

## **International Interreligious Affairs highlights – July-September 2009**

### **David Rosen**

#### **July-September The Saudi interfaith initiative**

In July in Vienna, a follow up working conference was held by the Saudi government together with World Muslim League, continuing the initiative of King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz of Saudi Arabia, further to the meetings he convened in Madrid and New York (at the UN.) This gathering received notice of the King's intention is to establish an international center for interreligious dialogue and as a result of the collaboration with the UN, the Norwegian diplomat Terje Roed-Larsen was mandated by the Saudi government to convene a working group to determine the format, function and oversight of this center in accordance with King Abdullah's desire to bring together religious leaders/representatives from the different faiths on a regular basis to address the major challenges of our times. A working group was established of some nine institutions and/or religious representatives including the Vatican and Canterbury. I was honored to be the Jewish representative and in addition to the Saudi representative the group included one the most prominent Lebanese Muslim scholars. The Hindu and Buddhist representatives are yet to be appointed. During the following months (in August in Rome and in September in Geneva) this committee met to formulate the structure and modus operandi of the center.

#### **Rome in August**

While in Rome, I had meetings at the Vatican to which I was accompanied by my colleague AJC's representative in Rome to the Holy See, Lisa Palmieri Billig. In addition to meetings at the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews presided over by Cardinal Kasper, we met with the President of the Council on Doctrine and Faith, Cardinal William Levada to explore ways in which we might resolve or at least overcome the hurdles created by the latest statements issued by the United States Conference of Bishops. Despite the reports from within the USCCB that these initiatives actually came from the Vatican, Cardinal Levada indicated that as far as the Holy See is concerned, this is a US matter that needs to be resolved in America. Nevertheless we were able to make some constructive suggestions which the Cardinal promised to convey to his colleagues in the US. (see:<http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?cid=1251133671103&pagename=JPost%2FJP%2FShowFull> ) Happily the US bishops did subsequently issue an important reclarification that diffused the crisis.

#### **Council of the Religious Institutions of the Holy Land**

Earlier in the month the Council of the Religious Institutions of the Holy Land of which I am a part, launched its first programmatic initiative. This is the first joint International, Israeli, Palestinian review of educational textbooks used in Israeli and Palestinian schools. On the basis of this sophisticated review procedure (supported by USAID) and using inter alia sophisticated technology developed by the University of Syracuse, the Council will be able to make concrete recommendations to the respective Israeli and Palestinian authorities.

#### **Krakow in September** **the Sant Egidio Interfaith conference**

While the numbers of people entering “holy orders” of the Catholic Church has diminished drastically in recent decades, since the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council there has been a flourishing of “lay” communities in which people undertake “lifestyle commitments” in the name of their Catholic faith.

One of the most well know of these is the community of Sant Egidio , founded some forty years ago in Rome by a group of teenagers led by Andrea Riccardi, today a professor of Church history. Dedicated to working with the poor, vulnerable and elderly in Italy, they worked with marginalized immigrant groups and became experts in the lives of non-Catholic Christians and Muslims both among the immigrants and in their lands of origin, as a result. Accordingly, they became involved both in the field of political conflict resolution (e.g. they were the go-between the government and rebels in Mozambique, bringing peace to that country) and interfaith relations. Following on from the First World Prayer for Peace in Assisi convened by Pope John Paul II in 1986, they started holding international interfaith gatherings of unparalleled hierarchical status and interreligious variety in different cities in Europe which take place annually. I have participated in almost all of these and this year's meeting was held in Krakow at the invitation of the city's Cardinal Stanislaw Dziwiedz who of course was Pope John Paul II's right hand man both when the latter was in Krakow and in Rome throughout his pontificate.

I was originally asked to speak at the conference on John Paul II and the Spirit of Assisi, but in the end the Chief Rabbi of Israel was unable to be present to speak at the opening session that took place with the participation of Polish national, European Union and African political leadership; and as a result I was asked to speak at the opening as well.

In addition to my presentations (see

<http://www.santegidio.org/index.php?pageID=903&res=1&idLng=1064&idTesto=92> ) I

gave a number of interviews including to Vatican Radio (

<http://www.radiovaticana.org/EN1/Articolo.asp?c=314783> )

The most significant part of this year's meeting was a day devoted to paying tribute at Auschwitz-Birkenau to the memory of the victims of the Shoah. The hundred of religious leaders, Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, Shinto , Zoroastrian, together with thousands of Catholics from the Sant Egidio community and from Polish communities came together in a moving expression of solidarity and the day was held as a fast day for the participants.