirty years ago, in 1985, that the Archdiocesan Office for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs first entered the Catholic/Muslim Dialogue. Together with the faculty of the Lutheran School of Theology and especially Dr. Harold Voegelar, we began to engage in conversations with the American Islamic College. These early stages in the Catholic-Muslim relationship were formative. It was a dialogue of life, as members of our two communities, largely from academic institutions, reached across boundaries and established friendships.

In this same period we saw the advent of the Conference for Improved Muslim/Christian Relations. Built largely on the relationships of the first phase, CIMCR broadened participation beyond just the schools and began to involve others in mosques and parishes. It even managed to put on two major public conferences, one at the American Islamic College and the other at the University of Chicago.

In the late 1980's preparations were underway to celebrate the centenary of the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions. The Council for a Parliament of the World's Religions was formed to prepare for the 1993 event, and the Muslim and Catholic communities had a new venue for their relationships, which included many other religious communities. The 1993 Parliament became a catalyst for another phase of our

dialogue, the engagement of the critical issues. Christians and Muslims, along with Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs, Jains and Zoroastrians were suddenly in conversation about the global issue facing the planet and the local issues which our communities were facing. The 1993 Parliament was a watershed event for Chicagoland as the world religions stepped onto the stage, literally, and told the world we had wisdom to offer to the new century, and that we were mature enough to do it together.

During these same years, the Council of Islamic Organizations was forming. The Archdiocesan Office encouraged your leadership to create such an umbrella organization because of the value it could bring to a large religious community, to have a “main address” in the city.

At the same time, Catholics and Muslims in Chicago have participated in the Midwest Muslim/Catholic Dialogue sponsored by the Islamic Society of North America and the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. The dialogue has produced two volumes of studies: *Revelation: Catholic and Muslim Perspective* and *In the Public Square: Catholics and Muslims on Religious Freedom and the Nature of the Human Person*.¹

We have been your guest most years at the ISNA Convention. Additionally the Muslim community has hosted an interreligious session as part of ISNA. And, of course, we have the long tradition of eighteen years with the Interfaith Iftars. We also have maintained lay dialogue groups with the CIOGC and the African American

¹ See *Revelation: Catholic and Muslim Perspectives*, Kevin Britt and Sayyid Syeed (Washington, DC: USCCB Publications, 2005) and *In the Public Square: Catholics and Muslims on Religious Freedom and the Nature of the Human Person* in *Chicago Studies*, (Spring 2011), Vol. 50, No. 2.

Muslim Community through these years. I want to thank Dr. Shakir Moidouddin and Dr. Randa Loutfi, as well as Jason Renken, Fr. William Vanecko and Vill Harmon for their work on these projects.

In more recent years, the CIOGC helped us to broaden the table of the Council of Religious Leaders of Metropolitan Chicago. This is the principal, institutional roundtable, and the inclusion of the Muslim community eventually opened the way for other religious communities to be associated with the Religious Leaders. Kareem Irfan would eventually serve as the first Muslim president of the Council of Religious Leaders.

As I conclude this retrospective, it is important to say not all the accomplishments are in the past. This year, we realized together a project which Dr. Kaiserrudin and I had been discussing for a while, which was to begin a formal, Catholic/Muslim *Scholars* Dialogue, where we could engage issues of theological importance at a high level. In one of their last meetings with Cardinal George, the CIOGC announced its readiness to begin just such a dialogue. I am happy to say that with the good work of the co-chairman, Azam Nizamuddin, the scholars' dialogue group began its work and has had two successful meetings. Our hope is to develop scholars in both the Catholic Church and the Muslim Community who know each other, know both traditions and who can be resources for their own communities and the wider public.

Thirty years seems like a long time, yet in the history of two pre-modern religious communities, it is not very long at all. For me, one sign of how far we have

come was on display at the Interreligious Observance in Holy Name Cathedral on the occasion of the death of Francis Cardinal George. A memorial service for a Cardinal of the Holy Roman Church, presided over by the Archbishop of Chicago, bishops of other Christian churches, the President of the Chicago Board of Rabbis and Sheik Kifah Mustapha. A memorial service where a Greek Orthodox priest chants a penitential psalm and Dr. Shakir Moidouddin offers a eulogy. A memorial service attended by the Jewish Mayor of Chicago. A memorial service which, at the end, no one though was the least bit out of the ordinary.

We have travelled a long road together in Chicagoland to make interreligious relations seem ordinary. A long road also stretches ahead of us, if we are to reach a place where religious freedom and authentic pluralism really characterize the culture of the United States. But it is good to remember how far we have come, and against what obstacles. May God who has begun this good work, bring it to completion.

The Very Rev. Thomas A. Baima, S.T.D. is a priest of the Archdiocese of Chicago, currently serving as Vicar for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs. He is also Vice Rector for Academic Affairs of the University of Saint Mary of the Lake, Mundelein, Illinois.