

KEEPING FAITH WITH OUR INTERRELIGIOUS
PARTNERS IN A TIME OF WAR – INVITED SESSION

Topic: Keeping Faith with Our Interreligious Partners in a Time of War
 Convener: Elena Procario-Foley, Iona University
 Moderator: Elena Procario-Foley, Iona University
 Presenters: Heather Miller Rubens, Institute for Islamic, Christian, and Jewish
 Studies
 W.G.B.M. Pim Valkenberg, Catholic University of America
 Philip Cunningham, Saint Joseph's University

In response to an invitation from President-Elect Nancy Pineda-Madrid to create a session that addressed the Israel– Hamas War, Elena Procario-Foley recruited a panel of Catholics specializing in interreligious dialogue to determine the best approach for such a complex and potentially painful session. Two stages of planning ensued. The first task involved several rounds of consultation to yield a topic that fell within the group's competence. Then the group entered into a series of Zoom meetings, deciding that the session should be a workshop so that everyone who attended could learn from each other, knowing there are no easy answers.

The workshop included five parts: Introduction, Reflective Interlude I, Keeping Faith panel discussion, Reflective Interlude II, and Engaging Participant Dialogue. The introduction attempted to set a tone for the gathering, beginning with an explanation of the process and a frank admission that none of the panelists came lightly to the topic. Everyone was invited to pray together the words of Ruth Duck's hymn, *Healing River of the Spirit*. After the prayer, the panelists offered self-introductions explaining the context of their work, the limits of their expertise, and how the Israel– Hamas War affected them as well as their work. As executive director of the Institute for Islamic, Christian, and Jewish Studies in Baltimore (ICJS), Miller Rubens explained that she was able to continue programming throughout the conflict while striving to be a trusted convener of people who hold radically different positions. Valkenberg described his situation at Catholic University. Focused on Catholic– Muslim dialogue, he teaches a class on the Abrahamic traditions and he reported that this year was a true journey with his Jewish and Muslim students. He observed that there is less and less common ground and he cannot assume anything in the classroom, but conversation in the classroom remains important. Cunningham reaffirmed that there is a value in just speaking with each other even when there is a fear that one might offend another. His work is focused in Jewish– Catholic dialogue as the co-director of the Institute for Jewish– Catholic Relations at Saint Joseph's University in Philadelphia, which also continued to offer programs of dialogue.

After hearing the panelists locate their work within the context of the conflict, participants were invited to spend time doing the same by writing responses to prompts concerning their work, interreligious partners, and possible blind spots surrounding the conflict.

Panelists then engaged in thirty minutes of conversation emphasizing a variety of points about dialogue in times of conflict. Dialogue is not about agreement but about improving the quality of our disagreements. Dialogue is about changing oneself and

not the mind of the other. Dialogue is listening to the fears and anxieties of one's dialogue partner. Catholics do not face the existential threats that their Jewish and Muslim dialogue partners face. Dialogue depends on the strength of existing relationships and the war has demonstrated that some of those relationships were not strong enough; some dialogues failed and will need to be rebuilt, particularly Catholic–Muslim dialogues according to one panelist.

The final forty-five minutes were dedicated to the participants. Attendees were asked to share their written reflections with a partner for ten minutes. Open plenary discussion followed as demonstrated by these representative remarks: The work of reconciliation has to pay attention to race, economics, and the assumption that Jews are all white. Restorative Justice Circles have been successful in classroom settings and Restorative Justice can play a role in stopping mass atrocity. Keeping local relationships going is essential. A just war expert lamented the immense complexity. Catholics in the dialogue must keep faith with fellow Christians in the Holy Land and draw on Catholic social teaching because the conflict is a fundamental moral issue, not an interreligious issue. Humanity is being denied at West Bank checkpoints. The Hamas attacks on October 7, 2023 were immoral, but that does not grant an open pass to retribution.

The dialogue was respectful, including a wide range of sometimes opposing ideas and opinions. Panelists offered concluding words, thanking those gathered for their vulnerable participation. Panelists emphasized that dialogue must lead to self-criticism and that *Nostra Aetate* cannot be taken for granted. Moreover, interreligious friendship cannot be short-circuited to personal relationships. The need is for what Pope Francis calls social friendship. A caution was offered that the conflict has multiple sides, not “two.” The sins of racism, misogyny, Islamophobia, and antisemitism must be dismantled simultaneously if we are to seek a social salvation.

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