

Pilgrims of Truth, Pilgrims of Peace



This year marks the 25th anniversary of Pope John Paul II's first invitation to leaders of the world's religions to gather in Assisi, Italy. Assisi was originally chosen because of St Francis' deep connection with people of other faiths even in his time. It was this invitation by John Paul II which first saw a deep sharing between people of different faiths and a celebration of people of good will in a traditional Catholic heartland.

A little smaller perhaps, but powerful in its message was Australia's gathering of the same name "Pilgrims of Truth, Pilgrims of Peace", which took place concurrently with the Assisi gathering at Mary MacKillop Place in Sydney, organised by the Bishops Commission for Church Ministry and the Office for the Participation of Women. As we gathered at Mary Mackillop Place, over 150 delegates representing dozens of faiths and even four people who profess no faith gathered in Assisi. While the grandson of Mahatma Gandhi, Rjhmooon Gandhi headed a Hindu delegation and the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams walked the cobbled paths of Assisi we were fortunate to have our own celebrity delegates from various places throughout Australia including – Adelaide, Ballarat, Newcastle, Canberra, and Townsville as well many Sydney folk deeply committed to dialogue with other faiths and other denominations.

The gathering of interested people always bears much fruit and I was deeply touched by the sharing that took place in this gathering. The rich conversations and informed discussions highlighted the involvement and commitment to peace of all those gathered. We had people from the Jewish, Islamic, and Christian faiths who came together to reflect on our common ground. The two day program with keynote speaker Sr Trish Madigan OP was an opportunity to celebrate the contribution of women to interfaith dialogue. Trish began by reminding us all of what is needed for dialogue to occur. Trish also drew our attention to some recent United Nations documents which reflect women's contributions to peace building. A highlight of the keynote address was Trish's experience of her recent research project in Northern Iraq. This research centred on the impact of Fezalar schools on both people of northern Iraq and those who are fleeing the ongoing danger in the south. It was moving to hear the women's voices which have often been ignored. It was the stories of "Iraqi women's resilience, courage and compassion in the face of devastation that can encourage healing and hope in the future."



We heard from Josie Lacey and Wilma Viswanathan; two great women committed to interfaith dialogue. Josie Lacey, a Jewish woman was the founder of the Women's Interfaith Network in Sydney. She shared with us what it means to be a Jewish woman in Australia as well as insights into the importance and significance of ritual. Wilma Viswanathan, a member of the Uniting Church of Australia celebrated with us the story of her rich life experiences of interreligious dialogue. Wilma finished by inviting everyone to offer one another the beautiful Hindu blessing of "Namaste" which recognises the divine within.

We also heard from Zuleyah Keskin from the Islamic Sciences and Research Academy who reflected on what changes have taken place in the Muslim community through participation in Interfaith Dialogue. Her warm and honest insights delighted participants and opened up engaging dinner-time discussions.

The powerful and moving story of the Trappist monks living in the mountain top Monastery of Notre Dame d'Atlas nestled in the village of Tibhirine, Algeria, featured in the movie *Of Gods and Men* was included in the program. Despite a structured discussion of parts of the movie set down as an agenda item, the consensus from participants was to view the entire movie and reflect on this experience over morning tea. This was a great lesson in collaboration. The reflections were pointed and personal. Comments such as,

"I was struck by their deliberations and final decision to stay in Algeria."

"I loved the doctor. (Brother Luc) His compassion and gentleness extended beyond his medical attention."

In the movie one of the brother's comments, "We are like birds on a branch. We don't know if we'll leave." A Muslim woman from the village responds by saying, "You are the branch. If you go, we lose our footing." Many participants were struck by this interaction. What are we challenged to be in thinking about this imagery?

Our final speakers Sr Ivy Khoury FMM (Caritas), Ms Jenny Collins-White (Catholic Mission) and Ms Makiz Ansari (ISRA) responded to the question, what does it mean to be a prophet, pilgrim or promoter of peace? Through reflection and personal experiences participants were challenged to consider how they can promote peace in their homes, neighbourhoods and communities.

This event enabled people to come together and pray for peace in our own particular ways. Who knows what may have been achieved in this gathering on a little hill in North Sydney but with women and men committed to dialogue anything is possible. May the spirit of Assisi, be with us all!

By Kimberly Davis, Director of the National Office for the Participation of Women, Australian Catholic Bishops Conference