

Ecumenical Interfaith Committee *Joint Committee on Franciscan Unity*



FRANCISCAN INTERFAITH CONFERENCE

by Donna Hollis, OFS, and Marie Bianca, OFS

“The People of God: A Sacred Prism,” was an interfaith gathering of representatives of various Franciscan groups, which sparked joy, peace, and spirituality for all who attended.

What a privilege it was for us, as members of the OFS-USA Ecumenical / Interfaith Committee, to attend this special event held Nov. 14-16, 2021, at the Graymoor Spiritual Life Center in Garrison, N.Y., a ministry of the Franciscan Friars of the Atonement. The Upper Hudson Valley was a riot of fall color, breathing renewal into our parched hearts. Little did we know that the colorful arrival was just the start of a life-giving conference. During these days together our Jewish, Muslim, and Christian speakers helped us understand our shared unity in the creation of God, with love at the center.

This gathering was presented and sponsored by the Roots and Branches Programs Ministry director, Fr. Masud Syedullah, TSSF. The goal was to offer an opportunity for those of different religious traditions to come together in prayer and community to build interfaith understanding and appreciation as expressed in and through the three Abrahamic faiths. The dedicated team represented Judaism (Rabbi Shefa), Christianity (Fr. Masud Syedullah, TSSF), and Islam (Iman Mohamed Bashar Arafat.)

This time of slowing down, listening, and entering the silence within ourselves and those around us helped us reflect on the fact that that all mankind is one, protected by the beloved hand of our Creator. We may express our beliefs uniquely, and as sons and daughters of the Creator we have many different colors to our skin and walk in different traditions, yet we were all created to love God and one another.

We learned some of the spirituality behind other faith traditions. We were led into chanting by Rabbi Shefa in the Jewish tradition, putting Scripture and prayer to music. We experienced Islamic spiritual practice led by Iman Mohamed Bashar Arafat’s singing the many names of Allah, intoning God’s praises. Iman Arafat also spoke of the things that make for peace. “You cannot make peace if you don’t sit with the Lord of peace, the source of peace, the originator of peace, the spring of peace, and the reservoir of peace,” he said. In essence, we surrender our will to God.

Fr. Masud Syedullah, led us into the Christian Tradition with the use of our bodies, meditative reading, and chants of Christian Spiritual practice. This is a doorway in which we talk through our faith what we believe in our hearts by giving expression to it.

Fr. Stephen Holton, an Episcopal priest from the Diocese of New York, shared how to weave relationships with others. He emphasized that the world needs peacemakers, which is why we need to encourage each other to take God’s good news to the streets. There are many wounded people, and we need to be their listeners, he said. In Genesis 18:1-8, when Abraham invites strangers into his tent, he is allowing himself to be vulnerable by feeding them and taking care of them. We need to follow Abraham’s example by offering God’s love, peace, and strength to those in most need. In that way we weave ourselves together with one another.

You may be asking, “What does this have to do with being a Secular Franciscan?” Catholic teaching encourages us to open our hearts to love and respect those whom we do not know. Like the Good Samaritan, we are called to stop along our way to help *anyone* in need, without first asking, “Are you Catholic? Are you Christian? Are you Muslim? Are you. . .?” This is living the Gospel, and living our Rule, for with a gentle and courteous spirit, we are called to accept all people as a gift of the Lord and an image of Christ. Is this path always easy? No. But we have each other to walk with us, to help us when we falter.

Each leader at the conference spoke about the symbol of light. In Isaiah 60:1, it says “Our Light has come.” Each of us at this gathering came to appreciate that Light, shining in each one present. At the end of the conference each participant was given a candle to remind us that we are bearers of that Light, and how we must the fire burning in our hearts. Our time together ended with a beautiful “sending forth,” with individual blessings given by each presider in their language and tradition.

We are thankful for all we leaned and experienced. We came away from the conference realizing that we are blessed to have a rich tradition calling us to embrace all mankind with respect, honoring our differences, as we dare to love deeply.



Left to right: Marie Bianca OFS, Fr. Masud Syedullah TSSF, Donna Hollis OFS



Left to right: Iman Mohamed Bashar Arafat; Fr. Stephen Holton (Episcopal Priest in the Diocese of New York); Donna Hollis, OFS (Secular Franciscan Order); Fr. Masud Syedullah, Third Order Society of St. Francis, Episcopal (TSSF); Rabbi Shefa, and Br. Mark Molter OLF (Order of Lutheran Franciscans)

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