Symposiums hope to kindle cross-cultural discussion

Muslim-Catholic relations is aim of DeSales University and dialogue center talks.

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Years ago, the Rev. Thomas Michel would roam the streets of his adopted home, the city of Yogyakarta in Indonesia, dropping by mosques and visiting student centers and doing whatever else he could to reach out to Muslims as an emissary of Christianity.

"They were always very polite," the soft-spoken Jesuit recalled Monday evening to a crowd of students, teachers and visitors at DeSales University in Center Valley. "But the problem was, they never invited me back."

Michel grew frustrated. Was he being too pushy? Not pushy enough?

A year passed, and Michel was surprised by an invitation to lecture on Christian understanding of the Quran, the Islamic holy text, at an academic conference. Yogyakarta's Muslims, it seems, were paying more attention to Michel than he ever suspected.

It was the root of an epiphany: Understanding among people of different faiths and cultures takes far more time than politicians and diplomats and ordinary citizens are often willing to give it.

With that anecdote, and other tales from his 35 years of living and working with Muslims around the world, Michel inaugurated the first in what is intended to be an ongoing series of Lehigh Valley symposiums on Muslim-Catholic relations.

The 90-minute event was sponsored by the Catholic university's Salesian Center for Faith and Culture and the Lehigh Dialogue Center, a Bethlehem-based Islamic group devoted to cultural and religious understanding. The Rev. Thomas Dailey, director of the Salesian Center, said the plan is to hold dialogues on campus each fall and at the Dialogue Center each spring.

Michel was the ideal guest to launch the series. He is the secretary for interreligious dialogue for the Society of Jesus and former secretary of the Vatican's council for interreligious dialogue. Besides Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim nation, his assignments have taken him to Turkey, Albania and the Philippines.

"Many efforts at dialogue fail because of the lack of patience," said Michel, who was a diocesan priest in St. Louis in the 1960s when he volunteered to teach English in Indonesia.
He joined the Jesuits so he could continue living and working overseas. In 1981, early in the pontificate of John Paul II, he was summoned to Rome, where he served as the church's leading expert on Islam until 1994.

Michel said John Paul's approach to religious outreach was ideal: deliberate, patient, sincere. The pontiff held three ecumenical gatherings in Assisi, Italy, over the years. The first, in 1986, drew only a few Muslim participants; the second, in 1993, drew many more; and the third, in 2002, drew so many that some had to be turned away. It was the fruit of the pope's long, earnest labor and an object lesson in understanding, Michel said.

Michel was joined onstage by Abdullah Bozkurt, president of the dialogue center, who said adherents of the faith have far more common ground than cause for division -- particularly the desire to maintain healthy families and moral societies in uncertain times.

"People are people," he said. "If you meet them and greet them, you find a lot of commonalities."

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