



Ecumenical/Interfaith Committee Walking Together

by Anne Mulqueen, OFS

I begin this article with a quote from Trappist monk Thomas Merton, whose roots were dug deep in the soil of Franciscan spirituality. This is what Merton had to say about ecumenism and our relationship with other faiths.

If I can unite in myself the thought and devotion of Eastern and Western Christendom, the Greek and the Latin fathers, the Russian with the Spanish mystics, I can prepare in myself the reunion of divided Christians.... If we want to bring together what is divided, we cannot do so by imposing one division upon the other. If we do this, the union is not Christian. It is political and doomed to further conflict. We must contain all the divided worlds in ourselves and transcend them in Christ.

But Merton did not attain this insight solely through intellectual prowess — which, of course, he had — but in conjunction with the grace of God. In a mystical experience in Louisville, Kentucky, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut Merton said:

... in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers.... There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun.

Not one of these people wore captions that told Merton their race, religion or nationality. He simply loved them all and was connected to all by the same God that created and sustained him. Therefore, I suggest that the central premise of Merton's quotes and this article is that there exists in all God's creation, a familial, inter-dependent relationship.

Our country is a country of diversity, and as citizens we accept people of different faiths and cultures with an attitude of respect and peaceful coexistence. As Catholic Christians and Secular Franciscans, we take this attitude a step further. We believe it is God who

calls us to proclaim our charism of peacemaking through acts of *bridge building* and — when necessary — by becoming the bridge itself. We sign our correspondence and emails with Peace and all Good, and we witness to that wish of peace by our actions. Our encounters with people of other faiths and other Christian denominations must be built on mutuality, respect and trust in a spirit of dialogue. Since dialogue is not one-sided, the desired result is relationship — perhaps even friendship.

And speaking of familial and inter-dependent relationships, I would like to introduce you to the people who make it possible for me to do what I do as Chair of the Ecumenical-Interfaith Committee. They are my support system and my friends, and I hope I am theirs. Alphabetically they are Delia Banchs, OFS, Michael Carsten, OFS, Mary Lou Kreider, OFS, and John Szczepanski, OFS.

Delia Banchs, OFS: Delia and her husband Wil have been married for 48 years, have four adult sons, 12 grandchildren and one great-grandson. Professed in 1979, she has served at the local and regional levels in Texas and Hawaii. Delia was Regional Minister of Los Tres Companeros/The Three Companions Region during 2003-2009. As a student in NYC, Delia formed lasting relationships with Jewish friends. The multicultural milieu of NYC and later living and traveling through Europe, the Middle East and Asia afforded her opportunities to explore and learn many languages, cultures and religious beliefs. Delia organized “World Day of Prayer” and “Agape” events for both the Military Council of Catholic Women (MCCW) and the Protestant Women of the Chapel (PWOC) and hosted interfaith dinners from 1974 to 1980. Since 1987, she has promoted the “Week of Prayer for Christian Unity” through her mailings. Delia said, “I rejoiced when the Ecumenical Committee was expanded to include Interfaith and to be serving on it.” And we rejoice with her and for her membership on the committee.

Michael Carsten, OFS: Personally, I know Mike to be a loving and involved father of three and grandfather of six, who carries all their pictures with him and always takes their calls. His career began as a carpenter, and he retired as a Construction Superintendent/Manager, whereupon he began another career as Director of Neighborhood Services at St. Aloysius Catholic Church. The image that pops into my mind when I think of Mike is a man always on the move and totally committed to the marginalized people he serves. He is a man with a cause. Mike was professed in 1993 and has served in local community and local, regional and national OFS positions. Mike was Regional Minister for Divine Mercy Region from 2001 to 2004, elected National Counselor 2004-2010 and currently serves with me on the Joint Committee for Franciscan Unity. The topic Mike speaks on at our workshops is “Prophetic Voice.” Without a doubt, Mike is a credible witness. Mike’s ecumenical/interfaith commitment is expressed daily as he ministers to the poor and homeless of all faiths in downtown Detroit.

Mary Lou Kreider, OFS: Mary Lou lost her beloved husband Art Kreider in 2005. She has five adult children and three grandchildren. If you know Mary Lou, the one thing you know about her is she loves to dance, and she exudes joy wherever she goes. She was professed in 1982 and has served in many local and regional positions. Mary Lou was Regional Minister for Lady Poverty Region from 2004 to 2010. Her ecumenical/interfaith journey began when her pastor delegated her to attend a meeting of ministers in her small community in Waterford, Pennsylvania. Mary Lou participates annually in a Lenten Soup/Bread and Service ecumenical activity. In addition to local ecumenical activity, Mary Lou immerses herself in whatever ecumenical and interfaith activities come her way. In fact, she persuaded her daughter Nora to attend a Sacred Dance retreat at a Catholic retreat center that to her surprise turned out to be dancing in honor of the Buddhist Goddess Tara. Mary Lou mentioned to me that her heart had always hoped to serve on this committee and now she does and we reap the benefit of her presence.

John Szczepanski, OFS: John is married to Maria Dolores Lucia (Castro) Szczepanski — don’t you just love that name — for 40 years. They have one son, Jonathan Matthew, and in June of this year, Jonathan and his wife Leanne delivered their first grandchild, Spencer Jonathan, to the Szczepanskis. John served his country in Vietnam as an infantryman and thereafter

worked in Human Resources with the hotel industry for 30 years. John made his profession 10 years ago and served as vice-minister for three years and minister for six years of Little Portion of St. Francis Fraternity in Our Lady of Indiana Region. Other than myself, John is the only person who served on this committee when my predecessor Ed Shirley was Chair—may Ed’s gentle soul rest in peace. Ed depended on John to keep us informed of current trends and events that impacted the committee. John grew up in East Chicago, Ind., a multi-racial/multi-ethnic/multi-faith city where “We lived together; we ate together; we had fun together; we prayed together and we worked out our differences together. In a way, I was living an ecumenical life. So Ecumenical Interfaith is natural.”

So now you know the people who serve you. We wish you would continue to write to us. If you would like to correspond with a particular member of the committee who you feel resonates with your spirit, please write to me at amulqueenso@gmail.com and I will forward your email to that member.

So let us go forth as sisters and brothers to share Shalom — that is to exchange greetings of peace, tranquility and harmony with all that God has created, both animate and inanimate.

Shalom Aleikhem, peace be upon you brothers and sisters!

