

ECUMENICAL AND INTERFAITH RELATIONS

(Submitted by the Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations Committee of the Southern California Nevada Conference, UCC, and the Pacific Southwest Region, DOC)

ASH WEDNESDAY IS MARCH 5. THE "MOST HONEST DAY" IN THE CHURCH YEAR. MAY ALL UCC AND DOC FOLKS BE BLESSED RECEIVING THE ASHES ON THEIR FOREHEADS.

A Muslim Woman Stands Up to Christian Islamophobes

In the course of our recent EIRC efforts to open dialogue between Christians and Muslims, we have had the pleasure of coming to know and working with Esma Ali, a Muslim believer from India who works as a real estate broker here in Southern California. Recently she shared with us her experience in responding to blog postings by what she calls "Christian extremists." Esma describes her experience so far as follows:

"I came across a blog website which is very anti-Muslim. I started to dialogue with them in the hope of reaching them, based on our common humanity from the same Creator. Most of the people on this site are Christian extremists. We certainly have their counterparts in Islam. We, the moderates, have much work ahead of us. God expects us to treat ALL of his creation with respect, no matter what people believe. By exemplifying this behavior, I think we have the power to alleviate much animosity and to construct bridges which currently do not exist.

"Robert Spencer is one of these extremists. He is highly regarded on this website. He has written a best-selling book called "The Truth about Muhammad." In the book, he takes many verses from the Quran out of context, and thus has misled many. When I refute any one of his statements, they claim that I am a 'lying troll.' I have lost count of how many times I have been called a 'troll' and a 'bimbo.' Some of them say to me, 'Leave our country and go back home.' I say to them that I am a productive member of this society. And I point out to them that unless they are Native Americans, this is not "their" land.

“You may ask why I keep returning to this site, despite the abuse. Once in a while, about ten per cent of the time, I can make sense with someone and have deep dialogue where we each discuss our religious feelings and our perceived or real threats. In a few instances, I have been called a ‘friend’ and have felt love from strangers on line. For me, this becomes an awesome moment of connection with a fellow human being, in spite of all our differences. I shall continue reaching out to ALL hatemongers, and will continue to pray that God help me to connect with all of his beings.”

Thank you, Esma, for your courage and your faith!

A Year of Pope Francis: Thirteen Very Hopeful Signs

1. The new Holy Father has undertaken initiatives to reform Vatican finances and especially to curb frivolous spending, for instance on the garb of the cardinals.
2. He invited a boy suffering from Down’s Syndrome to ride with him in the “Popemobile.”
3. He publicly embraced and kissed a man in agonizing pain from a genetic disease.
4. He has washed and kissed the feet of imprisoned youth offenders and Muslims.
5. In Brazil, he met with and expressed support for indigenous people whose land is in danger of being invaded and appropriated by big agricultural enterprises.
6. He phoned an Argentine woman to console her after he got news of her having been raped.
7. He sneaks periodically out of the Vatican to feed the homeless.
8. He donated his own motorcycle to fund a new hostel and soup kitchen in Rome.
9. He spoke out against those who have prejudice against atheists, stating that atheists, too, can be good people.
10. He condemned the current global financial system, affirming that “money has to serve, not to rule.”

11. He has amended Vatican law to make sexual abuse of children a crime.
12. He has spoken out against the Catholic Church's "obsession" with abortion, gay marriage, and contraception. And has refused to judge homosexual persons. –HOPEFUL, NO?