

MIDWEST MUSLIM-CATHOLIC DIALOGUE REFLECTS ON MUTUAL ESTEEM IN *NOSTRA AETATE*

WASHINGTON—The 18th annual Midwest Muslim-Catholic Dialogue convened to reflect on the topic of mutual esteem in *Nostra Aetate* (NA). Presentations focused on the development of the document, its reception by Catholics and Muslims following the Second Vatican Council, and its importance in modern day interreligious dialogue. The meeting was held at John Carroll University in University Heights, OH on October 28-30, 2013. Bishop Francis Reiss of the Archdiocese of Detroit, Michigan, and Sayyid Syeed, Ph.D., of the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA), presided.

In the first part of the meeting, the co-chairs welcomed the assembly. In his opening remarks, Bishop Reiss indicated that in 2015, the Catholic Church will be celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of NA. “This document,” the bishop remarked, “is truly the Magna Carta for Roman Catholics currently engaging in interreligious dialogue—and so, its importance cannot, must not, be underestimated! We are here today, in large part, because of this document.” “Our work together,” the bishop continued, “has forged true bonds of friendship that are supported by mutual esteem and an ever-growing trust that enables us to speak candidly with one another in an atmosphere of respect and friendship.” Following Bishop Reiss, Dr. Sayyid Syeed remarked that the goodwill engendered by NA has galvanized Muslim communities here and abroad to advance the cause of dialogue between Christians and Muslims. Speaking to the work of ISNA, Dr. Syeed indicated that in the spirit of NA bonds of friendship have been forged between Catholics and Muslims since the Second Vatican Council, and that because of this friendship, ISNA has, among other initiatives, worked to advance the rights of Christians in the Middle East.

In the second part of the meeting, Fr. Raymond Webb presented a study of the rudiments of NA and addressed the topic of mutual esteem in particular. Citing Pope Francis, Fr. Webb remarked that “esteem is intimately connected with respect,” and that “while respect means an attitude of kindness towards people for whom we have consideration, ‘mutual’ means that this is not a one-way process, but something shared by both sides.” Four challenges to this understanding of esteem seem to be present in our dialogue today: the ability of Christians and Muslims to separate the religious and the political, disrespect for Islam and Muslims (and the need for a robust response), the complex question of fears over the status of Christian minorities in Muslim lands, and insufficient effective catechesis of Catholics and Muslims. After discussing necessary steps for meeting these challenges, Fr. Webb concluded his talk by affirming that “mutual esteem is the hoped for, indeed necessary, foundation for Muslim-Catholic dialogue in its four forms of neighborliness, common good, theology, and spirituality—all of which can be deepened through our mutual commitment.” Responding to Fr. Webb’s presentation, Dr. Zeki Saritoprak asserted that for Muslims NA is a remarkable document that, by effectively prohibiting anti-Muslim sentiment, established a footing of trust to emerge between Muslims and Catholics. Further, he stressed that NA “advocated not only for mutual esteem but mutual cooperation.” Ultimately,

Saritoprak continued, “because of this goodwill act by the Catholic Church, Muslims have increasingly acknowledged that respect is likewise an irrevocable article of Islamic faith.”

In the final part of the meeting, invited speakers Dr. Abdullah Antepli, Muslim Chaplain at Duke University, and Dr. John Borelli of Georgetown University, provided keynote addresses on the topic of NA. In his address—*Nostra Aetate*: Challenges and Opportunities—Dr. Antepli lauded NA as a document that has made possible dialogue between Muslims and Catholics, which can only work to make us better Muslims and Catholics.” But, “the real power of this document,” he remarked, “is not the interfaith movement it spawned, but rather that, in advocating for dialogue, it serves as an act of devotion to God, indeed, as a new way of encountering God in the other.” Moreover, NA “provides us with a great opportunity still yet to be realized, especially when it comes to working together to address the most pressing needs of the day such as poverty.” In his address on NA, Dr. Borelli provided a rich contextual study of NA from its pre-conciliar origins to its genesis under the direction of Pope John XXIII and its implementation and shepherding under subsequent popes.

In addition to the co-chairs, those present at the meeting included Muslim participants Dr. Irfan Omar, Marquette University; Dr. Ghulam-Haider Aasi, American Islamic College; Dr. Zeki Saritoprak, John Carroll University; Ms. Inshirah Farhoud, Islamic Society of Milwaukee; Dr. Anas Malik, Xavier University; Ihsan Ul Haque, M.D.; Mr. Isam Zaiem, CAIR, Cleveland Chapter. Additional Catholic participants included Ms. Judith Longdin, Archdiocese of Milwaukee; Fr. Raymond Webb, University of St. Mary of the Lake; Fr. Tom Baima, University of St. Mary of the Lake; Dr. Scott Alexander, Catholic Theological Union; Fr. Jeff Day, Archdiocese of Detroit; Dr. Anthony Cirelli, SEIA.

The next meeting is scheduled to take place in October 2014.