

Put Out Into the Deep

Interreligious Dialogue Is Not Easy



My dear brothers and sisters in the Lord,

The occasion of the visit of our Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI, to the Holy Land gives me an opportunity to comment on his trip and also on interreligious dialogue. During the interview time on the flight to the Holy Land that Pope Benedict granted to the press corps traveling with him, the Holy Father made some very interesting comments. When asked the purpose of his journey and did he think he could offer a contribution to the peace process, he answered, "We are not a political power, but a spiritual force, and this spiritual force is a reality that can contribute to the advances in the peace process." He then added, "...prayer is a real force," that helps us discern God's will and put it into practice. If people want peace, they need to pray and ask for it.

The Holy Father went on to say something very interesting as another contribution he could make to the peace process. "We are seeking to assist in the formation of consciences. The conscience is the human capacity to perceive the truth, but this capacity is often impeded by particular interests."

Certainly, the situation in the Holy Land today is impeded by particular interests, and the ability to find the truth and justice in this complex situation is a daunting task. I believe the visit of our Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI, will, indeed, advance the peace process as it certainly will advance the cause of interreligious dialogue.

Pope Benedict has had several problems in the recent past in initiating interreligious dialogue with the Muslims and Jews. His 2006 speech at the University of Regensburg in Germany still presents problems from some. In that speech, he

quoted an historical document of the 15th century which somehow equated violence with Islam. This certainly was not his intention, as he has explained; however, he used it as a point of departure to correct the historic misunderstandings. Unfortunately, it only contributed to more misunderstanding.

On this trip, the Holy Father's first stop was the Kingdom of Jordan where the Royal Family is truly open to religious freedom and dialogue in their kingdom. As he travels to Israel, a greater complexity will greet him. Most recently, with the lifting of the excommunication against the three bishops involved in the Lefebvre movement, the pope had an unexpected consequence because one of the bishops, Bishop Richard Williamson, is a Holocaust denier. His subsequent statements have not yet satisfied most observers and it was, obviously, an unintended consequence of the Holy Father's solicitude for those in schism whom he wishes to bring back to the fold of the Church.

The Holy Father's visit to the Holy Land is an opportunity for reinitiating religious dialogue on many issues. He will give over 22 speeches and addresses during his visit. One of the highlights already has been a visit to the Yad Vashem memorial in Jerusalem. This memorial is constructed to the memory of all those who perished in the Holocaust. Unfortunately, it also has become a point of controversy. Although there were many righteous Christians who risked their lives to save Jews during the Holocaust, a negative characterization of Pope Pius XII still remains at Yad Vashem. Unfortunately, this historical question is yet to be settled. Yet, recently

an Op-Ed in one of our local papers, *The Daily News*, by Rabbi Gary Krupp seemed to be a testimony from the Jewish perspective of a clarification of the historical revisionism that, unfortunately, has characterized some treatment of Pope Pius XII.

Recently, I had an opportunity to see a wonderful play called, *Irena's Vow*. It is the story of a Polish girl, Irena Gut Opdyke, who risked her life to save the life of 13 Jews whom she hid in the basement of a Nazi commandant's house where she was a servant. Irena is listed among the righteous who did all they could to save the lives of Jews during the Holocaust. It is a play well worth seeing. Her vow came to be made when she witnessed the death of a mother and child shot before her eyes. Unfortunately, she was unable to do anything about that particular incident, but from that day on she vowed that she would do anything she could to save the lives of innocent Jewish people. The play is historically correct and very heartwarming.

Interreligious dialogue with Muslims and Jews is an absolute necessity. The three major religions that recognize the Old Testament have something in common with Abraham who is recognized as the Patriarch. That recognition should bring his descendents of the various faiths together to make common cause for peace in the land where God revealed Himself in various ways to His people.

All dialogue is a way of putting out into the deep. Interreligious dialogue, unfortunately, seems to take place on tempestuous waters. Join me in praying for the continued success of the Holy Father's efforts and "for the peace of Jerusalem" as the psalmist urges us to pray.

Bedford-Stuyvesant Pastor Removed Over Allegation of Sexual Abuse

On April 24, 2009, a complaint of sexual abuse against Father Joseph Agostino, C.M., pastor of St. John the Baptist parish, Bedford-Stuyvesant, was reported to the Diocese of Brooklyn's Victims Assistance Hotline 1-888-634-4499. The complaint was immediately referred to the Kings County District Attorney's office.

The Congregation of the Mission, Father Agostino's order of priests, subsequently informed Bishop Nicholas DiMarzio that it has launched an investigation into allegations of abuse by Father Agostino, and that he was removed from ministry pending the outcome of the investigation.

Father Agostino denies the allegations.

In 2003, a report of sexual abuse was made against Father Agostino by the same individual who has made the new allegation. At that time, the individual did not indicate that he was a minor when the alleged abuse took place.

Additionally, an investigation conducted by the Congregation of the Mission determined that there was not then sufficient evidence to support the allegations. As a result, Father Agostino was not removed from his position. Bishop Thomas V. Daily, then Bishop of Brooklyn, also met with the alleged victim in 2003, and the Congregation of the Mission's investigation and decision were upheld.

On April 24, the individual presented new information that indicat-

ed he was a minor at the time of the alleged abuse. He also presented more specific and detailed information than was previously reported. This has prompted the new investigation and Father Agostino's removal from ministry at this time.

The Diocese of Brooklyn's Victim Assistance Coordinator, Sister Ellen Patricia Finn, O.P., stated she has been in regular contact with the victim and that he is availing himself of services made available by the Diocese.

The Very Rev. Michael J. Carroll, C.M., Provincial of the Congregation of the Mission, said, "While at this time these are allegations, the fact that they have been made shame all of us in the Congregation. If true, these actions are indefensible and unacceptable."

Father Carroll spoke to the St. John the Baptist parish community last Sunday, May 10.

In a letter to the people of the parish, Bishop DiMarzio asked parishioners to pray for all victims of abuse by clergy.

"The facts here remain to be established," he wrote. "Nevertheless, on behalf of the Diocese and in my own name, I am deeply sorry for the pain and suffering that has been inflicted upon victims of abuse by any priest. As Catholic Christians it is confusing how any priest, a minister of Christ's love, could commit acts of evil against young people. We are all ashamed. At the same time, the courage and strength of those victims that come forward is to be greatly admired."