

HISTORY OF ECUMENICAL DIALOGUE IN THE DIOCESE OF PARRAMATTA

The Beginning

At the creation of the Diocese in 1986, Bishop Bede Heather commissioned Fr Zvonimir Gavranovic to undertake a course in ecumenism and then appointed him the Promoter of Ecumenism in the Diocese. As Fr Zvonimir was active in a parish at the time, this could only be a part-time position which he held from 1988 to 1993.

Some parishes had begun Interchurch dialogue prior to 1986. In Glenbrook, for instance, the Anglican, Baptist, Catholic and Uniting Churches had been engaged in joint bible prayer groups, Easter Dawn Services, ecumenical dinners, Christmas Carols, World Day of Prayer Services and a service during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity since 1982.

In July 1989 another group started up in the Hawkesbury District (Richmond, Windsor, Wilberforce, and Kurrajong). The Group began with a ceremony, presided over by Bishop Bede Heather, Bishop of the Catholic Diocese of Parramatta, at the Uniting Church in Windsor. Fr. Zvonimir Gravonic was present at the formation ceremony in his then role as ecumenical coordinator for the Diocese of Parramatta.

The members come from of a mixture of Christian denominations predominately Anglican, Catholic, and Uniting churches. For many years the group met monthly and then more recently, bi-monthly, using a variety of venues including the Uniting Church hall at Windsor, Uniting Church hall Richmond, private residences, and in recent years the Old Presbytery building at St. Monica's Catholic Church, Richmond. The activities of the group include: bible readings and studies; World Day of Prayer participation; guest speakers of many different faiths and experiences; interfaith sharing and deeper understanding of the Christian Faith in other lands; and the giving of small donations to overseas Christian Missions.

Diocesan Activities

At the diocesan level, some of the Interchurch activities that took place under the leadership of Fr Zvonimir were:

- Regular dialogue with the ministers of All Saints Anglican Church, Parramatta
- An annual meeting of Anglican and Catholic pastors. These meetings involved prayer and discussion (usually of a pastoral nature, such as catechetics in State schools, evangelization and youth ministry) followed by lunch
- The promotion of interchurch prayer groups in the Diocese
- An Ecumenical Service to open the Law Year was also started and held in either the Catholic or Anglican Cathedral in Parramatta.

Accreditation

In June 1990, the Diocese joined the NSW Ecumenical Council. Parramatta was the first Catholic Diocese in NSW to do so. As a result, the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity began to be promoted on a regular basis.

The NSW Ecumenical Council in 1991 sponsored Br Ghislain from Taizé to conduct a retreat at the Winston Hills Ecumenical Prayer Centre.

Ecumenical Commission

In around 1993 the Diocese of Parramatta initiated a parish-based ecumenical program that encouraged Parishes to appoint Parish Ecumenical Officers and appointed Deacon Richard Mulheron as the Diocesan Ecumenical Officer.

In 1995, Fr Colin Barker was made the Director of the newly formed Ecumenical and Interfaith Dialogue Commission. During his term of office, dialogue with the Anglican Church was maintained and a Taizé Prayer Group established at the cathedral.

In July 2005, Fr Bill Moore was appointed Director of this Ecumenical and Interfaith Dialogue Commission and completed his term of Office in December 2006.

In March 2007, Bishop Kevin Manning invited Mrs. Lorraine Murphy ocds, to take up the Chair of this Commission. Also in 2007, Fr. Herman Roborgh S.J., PhD (Islamic Studies, Aligarh, India) was appointed as adviser to the Bishop on interreligious relations in the diocese. In 2008 he gave an introductory course on Islam to the diocesan seminarians and a seminar on the same topic at IFM, Blacktown. He published a booklet on *Christian-Muslim Relations; Guidelines for Catholics in the Diocese of Parramatta* in 2008. He holds a monthly dialogue forum in Blacktown for Christians and Muslims called: "Friends in Abraham". In May, 2009, a conference was held in the Cathedral hall to discuss the document: "A Common Word Between You and Us", signed by 138 Muslims and sent to the Pope. Herman also contributes to various newspapers and journals on topics related to Christian-Muslim relations.

HISTORY OF INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE IN THE DIOCESE OF PARRAMATTA

Background

On 2nd November, 1992 Bishop Bede Heather, as Chairman of the Bishops Committee for Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations launched the Australian Guidelines for Catholic –Jewish Relations.

At the time Fr Kevin Manning was installed (10/07/97) as the new Bishop of the Diocese, a need arose for the dialogue to include Muslims.

Tensions had arisen in Australia between Christians and Muslims as a result of terrorism by extremists throughout the world. Bishop Kevin was approached by representatives of the Muslim communities in Auburn and Lakemba to speak out on behalf of the majority of Muslims who simply wanted to live in peace within Australian society.

Early in 2001 young members of the Muslim community in Auburn formed a group called Affinity Intercultural Foundation. This group began to organize seminars and occasional talks by Muslim scholars who would give Australians the opportunity to appreciate Islam as a peace-loving religion with a valuable tradition. Bishop Kevin was asked by Affinity if he would support an international seminar to be held in the Diocese. This he did in 2004. Since then, Affinity has arranged further seminars and talks throughout the Diocese.

Combined Ecumenical and Interreligious Commission

During the year 2005 the Director of the Ecumenical and Interfaith Commission, Fr Bill Moore, joined with Affinity and the Uniting Church of North Parramatta to organize home encounter groups in the Diocese for members of the Muslim faith and the Catholic and Uniting Churches. These groups met regularly over a period of about six months, discussing set topics of each other's religion and socializing together. So successful was this venture that a website was set up to continue the dialogue.¹

Bishop Kevin Manning commissioned a booklet "Guidelines for Catholics in the Diocese of Parramatta – Christian-Muslim Relations" by Fr. Herman Roborgh S.J and Sr. Vivienne Keely CHF. This was launched in July 2008.

¹ www.homeencounters.org.au