

“The biggest evil now is SILENCE!” That was on a placard carried by protesters who were denouncing an attack on a place of worship. It was part of a short video, showing how people of differing faiths supported each other in times of crisis, presented by M. Said Selmanlar, President of the Lehigh Dialogue Center in Bethlehem, PA. He was one of 6 Muslims, and the only male, who agreed to meet with us for the Interculturality session during the Easton Assembly. Using a Venn Diagram, he showed the commonalities of the ‘Religions of the Book.’ He stressed that it is our humanness that we should emphasize before we look at our differences, which he said “make up the beautiful garden that Allah created.” M. Said also noted that many Turkish Muslims cannot return to their native country because they are followers of Muhammed Fethullah Gülen, a Turkish cleric living in PA. He has won numerous international peace awards, including one from Pope Francis. Although he promotes education, civil society, and religious tolerance initiatives, his philosophy is banned as terrorist by the Turkish government.

The Lehigh Dialogue Center exists to promote tolerance, understanding and as its name states, dialogue between all people. They participate in and host many interfaith programs, as well as open their center and extensive library to the public. They also invite non-Muslims to participate in their rituals and feasts.

In setting up this encounter, we were mindful that this year, 2019, is the 800th anniversary of the meeting of Francis and the Sultan. We asked if they could send women speakers, so that we would get a better understanding of how these turbulent times are affecting the women, their families and especially their children.

Mukaddes Sablak, whose name means ‘holy’ in Arabic, is teaching a graduate course on Islam. She gave us some fundamentals of Islam, spoke about Chapter 19 in the Quran that is titled “Maryam,” and references Lady Mary the mother of Jesus. She noted that although Jesus is considered a prophet, he is most often referred to as ‘the son of Mary.’ She explained why she chooses to be totally covered – not in a burka – but head-to-toe, nonetheless. That was her norm growing up In Turkey and the one she is most comfortable with. When laws were changed that no longer permitted women to wear the head covering in public in Turkey, she opted to leave her parents and family and come to the U.S. where she said, “that is the beautiful part of America, people can wear what they want.”

Mukaddes explained ‘wudhu,’ the ritual cleansing before entering Allah’s presence during prayer. If a person is not clean while performing ‘Salah,’ or the ritual prayer that takes place five times a day (totaling about 1 hour in all), Allah will not accept the prayer. She showed us how a prayerful Muslim would make a timeline for prayer times when traveling, and then recounted an experience that upset her children. They pulled over into a public place for prayer and even though they were away from the people, someone yelled some derogatory remarks. Rather than subject herself and family to that possibility again she now checks the areas that she will be traveling through for a local mosque and if that is not possible, she will approach a church and ask if she can pray. That event made the story of the Academy Award winning movie, *The Green Book*, even more poignant, for me.

Lubna Ayub, a special ed teacher who also teaches the Islamic equivalent of Sunday School to young Muslims, had an experience similar to Mukaddes while wearing the hijab (head covering). Her family requested that she not wear a head covering when outside. Lubna brought her 3 children with her; she spoke about how different cultures affect Islam. She is from India so her practice of Islam has been colored by the Sufi traditions of that country. For example, brides in Turkey wear white, while Indian

brides wear red. When asked about ISIS and Jihad, she explained that ISIS is terrorist and not Islam and has spread more because of the illiteracy and ignorance of the followers than the true practice of Islam. As for jihad, its real meaning is 'struggle.' Specifically, the internal struggle a person faces in trying to live up to the tenets of one's faith. For example, the struggle to make time to pray 5 times a day.

Three other women joined us, Nihal Erciyas, Hafsa Turkyolu and Sunuy "Sue" (I did not get her last name). Some of them joined us for lunch and because they were with us from Noon to 4 P.M. and sat at our tables we had time to ask questions and for personal discussions during which we shared stories and explained what being Franciscan and a vowed religious mean. Because their visit coincided with Noon prayer time, they were able to pray during a break, laying down their prayer rugs in the back of our gathering space.

Besides the gift of their presence, our Muslim friends brought some wonderful Turkish Delights candy which we all enjoyed. As the program was ending, Sue's husband and year-old daughter came to take her home. We closed the session with the recitation of an Islamic peace prayer and the Prayer of St Francis. We presented the Lehigh Dialogue Center with an honorarium and a copy of the *Sultan and the Saint*, then extended our arms in the Franciscan Blessing.

M. Said plans to organize a 'movie night' to show it to the people who come to the center. Mukaddes, who has an extensive network, has offered to help anyone who would like to search out a Muslim community to visit or ask to speak to your group. She has access to an on-line course, Islam 101, for a donation, if anyone is interested. Kathy Doyle can provide her private contact information. We are most grateful to our Aston Franciscan sisters who gave us the initial contacts that helped us in our search for Muslim speakers. "As-salamu alaykum," peace be unto you!