COLUMBAN CENTRE FOR CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS

Bridges

Building relationships between Christians and Muslims

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From the Editor

No food! No water! No medicines! No shelter! No security! No peace! No justice! No end in sight! No words to describe the utterly appalling man-made horror unfolding in Gaza.

Silence in the face of this immense suffering is appropriate. It is the pain-filled but respectful recognition of our common humanity.

However, fear and personal inadequacy to challenge this situation produce a compromised silence, rightly construed as complicity, or even worse, consent. This shame-filled silence is a denial of our common humanity and is unacceptable. We must speak truth to lies, call out injustice, show mercy to the suffering, and side with the victims.

But to speak is also fraught. Our words are ever inadequate to the immensity of present suffering and its historical roots. They can easily be misconstrued by one side or the other.

I think of the dilemma of Jean Val Jean in *Les Misérables*:

> *If I speak, I am condemned.*
> *If I stay silent, I am damned!*

Many speak of "paralysis", an inability to respond, affecting individuals, groups, and governments. World leaders seem unable to challenge Israel and Hamas prosecuting the war with such dire consequences and so little regard for civilians.

Moved by compassion for human suffering, many take part in protests and rallies. But inspired by strong convictions and deep loyalties, some are so consumed by partisan concerns that they have no space for the 'other'.

Jean Val Jean's dilemma led him to ask, "Who am I?" The iniquities of the Israel-Hamas war confront us with the same question: "Who am I?" Dare I speak? Do I stay silent? What does my choice say about me? We are on trial. Our response to this tragedy reveals our human decency or lack of it!

While most of us cannot change the course of world history in dramatic and decisive ways, there are four things that we can do. We must do all in our power to uphold international law. It is the only legal standard to expose war crimes. We must defend the common human dignity of all peoples. It is the only ethical/moral standard that can vanquish human enmity. We must preserve peace in our hearts and our neighbourhoods. It is the balm that can calm violent passions. We must practice justice in our circle of influence. It is the cord that binds us to each other and to God. May God help us to choose and act responsibly.

REV DR PATRICK McINERNEY

Abraham Conference Prayer Service for Peace



On 12 June 2025, faith leaders and community members gathered for the Abraham Conference Prayer Service for Peace at St Stephen's Uniting Church in Sydney. It was a call for peace, justice, and understanding. **Kim Chong**, secretary for the organising committee, joined Jewish, Christian, and Muslim members in leading the service. Prayers and scripture readings in Hebrew, Arabic, and English emphasised compassion, unity, and shared responsibility for peace. A candle-lighting ceremony featured representatives from each Abrahamic faith saying "peace" in English, Hebrew, and Arabic. The service closed with Pope Francis' *Prayer for the Earth* in Hebrew, English and Hindi/Urdu. Participants were offered olive sprigs to take home, symbolising reconciliation. *For media report, see bit.ly/4ohMyXx*.



Walking Together in Faith and Dialogue

From 30-31 May 2025, the "Walking Together" Conference, hosted by the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, brought together clergy, religious, and laity from across the country to deepen their commitment to Christian unity and interfaith dialogue. Held at Mary MacKillop Place in North Sydney, the event opened with a shared liturgy and keynote from Bishop Philip Huggins, who emphasised dialogue as a vocation rooted in Christ's love. Rev Professor Dan Madigan SJ reflected on the enduring relevance of *Nostra Aetate*. Breakout sessions and theological reflections included one marking the 1,700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea, the other a multifaith panel offering lived insights from Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, and Jewish perspectives in relation to *Nostra Aetate*. In these sessions, participants were invited to consider unity not as sameness, but as an expression of divine grace. The conference concluded with a renewed call to be people of encounter, peace, and shared mission. For media report, *see bit.ly/3GNL5aQ*.

Truth as the Basis for Peace



On 25 June 2025, Centre Director **Fr Patrick McInerney** (pictured) and Sr Susan Connelly were panellists for the annual Tri-Diocesan Social Justice Evening. The topic was the Bishops' 2024 Social Justice Statement, *Truth and Peace: A Gospel Word in a Violent World*. Countering the "fake news", misinformation, and disinformation that are rampant on social media, Fr Patrick affirmed the importance of objective truth as the basis for trust between people, and ultimately, for peace. He asserted that truth is not just "out there" but is intimately personal; it is about being true to oneself. To those tempted to weaponise the truths of revelation against others, Fr Patrick quoted the 1991 *Dialogue and Proclamation*, "In the last analysis, truth is not a thing we possess, but a person by whom we must allow ourselves to be possessed." He stressed the importance of interreligious dialogue for expanding our horizons on God, self, others, and the world, and invited participants to get to know and love their neighbours, in accord with the Gospel command.

For media report, see bit.ly/4f1p84o.

Photos: Cover: Jaber Jehad Badwan creator QS:P170,Q132188370, bit.ly/3UG4Owf; Diocese of Parramatta; Kim Chong



Youth Lead the Way in Interfaith Engagement at John XXIII Catholic College

On 1 July 2025, John XXIII Catholic College in Western Sydney hosted a vibrant interfaith workshop co-organised by Muslim student leader Ibrahim Asif Shah Khan, the Diocese of Parramatta Interfaith Commission, the Columban Centre for Christian-Muslim Relations, and Together for Humanity. The Centre and Interfaith Commission provided a workshop introducing the students to interreligious dialogue in the Catholic Church, drawing on teachings from *Nostra Aetate* and *Dialogue and Mission*. Students explored practical ways to engage across faiths with empathy and respect. Highlights included a Golden Rule game, faith-sharing by Jewish, Christian, and Muslim presenters, and reflections on shared values between Islam and Christianity. These sessions aimed to build understanding in one of Australia's most diverse regions, fostering unity, compassion, and the skills needed to be bridge-builders in today's pluralistic world.

For media report, see bit.ly/45oY2kQ.

Christian and Muslim Women Unite in Compassionate Food Drive



On 27 May 2025, the Western Sydney Women's IntHERfaith Initiative, in partnership with Good Shepherd Parish Plumpton, Australian Catholic University, and the Diocese of Parramatta's Interfaith Commission, hosted a women-led Christian-Muslim food drive for the House of Sakinah. This Mt Druitt-based Muslim charity supports women and children escaping domestic violence, families facing homelessness, and migrant women. The event celebrated shared values of compassion and service. Muslim women spoke about their faith and the upcoming *Hajj* (Pilgrimage) deepening understanding across faiths. With strong community support, four carloads of groceries were donated. The initiative not only provided practical help but strengthened bonds between Christian and Muslim women, showing that unity grows through acts of kindness and collaboration. *For media report, see bit.ly/40Hk2EL.*

Commitments to Peace

In June-July 2024, the Centre signed two important international peace statements:



(1) *We as people of faith join in solidarity, with our voices and our power, for disarmament, nuclear abolition, and ways of being that are in the right relationship.* These are the opening words of a joint interfaith statement marking 80 years since the first atomic detonation in New Mexico on 16 July 1945, and the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki on 6 and 9 August 1945. The statement details the cost and destruction of nuclear weapons, of testing, of accidents, and the human responsibility to work for justice and peace.



(2) Similarly, Pax Christi International called on delegates to a High-Level International Conference for the Peaceful Settlement of the Question of Palestine to take "concrete and meaningful steps toward a just and lasting peace for the Palestinian people, in accordance with international law and the two-state solution". It made eight recommendations, concluding with the following appeal: *The eyes of the world, and the hopes of millions, rest upon your leadership. This is the moment to break the cycle of suffering, and to forge a just and lasting peace.* *For the* Joint Interfaith Statement*, see bit.ly/InterfaithAug2025.*

For the Pax Christi statement*, see bit.ly/3I9IesV.*

Pope Leo XIV Expands Interfaith Dialogue Office with Global Appointments



On 3 July 2025, Pope Leo XIV appointed Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa, Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, to the Vatican's Dicastery for Interreligious Dialogue, alongside several new members from more than 20 countries. Other key appointees include Cardinal Dominique Mathieu (Tehran), Cardinal Tarcisio Isao Kikuchi (Tokyo), Archbishop Jacques Mourad (Homs), and Bishop Paolo Martinelli (Southern Arabia). The diverse group reflects Pope Leo's commitment to globalising the Church's interfaith outreach. These appointments follow earlier decisions naming Cardinal George Jacob Koovakad as Prefect and Father Laurent Basanese as head of office. The Dicastery fosters respectful relationships between the Catholic Church and other religions. New members represent regions including the Middle East, Asia, Africa, and the Americas, underscoring the Vatican's emphasis on inclusivity, dialogue, and peaceful coexistence in a religiously diverse world. *Condensed and adapted from bit.ly/4f32KIb.*

King Charles Urges Greater Understanding of Muslim World

King Charles has emphasised the urgent need for deeper understanding and respect between the West and the Muslim world, calling it "more imperative than ever". Speaking at the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies – where he made a landmark speech in 1993 as Prince of Wales – he praised the Centre's four decades of promoting interfaith dialogue. Marking its 40th anniversary, the King unveiled a new wing named in his honor. The event was attended by faith leaders, including the Bishop of Oxford and Sultan Muhammad Sa'ad Abubakar III, who advocates against extremism. Charles highlighted the Centre's work as crucial amid global tensions, citing conflict zones like Gaza, Yemen, and Iran. He reaffirmed his commitment to representing all faiths, despite his role as Supreme Governor of the Church of England. Dr Farhan Nizami, the Centre's director, said the King's engagement with faith stems from deep-rooted tradition, enabling him to foster true interfaith understanding. *Condensed and adapted from bit.ly/46nDFoW.*

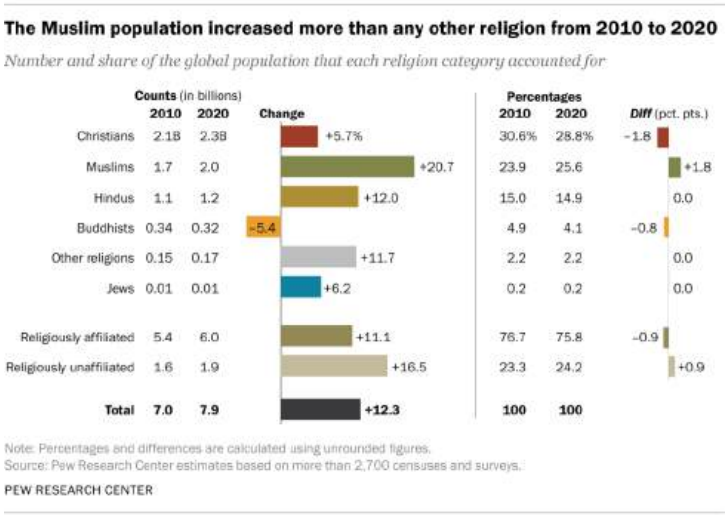
Young Leaders Complete Interfaith Summer Course on Migration



In July, 10 students from Africa, Europe, and the Middle East completed the World Council of Churches' Certificate of Advanced Studies in Interreligious Studies at the Ecumenical Institute in Bossey, Switzerland. Centered on "Migration in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam", the six-week course combined distance learning, residential study, workshops, and interfaith dialogue. Participants explored faith-based responses to migration, identity, and belonging, gaining tools to engage in global interreligious work. Faculty leaders, including Rev Dr Kuzipa Nalwamba and Sheikh Hafid Ouardiri, praised the students' honesty, courage, and compassion. Graduates leave as "harmonised companions in dialogue", ready to share their experiences and build bridges across faiths. The course nurtures young leaders as multipliers of peace, unity, and understanding in a divided world. *Condensed and adapted from bit.ly/46T0HEq and bit.ly/3U433ZD.*

Photos: PA; Fr Lawrence Iwuamadi/WCC; John W. Coleman, UM News; Msgr. Fairbanks

Muslims Fastest-Growing Faith Group Globally, Pew Study Finds



A new Pew Research Center study shows that Muslims were the fastest-growing religious group between 2010 and 2020, increasing by 347 million people – more than all other religions combined. This growth is largely due to high birth rates and concentrations in rapidly growing regions like sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East. Christianity, while still the world's largest religion with 2.3 billion adherents, declined slightly as a share of the global population. The religiously unaffiliated – or "nones" – now form the third-largest group, rising significantly in Europe, North America, and Asia-Pacific. Pew's analysis, based on more than 2,700 sources from 201 countries, also tracked religious switching for the first time. Buddhism saw a net loss, while Hinduism and Judaism grew modestly. Researchers noted that demographics, including fertility and migration, play a key role in shaping the global religious landscape. *Condensed and adapted from bit.ly/455Wk6B and bit.ly/4kOCC4T.*



Philadelphia Church Shares Worship Space with Muslim Community

St Luke United Methodist Church in Bryn Mawr, near Philadelphia, has opened its fellowship hall to the As-Salaam Islamic Society, offering space for Friday prayers, Sunday school, and community events. This partnership, led by Rev Mark Salvacion (right, centre), reflects the United Methodist Church's 2024 resolution encouraging stronger interfaith ties. The collaboration began after a local mosque closed in 2018, leaving many Muslim families without a place to gather. The relationship goes beyond a rental agreement, with the two communities sharing meals, co-leading Bible and Qur'an studies, and joining in service projects. Despite some backlash, Rev Salvacion remains committed to fostering unity. "We must care about each other, especially our neighbors," he said. Both communities see their cooperation as a living example of shared values, mutual respect, and faith in action – planting seeds of peace in a diverse and changing society. *Condensed and adapted from bit.ly/3IYl4WE and bit.ly/3UoaiLX.*

Interfaith Pilgrims Explore Spain's Shared Faith History

From 19-26 May 2025, 27 interfaith pilgrims – Muslims, Jews, and Christians – traveled through Andalusia, Spain, to explore its rich history of religious coexistence. The trip, themed "One Culture, Three Religions", focused on *La Convivencia*, a medieval period (711-1492) when the three faiths lived, collaborated, and sometimes clashed in Iberia. Sponsored by Peace Islands and the National Council of Synagogues, the group visited cities including Córdoba, Seville, and Granada. They toured iconic sites like Córdoba's Mosque-Cathedral and Seville's Church of Santa María la Blanca, both of which reflect layered religious histories. Pilgrims engaged with local faith leaders and reflected on shared Abrahamic roots, emphasising respect and understanding. The journey aimed to build lasting interfaith relationships by learning from the past and embracing the diversity of today's increasingly secular and multicultural Spain.
Condensed and adapted from bit.ly/452q7DV.



Healing a Fractured World: A Call for Dialogue

US theologian shares powerful vision for interfaith dialogue by Belinda Gadd

In a time of racial and religious prejudice and disconnection, where religion is often used to exclude rather than unite, what role can Catholicism and interfaith leadership play in healing the world?

This was the challenge posed by US theologian and Catholic priest Professor Leo Lefebure at a public lecture on Thursday 26 June 2025 at the Bishop Bede Heather Centre in Blacktown (pictured). Hosted by the Columban Centre for Christian-Muslim Relations (CCCMR) and supported by the Interfaith Commission Diocese of Parramatta, a diverse audience listened to Professor Leo's vision of faith traditions as bridges of encounter, healing and hope in today's fractured world.

Rev Dr Patrick McInerney, Director, CCCMR, introduced Professor Leo, commenting on his "breadth and depth and reach of his knowledge and experience in world religions and interfaith relations" and his ability to "trace things back to their roots and bring them to the present moment".

Professor Leo is a Catholic priest from the Archdiocese of Chicago and a leading scholar in interreligious dialogue. He holds the Matteo Ricci Chair of Theology at Georgetown University and is the author of *Transforming Interreligious Relations*, among other works. He serves in several international interfaith roles.

Professor Leo addressed what he described as a dual crisis – the misuse of religion in politics and a global ecological emergency. "In a number of contexts around the globe … religious leaders have shaped political and cultural life by constructing or encouraging toxic forms of ethnic or racialised religious identity that support the dominance of one group over others.

"Today, in my country, the United States, we see a resurgence of white racist Christian nationalism that prizes white Christians as the true citizens of America and looks down on persons of colour and those who are not Christian." In such cases, "the religious, the cultural, the political, can hardly be distinguished".

On the environmental front, Professor Leo spoke of the "ecological situation", driven by what Pope Francis calls the "technocratic paradigm" – valuing all human activity by its profitability. "To a large degree, the development of contemporary politics and culture has relied on the exploitation of natural resources with a reckless fervour," he said. Professor Leo affirmed Pope Francis's rejection of such views.



"He decried technocracy in our world and held up the example of Francis of Assisi as a patron of ecology."

In response to these global challenges, Professor Leo proposed five areas for building interreligious encounter: aesthetics, academic sharing, spiritual encounter, concern for the world, and friendship. On aesthetics, he said, "Art, music and literature can express with revolutionary power the suffering of the marginalised, and it can invite empathy, compassion, solidarity with them." Academic life, he noted, "can also be a grace-filled exploration of the wonders of a world open to transcendence and the sacred".

He emphasised the need for genuine spiritual encounter, noting, "all of Christian life is subject to distortion ... the Catholic Church has a conflicted history". Recalling Pope John Paul II's 1986 invitation to religious leaders to pray for peace in Assisi, he said, "He acknowledged that we need to ask forgiveness for the sins that earlier generations of Catholics have committed against followers of other traditions."

On shared concern for the world, Professor Leo reflected on Pope Benedict XV, who gave away all the money of the Holy See during World War I. "He didn't care if you were Jewish or Muslim or Eastern Orthodox or Catholic." As a result, a statue of Benedict XV was erected in Istanbul. Finally, on friendship, he said technocracy values all relationships by their profitability. "One of the greatest losses in technocratic paradigms is that there's no room for a genuine friendship."

This event aligns with the Diocesan Pastoral Plan priorities of Mission and Listening, Dialogue and Discernment, for a welcoming and inclusive Church.

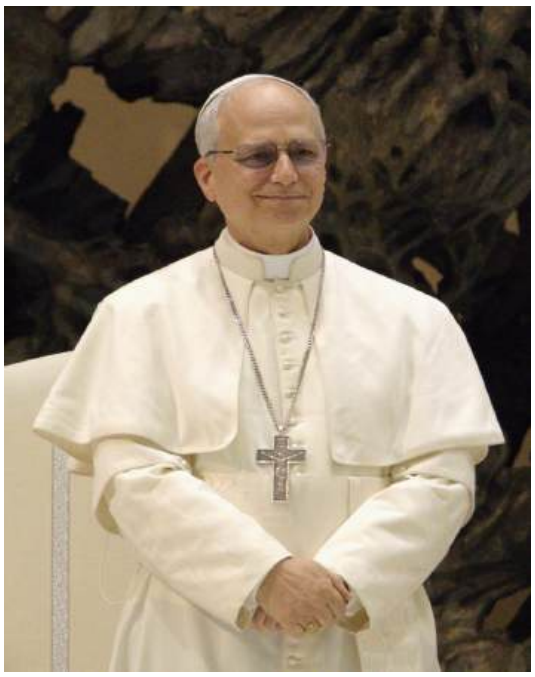
Condensed and adapted from bit.ly/4l5RiwK.

View the lecture in full at youtu.be/ 5GKANczYCo.

Photo: Kim Chong; Edgar Beltrán, The Pillar, CC BY-SA 4.0

Pope Leo XIV's Embrace of Interfaith Dialogue

Pope Leo XIV begins papacy with bold call for interfaith unity



In the early days of his papacy, Pope Leo XIV has made one message abundantly clear: dialogue and bridge-building will be cornerstones of his leadership, especially in relations with Jews, Muslims, and people of other faiths. Following in the footsteps of Pope Francis, Leo's initial outreach signals a strong continuation – and potential expansion – of the Church's commitment to interreligious harmony.

From his first public address on 8 May 2025, Pope Leo emphasised openness, dialogue, and compassion. "Like this square, open to all," he said, referring to St Peter's Square, "so too must our hearts be – open to all who need our charity, our presence, dialogue, love".

His message echoed the vision of his predecessor, Pope Francis, who championed interfaith dialogue not as a political gesture, but as a spiritual and humanitarian imperative.

Just days into his pontificate, Pope Leo held a private call with Grand Imam Ahmed al-Tayeb of Al-Azhar. Pope Francis and al-Tayeb co-authored the historic 2019 *Document on Human Fraternity*, promoting peace, justice, and mutual respect. Pope Leo reaffirmed this legacy in his meeting with Mohamed Abdelsalam, a key architect of that document, expressing eagerness to continue the collaboration.

Muslim scholar Mehnaz Afridi, director of the Holocaust, Genocide and Interfaith Education Center at Manhattan College, highlighted Pope Leo's formation at Chicago's Catholic Theological Union and Villanova University – both hubs of interfaith dialogue. She also noted symbolic connections between the pope's Augustinian spirituality and shared Islamic beliefs, such as the centrality of God and the reverence for Mary, honoured in both the Bible and the Qur'an.

Key Jewish leaders also took note. Rabbi Noam Marans of the American Jewish Committee praised Leo's direct commitment to continue dialogue "in the spirit of *Nostra Aetate*", the Second Vatican Council's groundbreaking 1965 declaration that affirmed Jewish-Catholic kinship and denounced antisemitism.

Pope Leo's Chicago roots and American background were also seen as promising; scholars like Adam Gregerman noted that many of the most fruitful Catholic-Jewish relationships have developed in the US, where large Jewish and Catholic communities interact regularly.

During his audience with religious delegations following his inauguration, Pope Leo reaffirmed that "now is the time for dialogue and building bridges". He emphasised "human fraternity" as a path shared by all faiths and praised religious leaders for their efforts toward peace. Recalling Pope Francis' insistence on unity through encounter, Leo stressed mutual respect, freedom of conscience, and collaboration as the only path forward.

By continuing Francis' legacy of authentic friendship and reciprocal understanding – particularly with Jewish and Muslim communities – Pope Leo XIV is charting a path for a Church that listens, reaches out, and walks with others in pursuit of peace.

As the world faces rising division and violence, his message is a timely call to unity: "Help us, one and all, to build bridges through dialogue and encounter, joining together as one people, always at peace."

Condensed and adapted from bit.ly/40CtOIe, bit.ly/4lKkII1 and bit.ly/413rslO. Read the 13 May 2025 Address of the Holy Father to Representatives of Other Churches and Ecclesial Communities, and Other Religions.

Beyond War and Towards Reconciliation

Faith leaders unite in Tokyo to call for peace, ceasefire, and reconciliation

At the Third Tokyo Peace Roundtable, 1-3 July 2025, religious leaders from across the globe and from diverse traditions, including Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, and Shintoism, issued a unified and urgent call for peace. Coming from war-torn regions such as Ukraine, Palestine, Myanmar, and Sudan, delegates from more than a dozen countries gathered in Tokyo and online to reaffirm that peace is possible.

Rooted in their sacred teachings, participants focused on building trust and advancing the Tokyo Peace Process. They addressed the escalating global crises that link armed conflict, displacement, climate change, and humanitarian disasters. Throughout three days of prayer, dialogue, and reflection, leaders pledged to deepen cooperation across faiths and act as moral voices for nonviolence, reconciliation, and justice. The collective statement, , affirmed that **all life is sacred** and that **sustainable peace** must be rooted in mercy, compassion, and love, not superiority or domination. It emphasised that **forgiveness**, though*Beyond Reconciliation: Multi-Religious Peace Roundtables* difficult, is essential to breaking cycles of violence, and that **women** must be integral to peacebuilding efforts. “True peace,” they declared, “**cannot be built for profit**”.

Specific **commitments** followed. The roundtable called for an **immediate and unconditional ceasefire** in all conflict zones, including Ukraine and Gaza. Participants pledged to **host Israeli and Palestinian religious leaders in future dialogue**, as their absence at the roundtable – due to war and closed airspace – highlighted the urgency for reconciliation.

A new **Multi-Religious Youth Peace Exchange** will empower young leaders from affected regions, equipping them with tools for grassroots peacebuilding. The roundtable also **urged protected and expanded humanitarian aid**, **condemning the use of starvation as a weapon** and calling for the protection of aid workers and refugees.

Leaders also decried the destruction of holy sites, reiterating that **protecting places of worship is essential** to safeguarding religious freedom and community identity. The group **reaffirmed the sanctity of human life and dignity**, and called for **universal disarmament**, the **protection of children**, and **respect for international law**.

Long-term plans include **continuous conflict monitoring**, **advancing forgiveness** as a courageous act, and **facilitating national dialogues** in war-affected nations. The Tokyo Peace Process will also **expand its multi-stakeholder network**, bridging religious, governmental, and civil society actors to sustain peace efforts on the ground.



Crowded Sensō-ji Temple in Asakusa, Tokyo.

As 2025 marks the UN’s International Year of Peace and Trust, the roundtable’s message was both a prayer and a plan: a collective commitment to ensure that peace is not only preached but practiced. United in diversity, the faith leaders concluded with a shared vow to continue building a culture of peace, with children and future generations at its heart.

Condensed and adapted from bit.ly/44TrbUW.

Photos: Subhash Suryawanshi, Pexels; Alessandro Para, Inter-Parliamentary Union

Parliamentarians Unite for Global Interfaith Peace

Global parliamentarians unite in Rome to strengthen interfaith dialogue

In a world grappling with escalating conflicts, polarisation, and the misuse of religion to justify violence, hundreds of parliamentarians, religious leaders, UN officials, and civil society representatives from nearly 100 countries convened in Rome from 19-20 June 2025 for the Second Parliamentary Conference on Interfaith Dialogue. Co-hosted by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) and the Italian Parliament with support from Religions for Peace, the conference brought together a diverse coalition committed to fostering peace, trust, and solidarity across faiths and beliefs.

The conference took place amid the Jubilee Year declared by the late Pope Francis, under the guiding theme "Pilgrims of Hope". Delegates had the unique opportunity to meet with the newly appointed Pope Leo XIV on 21 June, reinforcing the spiritual dimension of the event. The gathering was a beacon of parliamentary diplomacy and interfaith cooperation in a time marked by global unrest, wars, and rising intolerance.

The culminating document, the Rome Communiqué, issued by the delegates, condemns unequivocally the exploitation of religion to incite hatred or violence. It underscores the vital role of interfaith dialogue rooted in human dignity, inclusivity, and respect for the rule of law as a means to prevent division, promote healing, and rebuild trust among communities.

The Communiqué calls upon parliamentarians and religious leaders to collaborate actively in advancing justice, protecting vulnerable groups, promoting democratic values, and upholding ethical leadership marked by compassion, accountability, and solidarity. It highlights the crucial need for peace education, digital literacy on human rights, and the empowerment of women, youth, and marginalised populations.

The conference's agenda included vital sessions addressing the rights of religious minorities, countering societal polarisation, fostering women's inclusion in public life, and safeguarding freedom of religion or belief. Prominent participants included Cardinal George Koovakad of the Vatican's Dicastery for Interreligious Dialogue, Rabbi David Saperstein, former US Ambassador for International Religious Freedom, Imam Yahya Pallavicini, Chairman of the European Muslim



Leaders' Majlis, and Miguel Ángel Moratinos, the UN High Representative for the Alliance of Civilizations.

This event built on the momentum from the inaugural Parliamentary Conference on Interfaith Dialogue held in Marrakesh in 2023, which produced the Marrakesh Communiqué. Ahead of the Rome meeting, the IPU released a key report highlighting parliamentarians' pivotal role in engaging constructively with religion and belief to foster just and peaceful societies.

In his keynote address, UN High Representative Miguel Ángel Moratinos emphasised the courage required to engage in dialogue amid a backdrop of growing hate speech, religious intolerance, and conflict. "Dialogue is an act of hope," he declared, urging parliamentarians to build trust "conversation by conversation, action by action". Moratinos framed interfaith and intercultural dialogue as essential to the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations' mission of fostering mutual respect and shared values across humanity's diverse cultures.

Moratinos highlighted parliamentarians' responsibility in shaping laws that protect freedom of religion or belief, fundamental human rights enshrined in universal frameworks. He challenged the assembly to move beyond tolerance toward genuine mutual respect, emphasising the need to listen deeply, find common ground, and build bridges rather than walls.

At a moment when divisive rhetoric and digital amplification of hatred threaten societal cohesion, the conference sent a hopeful message: dialogue can heal, and peace remains within reach if leaders choose empathy, inclusion, and justice. *Condensed and adapted from bit.ly/3IVQiOd, bit.ly/41f14FC and bit.ly/4m51Xc8.*

From Silence to Strength: Women of Faith

Mama Zipora's story and the rise of hope for women in Kwale, Kenya

In the heart of Lunga-Lunga sub-county, under the shade of frangipani trees at a community gathering in Pongwe, a humble yet fierce voice pierces the air. It is the voice of Mama Zipora Nyawera, a long-serving member of the Kwale Women of Faith Network in Kenya. She doesn't need a microphone to be heard; her truth carries through her words. "For years," she begins, "our silence has been our prison. Today, we choose our voices. Today, we choose justice".

Mama Zipora speaks not only for herself but for the many women in Kwale whose stories have been buried under layers of shame, fear, and systemic neglect. She is one of the women leaders trained by the Inter-Religious Council of Kenya (IRCK) under its sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) and women empowerment initiative, in partnership with the Kwale Women of Faith Network. The program has become a turning point for communities like hers, where cases of SGBV have risen sharply, fueled by poverty, cultural taboos, and lack of support systems.

The Awakening

"I used to think that suffering in silence was part of being a woman," Mama Zipora confesses. "When I was younger, no one talked about abuse. If your husband beat you, you were told to pray more. If your daughter was raped, you were told to keep it quiet to protect her future."

The story changed when the Women of Faith Network began community outreaches and empowerment drives across Lunga-Lunga. Through open days, interfaith dialogues, and training sessions, women began to rediscover their agency. Mama Zipora learned about the legal rights of women, the structures for reporting abuse, and the power of psychosocial support. But more importantly, she learned she was not alone. "I remember my first session. I cried, not because I was sad, but because I was finally seen," she recalls.

Bridging Justice with Faith

The unique aspect of this initiative is how it integrates faith and justice. Religious leaders have been instrumental in addressing cultural stereotypes that perpetuate violence against women. Sermons now include teachings on human dignity, protection of the vulnerable, and the sacredness of life. "Our faith is no longer used to silence us," says Mama Zipora. "It is now the reason we speak."

During a recent SGBV community outreach at Pongwe Social Hall, women received cervical and breast cancer screenings, engaged in open conversations on health-seeking behavior, and took part in sessions on positive parenting. Health professionals and local administrators joined hands with religious leaders to ensure the message was clear, there is no room for violence.



A New Chapter

The impact of these interventions is tangible. More women are reporting abuse. The stigma is slowly being stripped away. Referrals to protection services have increased. The community is beginning to understand that SGBV is not a private issue, it is a public injustice.

In her closing remarks at the Open Day, Mama Zippora stood beside women from different faiths and said: "We are not just survivors. We are guardians of this generation and the next. And we will not stop until every woman in Kwale walks freely, speaks loudly, and lives with dignity."

The Road Ahead

While great strides have been made, challenges persist. Underreporting remains a concern, and access to legal and psychosocial services is limited in remote areas. The Women of Faith Network has submitted a memo to the Technical Working Group on GBV and Femicide, calling for budget allocation to rescue centers, legal aid for survivors, and capacity building for law enforcement on handling cases with sensitivity and speed.

The story of Kwale's women is still unfolding, but the narrative has changed. No longer defined by fear, their voices now speak of justice, healing, and hope. At the heart of it stands Mama Zippora, a woman of faith, and a trailblazer. "This is not just a project," she says. "It is our rebirth." *Condensed and adapted from bit.ly/41iKcha.*

Photos: Mailabari, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons

Coming Events



September 2025

01 World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation (Catholic Christian)

04 *Mawlid al-Nabi* – The birth of the Prophet Muhhamad (tbc) (Islam)

08 Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary (Catholic Christian)

11 *Nayrouz* (New Year) (Coptic Christian)

21 UN International Day of Peace

24 Vatican World Day of Migrants and Refugees

26 UN International Day for the Total Elimination of Nuclear Weapons

October 2025

04 Feast of St Francis of Assisi (Catholic Christian)

19 Mission Sunday (Catholic Christian)

28 60th Anniversary of publication of *Nostra Aetate* (Catholic Christian)

November 2025

01 All Saints' Day (Western Christian)

02 All Souls' Day (Western Christian)

09-16 Inter Faith Week

16 International Day for Tolerance, United Nations

25 International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women AND White Ribbon Day Australia

30 First Sunday of Advent (Christian)

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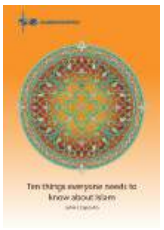
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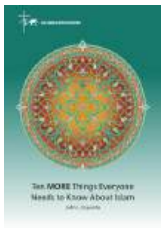
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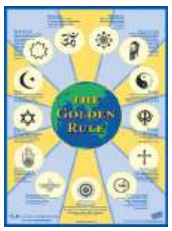
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