

# The Muslim-Christian conversation

SCARBORO MISSIONS' INTERFAITH DESK GOES TO ROME AND WITNESSES  
A STUNNING GLOBAL PICTURE OF MUSLIM-CHRISTIAN COOPERATION

By Paul McKenna

It is time to uncover the best-kept secret on the planet. All over the world, Catholics at all levels of the Church are engaging in creative dialogue with people of other religions. And dialogue with Islam is a big part of this international interfaith conversation. After 13 centuries of bad history between these two traditions, the good news is that Catholics and Muslims are now in conversation.

Did you know that Muslims and Catholics together form one-third of the world's population, and that Muslims and Christians form almost one-half? Did you know that Pope John Paul II has forged dramatic new bonds with Muslims worldwide? Since 1978, he has met with or addressed Muslim audiences more than 150 times. In 1998, he supported the creation of the Muslim-Catholic Dialogue Commission. Established by Vatican and Muslim officials, this commission is the first permanent official channel for discussion between the two religions.

In 2003, I attended an international conference in Rome on Muslim-Christian dialogue. The gathering was sponsored by SEDOS, a Rome-based forum that supports Catholic religious orders worldwide in their commitment to global mission. The conference attracted priests and nuns from a multitude of religious orders; many had lived or worked in countries with large Muslim populations.

Gifted speakers, Muslim and



Paul McKenna (left) of the Scarboro Missions Interfaith Desk with Muslim and Catholic scholars and specialists at an international conference on Muslim-Christian relations. Rome, 2003.

## I WAS LEFT WONDERING WHY TODAY'S MEDIA KEEPS US IN THE DARK ABOUT THIS GOOD NEWS OF DIALOGUE.

Catholic, travelled from various parts of the world to take part in the conference. They included academics, theologians, lawyers, dialogue specialists, doctoral students, human rights specialists, international relations specialists, imams (Muslim religious leaders) and Christian religious. Together, they painted a stunning picture of global interreligious cooperation.

Three of the conference speakers were Muslim young people who are also doctoral students in Christian theology at Catholic universities in Rome. These young people have come from other countries and are living in Christian communities in Rome while completing their studies.

Throughout the world, Muslims and Christians are engaging

in dramatic new models of conversation and cooperation at the levels of the theological, the spiritual, the interpersonal, the grassroots and the institutional. Together they are cooperating in the fields of social justice, language, diplomacy, culture, human rights, global peace and international relations.

And so the conference treated me to a panorama of international cooperation between the world's two largest religions. What a profound experience of hope for the future. I was left wondering why today's media expends a good deal of ink informing us only about Muslim-Christian tensions around the world. Why is the media keeping us in the dark about the good news of Muslim-Christian cooperation?



Photos above: Whirling dervishes (Sufis) dance before an audience of thousands of conference participants at the 2004 Parliament of World Religions. Many faith traditions prayed, sang and dialogued together at this powerful global interfaith gathering. Barcelona.



## Building an international interfaith movement 2004 Parliament of World Religions, Barcelona

Every five years, the Parliament of World Religions gathers somewhere in the world. These events have proven to be the largest multifaith gatherings in history. Last July, 9,000 people of many faiths from many parts of the world converged upon Barcelona, Spain, to dialogue, sing, meditate, celebrate, meet and rejoice together.

Social justice was very much a concern of this Parliament that dealt with four pressing global issues:

- supporting refugees worldwide
- eliminating the international debt owed by developing countries
- overcoming religiously-motivated violence
- increasing access to clean water

The seven-day conference featured more than 500 workshops dealing with all aspects of the fields of religion, spirituality and social justice. Two members of the Scarboro Missions Interfaith Desk, along with numerous other Canadians, attended the global interfaith gathering.

"The conference site on the edge of the Mediterranean was a sea of people in the clothing, voices, faces and colours of the world-the orange robes of Buddhist monks mingling with the white gowns of the Sufis-all stopping to greet each other in peace, smiling, spontaneously hugging," said Raheel Raza, a Toronto Muslim who collaborates with Scarboro's Interfaith Desk. "As I looked around me, I was filled with peace and the wonder of being there."

The Parliament of World Religions is one of a growing number of international interfaith organizations. These groups, which are springing up all over the world, are committed to working together on a global scale because they realize that, in the words of Catholic theologian Hans Kung, "there will be no peace among the nations without peace among the religions."

"People ask me, 'Is there hope for peace?'" said Raheel Raza. "After experiencing Barcelona, I say, 'Peace will happen when we exchange weapons of mass destruction for words of wisdom.'"

For information on the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue, go to:  
[www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/interelg](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/interelg)

For summaries of the workshops, visit the website of the Council for a Parliament of World Religions: [www.cpwr.org](http://www.cpwr.org). Scarboro Missions and the Encounter World Religions Centre have produced a powerpoint slide presentation featuring the events of the Barcelona Parliament of World Religions. To view this presentation, contact J.W. Windland at Tel: 1-888-411-7537, Ext. 22, or Email: [encounter@worldreligions.ca](mailto:encounter@worldreligions.ca)