

From the President's Desk:

Today- April 17, 2008- I woke up at 5:00 am to take an early flight to Washington, DC to attend a meeting. The invitation took me by surprise. I felt humbled and very happy because it meant that we are doing something right with the "Elder Brothers and Sisters Foundation." The meeting was arranged by the United States Conference of Catholics Bishops for Pope Benedict XVI with leaders of other religions. We were asked to be in the lobby of the Hyatt Regency Hotel at 3:30 PM, but I arrived at noon to have lunch with friends that I had not seen in years.

Around 2:00 PM we were told to meet in the social hall on the 11th floor to obtain security clearance. Upon arrival, we were given an identification card with the name of the meeting, "Peace Our Hope", which was very appropriate for the occasion. A few minutes later I met Sam Miller, from Cleveland, Ohio. Sam is a distinguished member of our Board of Advisors who has been very supportive of our work. While waiting for the buses that would take us to the John Paul II Cultural Center in Downtown Washington, D.C. we were offered some refreshments and light food. During this time we met some of the other individuals that were invited to the event, most were religious leaders spanning five different religions.

We were transported to the Cultural Center in comfortable buses promptly on time. There were approximately 150 guests. Upon our arrival we went through very tight security. We were given a beautiful program and each of us had a designated seat identified with our name. It was approximately 4:00 PM when we were seated. I reviewed the program while we continued to exchange business cards. Sam and I were seated in the same area.

At 6:15 PM we were able to see through a glass window of the atrium where the Pope Mobile was moving towards the John Paul II Cultural Center building and where Pope Benedict XVI was riding with a long caravan of cars behind him. At 6:30 PM sharp, His Holiness entered the beautiful room. He sat in a very impressive chair. Bishop. Richard J. Sklba, Chairman of the Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs of the United Conference of Catholics Bishops, made some welcoming remarks and served as the Master of Ceremonies for the event.

Bishop Sklba introduced His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI who read a very substantive speech in English that lasted approximately twenty minutes. All present were attentively listening to the speech, which contained strong statements about the importance of the interfaith dialogue, human rights, freedom and peace above all other concepts.

After the speech by His Holiness, five young individuals representing Judaism, Islam, Jainism, Buddhism and Hinduism made presentations of symbols of peace to the Pope.

Once these symbols of peace were presented, leaders from each of the five religions mentioned above greeted the Pope. Each of these religious leaders had the opportunity to shake His hand and chat momentarily. There were three Rabbis, the first was Rabbi Gilbert S. Rosenthal, Executive Director of the National Council of Synagogues, who has shown strong support to our Foundation.

I commend the organizers: the staff of the Secretariat of Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs of the USCCB, who put on this event, among them Rev. James Massa and Fr. Dennis McManus who we met during the course of our activities in the Foundation.

During the evening we had the opportunity to talk to His Eminence Cardinal William H. Keeler, Archbishop Emeritus of Baltimore. A member of our Board of Advisors, Cardinal Keeler, whom we had invited weeks before to visit Synagogue Temple Beth Sholom in Miami Beach on May 13, 2008. We had also the opportunity to talk briefly with His Eminence Francis Cardinal George, Archbishop of Chicago and Chairman of the USCCB. I asked permission to communicate with him at a later date. He agreed, and I intend to follow up as soon as the opportunity arises.

After part of the program was finished, the Master of Ceremonies went to the microphone and announced that the Pope was inviting the Jewish leaders present to move to another room in the John Paul II Cultural Center because He wanted to give us blessings for the celebration of Passover that was going to start in 48 hours. Approximately 50 of us gathered in a beautiful room where the Pope spoke for a few minutes and gave each of us a blank envelope. Inside we found a letter signed by Him with the Blessing for Passover. As His Holiness walked out of the room he shook hands with most of us while photographers captured the moment on film.

To finish the long day all the guests were invited to the social hall of the John Paul II Cultural Center. To my surprise among the food offered Sam Miller and I found some matzos. I broke one matzo for Sam and I to eat. It is interesting that the first matzo that we ate in this year Passover was a courtesy of His Holiness. No one could have thought 50 years ago that something such as this would ever happen.

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