



# What We Want the Other to Know and Teach about Our Religious Traditions

By Sr. Rosaleen Zdunich

This title was the topic for a Jewish, Christian and Muslim dialogue organized at the initiative of Rabbi Joseph Ehrenkranz, who was the Executive Director of the Centre for Christian-Jewish Understanding of Sacred Heart University, Fairfield, Connecticut.

It was one of five that took place in the world under his direction. The conferences began in 2000 in Jerusalem and Edmonton, Alberta followed by conferences in Rome, Italy; Bamberg, Germany; and Fairfield, Connecticut. We were very privileged to host such a prestigious dialogue and the first of its kind to be held in Edmonton as expressed by the following statement:

*\* “Humanity has reached a dramatic crossroad in history. We have the opportunity to put aside our divisiveness and seek reconciliation and understanding once and for all”.*

This statement served as the theme and the spirit in which this dialogue was organized and held. This event generated a great deal of interest and enthusiasm due to anticipation which surrounded it. When the media heard about it, they phoned for more information and interviews.

The evening preceding the dialogue, drew a crowd of more than 500 to City Hall for the official opening. Mayor Bill Smith welcomed the capacity crowd. The Interfaith Prayer Service marking the annual day of “Elimination of Racial Discrimination” designated by the United Nations followed. Fourteen faiths prayed each according to their own faith tradition and Rabbi Ehrenkranz gave the keynote address.

The following two days created an opportunity for the three Abrahamic faiths to engage in a dialogue of mutual respect and understanding. The warm hospitality of Beth Shalom Synagogue created an atmosphere where open and honest discussions took place.

High profile speakers included Dr. Derek Penslar, Professor of Jewish History at University of Toronto, Ontario; Dr. Leonard Swidler, Professor of Catholic Thought and Interreligious Dialogue at Temple University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; and Dr. Jamal Badawi, Professor of Islamic Tradition at St. Mary’s University in Halifax, Nova Scotia provided an intellectual basis for critical thinking and stimulating discussions. These religious leaders and historians spoke about their faith from a historical perspective and called for understanding and co-operation among their followers. They agreed, that in a multicultural 21st century society, it is crucial that trust and understanding be the foundation of good relationships, and one way this can be accomplished is through dialogue.

*\* The Centre for Christian-Jewish Understanding of Sacred Heart University, Fairfield, Connecticut.*



## Our Religious Traditions continued...

The 300 participants from the three faiths including academics, university students, and the general public challenged the keynote speakers with thought-provoking questions. They sought clarification on complex issues. They questioned how to create greater understanding and harmony among these faiths.

At the conclusion of the two days, comments echoed throughout the hall: “I’ve enjoyed the intellectual level and I’m getting a tremendous education”; “I’ve learned there is an openness to understand more about each other”; “There is readiness of people of different faiths to grow together”; “A good beginning to building bridges”; “Outstanding event and a good education”.

This momentous and historic dialogue was supported and sponsored by generous donations from individuals and organizations of the three faiths.

The proceedings of all five dialogues were put into a book entitled: *“What Do We Want the Other to Teach About Us?”* Sacred Heart University Press, 5151 Park Avenue, Fairfield, Connecticut.

In Edmonton, two additional dialogues took place.

2001 Topic: Jerusalem – A Centre of Faith

Keynote Speakers: Rabbi Joseph Ehrenkranz, Archbishop

Thomas Collins, Dr. Saleem Qureshi

Host: McDougall United Church

2004 Topic: The Contributions of Religious

Traditions to Civil Society

Keynote Speakers: Rabbi David Kunin,

Rev. Bill Phipps, Dr. Bilal Kuspinar

Host: The Faculty of Arts,

University of Alberta