



- our Diocese**
- Our Bishop
- Communications Office
- Diocesan Departments
- The Beacon
- Parishes of the Diocese
- Protecting our Children
- Home

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"Children of Abraham: Journeys to God"

CONVENT STATION - Despite serious differences that have led to prejudice, misunderstandings and violence, Jews, Christians and Muslims - each in their own ways - wield "enormous religious, human and ethical potential against the immense destructive potential in our world," Cardinal Walter Kasper proclaimed during an interfaith gathering at the College of St. Elizabeth here.



Cardinal Kasper, president of the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity and of the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, spoke July 19 during a special assembly, "Children of Abraham: Journeys to God." He was there along with a rabbi and an imam to call for the world's three major religions - Christianity, Judaism and Islam - to fully acknowledge their common faith ancestry. Together, they can battle the pessimism and nihilism in the world and work toward peace.

During the assembly, Bishop Rodimer and Sister of Charity of St. Elizabeth Francis Raftery, the College of St. Elizabeth's president, presented an honorary doctorate to Cardinal Kasper "in recognition of his effective leadership in promoting ecumenism and interreligious dialogue." A citation read by Johanna Glazewski, the college's vice president and dean for academic affairs, said he had "unabatingly used his energies" to help adherents of different religions see themselves not as opponents but as "brothers and sisters on a road to fuller unity."



"Our positive potential can help to build up a new human civilization of life," Cardinal Kasper told more than 700 members and leaders of the three major faiths who came from all over New Jersey for the assembly. "It (interfaith understanding) can also be the basis of a witness ... for improving the lives of our fellow human beings and for standing against the immoralities and idolatries that harm and degrade us, against poverty, human degradation and misery."

For the assembly, the cardinal was joined by Rabbi Terry Bookman, spiritual leader of Temple Beth Am in Miami, Fla., and Imam Yahya Hendi, Muslim chaplain at Georgetown University, Washington, D.C. and the National Naval Center, Bethesda, Md. All three said the three faiths are linked by a common spiritual ancestor, Abraham, and share such critical values as beliefs in the sanctity of life, the dignity of each person, family values, justice and peace.

Members of all three faiths must form an alliance and work hard to eradicate misunderstandings and prejudices they may harbor about the other religions. Perhaps in a more virulent form, these types of hatred, at least in part, fueled the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks and violence in the Middle East, they suggested.



In the U.S., people of good faith need to educate themselves by reading the texts of the other faiths and learning about their beliefs, customs and worldviews by getting to know their followers. The religious leaders suggested that the various houses of worship in their communities organize interfaith prayer services, socials, home visits and service projects.

"We may need to destroy our enemies;" said Imam Hendi during his speech. "From Abraham Lincoln we learn that: `I destroy my enemies when I make them my friends: All of us need to be a part of this endeavor of love building and peace making."



The special assembly is part of the Seventh Summer Institute, which was held from July 13 to July 24, by the college's Center for Theological and Spiritual Development.

"I truly believe that we as religious people have the vision and values to make peace and love reign among all peoples who inhabit this beautiful world," Father Anthony Ciorra, the center's director, wrote in the special assembly's introduction. "It is our hope that this day will deepen and affirm our fondest hopes and dreams as we gather in God's name."

Father Ciorra said the number of non-Catholic participants in the assembly could not be given because registrants were not asked for their religious affiliation.

He said the event was planned as a response to the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, and the conflict in the Holy Land, and that the center would follow up this fall with a program of getting members of the three religions together in small groups "to build relationships and to come to appreciate the beauty of each of our faiths."

The assembly included the presentation of an honorary doctorate to Cardinal Kasper "in recognition of his effective leadership in promoting ecumenism and interreligious dialogue."

The cardinal outlined several factors in the pursuit of peace - including politics, because wherever they live, people yearn for freedom, dignity and equal rights.

Also playing a significant role will be culture, because people also want the right to shape their own customs and values. A third dimension of peace will be dialogue, which the cardinal described as more than an exchange of ideas, but "a fundamental dimension of the human person: an exchange of life, means of life, styles of life and cultural expressions of life."

"Such a dialogue presupposes peaceful hearts, which have overcome hatred, revenge and all kinds of prejudices." Cardinal Kasper said. "Peace begins in the hearts of people, and only the Almighty has access to the very depths of our hearts. So peace, in the final analysis, is a religious issue."



In recent decades, the Catholic Church has been very active in reaching out to Jews and Muslims. The Second Vatican Council's declaration on

the relationship of the Church to non-Christians, "Nostra Aetate," notes that, although Jews have not accepted the Gospel, they "remain dear to God." The document also declares that the Muslims "adore one God" and strive to submit to his will as did Abraham, the cardinal said.

Cardinal Kasper also noted that Pope John Paul II has personally extended the Church's hand of fellowship to both Muslim and Jewish religious leaders.

In pursuing peace, leaders of the three major religions shouldn't forget about the "negative aspects" of their histories such as the violence and oppression they've exacted

on each other, the cardinal said. But these leaders need to look forward to the common good they can promote together, he said. "We must bring to an end the vicious circle of violence and counter-violence which has caused the death of so many innocent people on both sides, which has caused fear, sorrow and despair. Violence cannot solve problems; violence causes ever new problems."

Jerusalem and its sacred sites, he asserted, must be for Jews, Muslims and Christians alike, and should be "a sign of hope for peace for all humankind." But he cautioned against religious pluralism and relativism, which would undermine the principles of these faiths. Instead, he called on these faiths to live peacefully with their differences.



In his address, Rabbi Bookman, who earned a master's degree in theology from Marquette University, Milwaukee, Wis., asserted that none of the major religions corners the market on divine truth.

"Our truth is a partial truth. Ultimate truth rests only with God," said Rabbi Bookman, adding that these faiths stand in contrast to a number of false religions around the world.

During a question -and-answer session, Rabbi Bookman urged Americans to focus on interfaith relationships in North America before trying to resolve the conflict in the Middle East. He also noted that people who engage in a dialogue don't have to agree on every point; they can agree to disagree. "Dialogue leads to understanding," he said.

In his address, Imam Hendi said that Muslims have a role in building peace in the Holy Land. "The Quran makes it clear to Muslims that the struggle against injustice is a universal struggle in which Muslims are called to join others, among whom are Christians and Jews."

Imam Hendi also objected to the media's use of the term "Islamic terrorist," which he said is counter to principals of Islam, a word which means "peace."

"Extremism and violence have no religion," the imam said during the question-and-answer session, stressing a point he made about nonviolence in his address: "As one family with different brothers and sisters and the common grounds we have, we will overcome all barriers and march together for global peace."



MANY FACES OF FAITH — Clockwise from above: Rasha Nayal takes part in the lighting of candles during closing prayer; Muslim Roxanne Dworak listens to the special assembly; Cardinal Walter Kasper (left) receives an honorary doctorate, presented by Bishop Rodimer and Sister of Charity of St. Elizabeth Francis Raftery, the College of St. Elizabeth's president; and the cardinal greets baby Jonathan Cranley, who is held by Jenny Realmuto as Paul Catipon and the baby's mother, Maureen Cranely, look on.

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