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### Interfaith gathering 'makes history'

South Florida religious leaders work to improve relations 20 years after pope's visit to Rome synagogue.

ANA RODRIGUEZ-SOTO - MIAMI BEACH



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Saying they were "making history," not just remembering it, Catholics, Muslims, Jews and Protestants came together at a local synagogue Jan. 17 to strengthen the ties between the different faith groups in south Florida.



Jim Howe, executive director of the Miami Coalition of Christians and Jews, speaks prior to the panel discussion among, from left: Rabbi Fred Klein, Archbishop John C. Favalora, Rev. Priscilla Felisky-Whitehead and Imam Nasir Ahmad.

The interfaith gathering at Temple Emanu El observed the 20th anniversary of Pope John Paul II's historic visit to a Rome synagogue on April 13, 1986. According to organizers, Miami was the first place to commemorate the anniversary. They hope others will follow, and the date will become an interfaith holiday.

"We are expanding our dialogue. We're taking this forward and making history," said Jim Howe, executive director of the Miami Coalition of Christians and Jews (see accompanying story).

Howe served as moderator for the panel discussion among four local religious leaders:

Archbishop John C. Favalora; Rabbi Fred Klein, executive vice president of the Greater Miami Rabbinical Association; Imam Nasir Ahmad of the Masjid Al-Ansar in Miami; and Rev. Priscilla Felisky-Whitehead of the Church by the Sea in Bal Harbour.

The discussion followed a dramatic reading by three students from the Jewish Leadership Institute of the words exchanged by the pope, Rome's chief rabbi and the president of Rome's Jewish community in 1986.

'The old dichotomies of our society — infidel, Jew, believer, Muslim, Christian — could no longer stand.'

**Rabbi Fred Klein**

Rabbi Klein called that visit — the first time since St. Peter that a pope had visited a Jewish synagogue — “a major resolution. (The pope) understood that history was at a threshold. The old dichotomies of our society — infidel, Jew, believer, Muslim, Christian — could no longer stand.”

Rabbi Klein referred to the technological revolution that has made the world so much smaller, saying it also posed the danger that “a local conflict can become global.”

“Each of us must accompany the other in this new reality,” Rabbi Klein said. Religious leaders “could continue arguing for the next century” or they could choose to “talk about the ultimate value of human life and the sacred value of diversity.”

Rev. Felisky-Whitehead noted that her own faith tradition, the United Church of Christ, had adopted a statement shortly after the pope's visit to the synagogue stating that “Judaism has not been superseded by Christianity ... God is faithful in keeping covenant.”

She said people of faith must not just tolerate but respect each other “without seeing that as a compromise to our own faith and its integrity.”

“We're first cousins,” Imam Ahmad said, referring to the fact that Jews and Christians trace their lineage to Isaac, Abraham's son by his wife Sarah, while Muslims trace theirs to Ishmael, Abraham's son by his concubine Hagar.

“God has placed us into tribes and into nations not that we despise one another but so that we learn from one another,” said Imam Ahmad, quoting from the Quran, Islam's holy book.

The pope's visit to the Rome synagogue was “the fulfillment of those prophetic statements,” he said. “This is the will God, which we recognize. Technology, the Internet, is also the will of God and it's bringing humanity back together.”



**Archbishop Favalora speaks as fellow panelists listen. At left is Rabbi Fred Klein; to the archbishop's right are Rev. Priscilla Felisky-Whitehead and Imam Nasir Ahmad.**

Archbishop Favalora noted that Pope John Paul II taught more powerfully by his deeds than by the thousands of words he wrote.

"If he hadn't said one word in the synagogue, (his visit) spoke volumes. What he did, in a sense, was a homily, a sermon on all that went before in the history of Jews and Christians — just the simple gesture of going," the archbishop said.

"This event tonight bespeaks the good will of people of good faith, of all of Abraham's children," the archbishop said. But, he stressed, "It's by doing that we really accomplish what (the pope) was trying to teach us."

"The root problem is we don't live by what we say we believe," the archbishop added. "There is no room for bigotry or prejudice in any of the great religions."

"I was very moved by the honor that they gave to Pope John Paul II," said Jimmy Grebe, a seminarian from the Diocese of Pensacola-Tallahassee who attended with his classmates from St. John Vianney College Seminary in Miami. "I didn't realize how meaningful what he did and what he said was to the Jewish people."



**Temple Emanu El cantors Karina Zilberman, left, and George Mordecai closed the interfaith gathering with songs in Hebrew, English and Spanish.**

A group of 15 teenagers from Corpus Christi Parish in Wynwood served as ushers at the interfaith gathering.

"They have to realize we belong to the same roots," said Father Jose Luis Menendez, pastor of Corpus Christi. "Without the Old Testament we don't have a foundation."

"Our goal now is to export this to the world," said Bernardo Benes, a retired banker and Cuban Jew who founded a non-profit group, the Elder Brothers and Sisters Foundation, to educate people against anti-Semitism by stressing the words and deeds of Pope John Paul II.

The foundation has printed a four-page brochure, "John Paul II and the Jews," which is available in three languages — English, Spanish and Creole — and soon will be available in Polish.

The brochure was approved by Eugene Fisher, associate director of the U.S. bishops' Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, who recently shared it with Poland's chief rabbi.

"We are going to finance the printing of the first 30,000" in Polish, Benes said.

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