

Interview: Msgr. Michael Fitzgerald

Interreligious dialogue and Mideast peace

Three hundred and fifty leaders of the religions of the world gathered in Milan, Italy Sept. 19-22, on the invitation of the Community of St. Egidio, to continue the ecumenical dialogue initiated by Pope John Paul II in the Italian city of Assisi eight years ago. One issue dominating the talks was the recent breakthrough in the Middle East and the role of religious dialogue in this process. Muriel Mirak-Weissbach spoke to two protagonists of the dialogue between Islam and Christianity. Below are some of the remarks of Msgr. Michael Fitzgerald, secretary of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue.

EIR: Can you describe the ongoing dialogue that you have between Christianity and Islam?

Msgr. Fitzgerald: There is the Al Beit Foundation, which has a Royal Academy for Islamic Civilization Research, which is under [Jordan's] Crown Prince Hassan. As part of the activity of this academy, he wanted to be in dialogue with Christians. Being a prince, he thought he should address himself to a prince, and so he started dialogue with the Anglicans of the Royal Chapel of Windsor in England, of Prince Philip. So there is an ongoing dialogue between Muslims and Anglicans; and, in fact, in that dialogue, some Jews were brought in, which is quite courageous, considering this was some years ago. On the Muslim side, it's not just Jordanians, but people from different countries, who take part in their discussions—small discussions, of 20 to 30 people a side.

Parallel to the dialogue with Anglicans, the Royal Academy started a dialogue with the Orthodox, in Geneva: Again they bring together Orthodox and Muslims from different parts of the world. They also have brought in young people, so as to train them in openness, for the future. I took part in one of those, because they always invite a Catholic into the Orthodox delegation. I took part in the last meeting, which took place in Amman in July, on tolerance, the challenge of the modern world, and how to face up to these.

The prince wasn't satisfied with that: He wanted dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church, so he addressed himself to the Vatican. Who better than the Vatican? Our council accepted the invitation, but on the condition that the local Catholics would also be involved. We have done this with the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem, Patriarch Sabah, who has always been involved in our meetings, and his auxiliary, who is in Amman, and together with local Christians. We felt that it was very important that the dialogue should not be with the

Vatican just at the top level or with people whom we would choose, but also with the Christians who were on the spot. We have discussed religious education, rights of children, women and society; and the next one will be religion and nationalism. Each time we select a theme by common accord.

EIR: What are the implications of the breakthroughs in the Middle East for the dialogue? Are you going to be extending the dialogue to the realm of economics?

Msgr. Fitzgerald: That is not our concern as a Council for Interreligious Dialogue, in the sense that we are concerned with religious dialogue, but it is the concern of local churches to cooperate, so the economic side will come in. I took part in a meeting in May which our council helped to facilitate with the World Council of Churches and the World Lutheran Federation—Christians, Muslims, and Jews on the spiritual significance of Jerusalem, with the main participants coming from Jerusalem or the Occupied Territories. It was not an easy meeting, but we did manage to come to common conclusions, and I think we've been overtaken by events—happily overtaken by events—but such a dialogue is important, because we are at the beginning of negotiations, of changing attitudes. When people have been separated for so long, they have to come together and have confidence in one another, and to build something up together is quite difficult. There's a lot of work to be done there.

EIR: What is the conceptual, philosophical basis for the dialogue? Jews here have referenced Maimonides. What about from the Catholic side, Raymond Lull, and Cardinal Nicolaus of Cusa? The Schiller Institute has just issued an English translation of many of Cusa's works which were hitherto not available. I'm thinking particularly of his *De Pace Fidei*, a brilliant work for ecumenism. To what extent do works like these play a role in your dialogue?

Msgr. Fitzgerald: Well, they don't; they could do. It depends on what you're choosing and the style of the meeting. There could be a meeting where you decide on that text, and you discuss it, but that's not the sort of style that we've had. We've had people writing their own papers without a great deal of reference to that.

But there is a place for that, for looking at what the contributions of history are, and seeing what we can learn from these positions taken in the past, which at that time, I think, must have seemed fantastic. People must have asked, "Who is this Nicolaus of Cusa who is writing like this?" . . .

EIR: What is the intellectual foundation, what kinds of thinkers do people in the Vatican look to for guidance today?

Msgr. Fitzgerald: We've been working from our own tradition on how we can open to Islam and other religions. In the last document that we produced, which was "Dialogue and Proclamation," the first part is a more open attitude toward religion, based on the Vatican council, which was not theological in its approach to other religions, but it tries to show how

Scripture and tradition lead to openness to other religions. . . .

Interview: Sen. Kamel Al-Sharif

There is a genuine desire for peace

Muriel Mirak-Weissbach interviewed Sen. Kamel Al-Sharif of Jordan, at the Milan conference on religious dialogue. Senator Al-Sharif has previously held ministerial and ambassadorial posts in the Jordanian government. He is currently the editor of Ad Destour, and secretary general of the International Islamic Council for Daw' a and Relief. He was the special envoy of His Highness Bin Talal, Crown Prince Has-san of Jordan.

EIR: How do you view the dramatic developments in the PLO-Israeli accord?

Al-Sharif: We are witnessing a worldwide trend toward peaceful solution of all these standing problems and a genuine desire to build a new world on the basis of just peace. This is a general trend. We are living in a small world, which is too much interlinked now, and any event which takes place in one part of the world affects the others; we are interdependent. So what happened in the Soviet Union and other parts of the world dramatically affects the situation everywhere, especially in the Middle East, because the international political situation and the equation of the balance of power has been dramatically disrupted. All these elements combined have led to the same trend in the Middle East. And then all the parties perhaps agree that things cannot go on forever in this manner and that insistence on power and occupation, denial of the others' right is not the solution: It would generate clashes over a period of time.

So everybody realizes that the peaceful solution is inevitable, if we want to avoid destructive conflicts. There are other elements which came into play, like the disposition of the Americans to solve these problems one by one, and to show that their leadership in the world is beneficial to every party. All these elements combined have led to this development.

Of course, it's early to say whether things will succeed in the end, because there are still many obstacles. The real intentions are not yet known. There is also a big margin for maneuvers—for all parties. But we are optimistic, we think that our hope is based on the realities of the situation, the reality that nobody can dominate the other, nobody is immune to internal problems; the discovery that people can find solutions whereby they can live and cooperate. Our hopes

are not imaginary or fantastic, but I think, based on reality. But sometimes it is difficult to predict how the human mind functions, and there is always the possibility of unpleasant surprises; and we are waiting, waiting to see.

EIR: One of the most important things will be to see whether the economic projects agreed upon will be implemented quickly, giving people on both sides reason to believe that the agreement will work.

Al-Sharif: We can't, at this stage, expect huge, massive projects to link the different parties before a final political settlement; you can't really have a genuine, final economic settlement without a political arrangement in the area. But keeping in mind that the recent accord is limited to certain areas and that the whole arrangement is provisional, some political arrangement could be arranged within these areas. If the Palestinians manage to solve the problems of Gaza and the enclave of Jericho in a proper manner, [and have] something they can show to the people and from there influence the economic situation of the people inside the Occupied Territories, who are the majority, from that base they can influence the events inside; this will be a great encouragement, no doubt about it.

But for big projects, which link, for example, Jordan, Israel, and the Palestinian state regionally, it's early to think of that, before the remaining issues which are vital to the solution—what is the fate of the Occupied Territories, what is the fate of Jerusalem, touchy sensitive issues—these are questions which have to be settled, so that we can stand on solid ground with more hope, more confidence.

EIR: In Jordan initially there was hesitation in welcoming the accord.

Al-Sharif: Jordan—I am not in the government at present—Jordan was surprised, like many parties. It was something which came against the established current of bilateral and multilateral negotiations. We were not aware of the secret negotiations between the Palestinians and the Israelis. But after the shock, the government said that if the Palestinians agreed, they are free to choose their way; the government gave its support. Of course, the attitude of the people is different from the government, because the government has its measures and criteria, its relations with the rest of the Arab world, international relations, coordination with the Palestinians, and it stems from basic premises which had been recognized before, that the Palestinians are free to choose their destiny and to solve their problems the way they like. The people are different. They have their own emotional and ideological outlook.

EIR: In reference to the conference here, what do you think the role of Judaism, the Church, and Islam can be in truly forging a peace?

Al-Sharif: Doubtless the religions have a vital role to play in the confidence-building process—in the whole world, not