

Three faiths speak in unison at Assisi anniversary



Assisi, interreligious meeting 2012

Rosen: “If we don’t want religions to be part of the problem, they must be made part of the solution”

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There was an atmosphere of a family gathering (in harmony with the “Day of the Family” mass that was being celebrated at that very same moment by Pope Francis at St. Peter’s) more than that of a formal interfaith encounter. The three religious authorities from Israel and Pakistan who spoke at Assisi’s annual appointment on October 27th , communicated with each other like old friends – or as the historical cousins that they actually are.

“Peace in the Middle East” was this year’s theme in the event that commemorates John Paul II’s groundbreaking call to interreligious prayer in 1986. To carry on the tradition, the Franciscans of Assisi plan to focus on a different area of the world each year.

H. B. Fouad Twal, the Patriarch of Jerusalem; Rabbi David Rosen, the Jerusalem based International Director of Interreligious Affairs of AJC (the American Jewish Committee); and Dr. Ejaz Ahmad, Intercultural Mediator for Caritas and member of the Italian Interior Ministry’s Islamic Consultation Board, seemed to agree that the time has come not only to accelerate dialogue but to follow up with action to overcome the violent conflicts that falsely claimed religious justifications.

Patriarch Fouad Twal said “The road to peace is not easy. We need to be realistic. Communication is very important. In the spirit of faith in God we should roll up our sleeves and try to influence politicians. ”

Msgr. Domenico Sorrentino, the Bishop of Assisi confessed he was “deeply moved by the beauty of having shared reflections and prayers for peace in the Middle East.” “It is not enough however”, he said, “to quote from the Holy Scriptures of Christians, Jews and Muslims. Concrete behaviour, charity in daily life must follow. The acts of terrorism committed in Syria and other areas in the Middle East don’t correspond to the precepts of any Holy Book. We need concrete steps to give credibility to collaboration and dialogue.”

Rabbi David Rosen said “It is important for politicians to understand that they need religions to work with them on political initiatives to overcome conflicts. Most politicians today feel they want nothing to do with religion. But if we don’t want religions to be part of the problem they must be made part of the solution.”

“We cannot ignore the fact that our texts are being abused” said Rabbi Rosen. “They are misused as weapons by the parts in conflict. Nevertheless, we still have an obligation to our faith traditions to argue on their behalf even if pointing out misinterpretations is not going to stop those who embrace violence.”

Dr. Ejaz Ahmad, who was summoned from Rome to replace Dr. Mohammad Sammak, Secretary General of the Christian-Muslim Committee for Dialogue in Lebanon (who was impeded from reaching Italy after being robbed of all his belongings in Buenos Aires) said he felt a “profound significance” in having been invited to be part of “this gathering of great personalities.” “Rabbi Rosen, Patriarch Twal and Bishop Sorrentino are marvellous, courageous people” he said.

Referring to his experience in his native Pakistan, he commented “I too find difficulties when speaking out against fundamentalism” he said. “It can be dangerous. These groups of terrorists are not small -- they are as strong as governments.”

“We need more interaction between people, not just empty words. We must eat together, get to know each other, create common projects against war and terrorism” he continued . “Dialogue is our long arm for creating peace in the world.

In his Assisi speech on “Love as the heart of religious experience”, Rabbi Rosen referred to principles espoused by the Talmud: “receiving offense without resentment; hearing condemnation without answering back; to act purely from love, and rejoice even in trials as tests of pure love” (TB Shabbat 88b; TB Soṭah 31a.)

“The Talmud presents God as having as it were His own prayer, which is ‘let my attribute of mercy overwhelm my attribute of justice.’ In the tension between these two Divine attributes, Divine compassion has the upper hand. It is by living a life that combines justice and compassion - with the latter having the upper hand - that both reflects and expresses the Divine love in our world.

The exponents of the three monotheistic faiths at Assisi, this year, found expression in some very special common ground and hopes for creating a bulwark against the forces of destruction currently feeding on perverse interpretations of their religious texts. At the end of the day, they left to return to their commitments to furthering global peace, and particularly in the areas where they live.