

Diocese of Parramatta welcomes faith leaders' prayer in historic moment of solidarity

Christina Gretton, *Catholic Outlook*, 27 April 2021



Leaders from several faiths stood with the Grand Mufti of Australia (right) and Leaders in the Islamic community at the maghrib (sunset) prayer at a dinner in the Diocese of Parramatta on 26 April 2021. The non-Islamic leaders prayed, meditated and reflected each according to their own faith tradition. Image: Diocese of Parramatta.

For the first time in the Diocese of Parramatta, Catholic, Muslim, Sikh, Jewish, Hindu and Buddhist leaders, including the Bishop and the Grand Mufti of Australia, gathered together to pray. The historic moment took place on 26 April as part of an *iftar* (breaking of the fast) dinner during the month of Ramadan. While Muslims observed the *maghrib* (sunset) prayer, the other guests stood behind them in spiritual solidarity and prayed, meditated, reflected, each according to their own faith tradition.

The dinner, hosted by the Diocese of Parramatta and the Columban Centre for Christian-Muslim Relations, is the second such event held by the Diocese, but the first at which religious leaders prayed simultaneously.

In addition to His Eminence, Dr Ibrahim Abu Mohammad, the Grand Mufti of Australia, and representatives of His Eminence, Ayatollah Sheik Mohammed Basim Al-Ansari, religious leaders attending the dinner included Imam Issa, Imam of the Parramatta Mosque; Sheikh Adid Al-Rubai from the Sydney Alliance; Rabbi Zalman Kastel, National Director of Together for Humanity; and Reverend Dr Ray Williamson OAM, President of the NSW Ecumenical Council. Other members of the Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, Sikh, Hindu and Christian communities were also in attendance.



His Eminence, Dr Ibrahim Abu Mohammad, the Grand Mufti of Australia (front left), joined Bishop Vincent Long OFM Conv, Bishop of Parramatta (right) at an iftar dinner (to break the fast), during Ramadan, 26 April 2021. Image: Diocese of Parramatta.

Rev Dr Patrick McInerney, Director of the Columban Centre for Christian-Muslim Relations, welcomed all guests as “brothers and sisters”, explaining that this ‘fraternity’ derives from our shared faith in the one God. He quoted from the Holy Qur’an that God created religious diversity “so that you might come to know one another” (Qur’an 49:14).

Bishop Vincent Long OFM Conv, Bishop of Parramatta, extended a greeting of peace and blessings for Ramadan. “We walk as brothers and sisters on a journey of faith,” he said. Bishop Vincent explained that the dinner was a continuation of a legacy from his predecessors, and noted Pope Francis’ recent visit to Iraq which demonstrated hope, courage and peace. His message also reminded those gathered of the violence that sometimes stems from distorted religious ideologies and the need to uphold the dignity of every human in the face of forces that seek to divide on race and colour.

He asked for faith to bind us, hope to drive out fear, and love to drive out hate.

Sheikh Adid Al-Rubai gave a Ramadan message on behalf of His Eminence, Dr Ibrahim. He agreed on the significance of Pope Francis’ visit to Iraq and explained how Islam acknowledges the Bible along with Qur’an as messages from Heaven which are revealed during the month of Ramadan.

Guests at the dinner expressed their support for a shared understanding of each others’ faith.



Guests at the dinner co-hosted by the Diocese of Parramatta and the Columban Centre for Christian-Muslim Relations were from Catholic and other Christian denominations, Muslim, Sikh, Jewish, Hindu and Buddhist faiths. Image: Diocese of Parramatta.

Mr Rodney Hyman AM from the NSW Jewish Board of Deputies encouraged understanding about other religions from personal interaction rather than the media. “Real life is not the ‘newspaper narrative’,” he said. “If we got to know each other, there would be a lot less fighting, because you don’t fight with your mates.”

Abbas Raza Alvi, President of the Indian Crescent Society of Australia is saddened by the polarisation in India over religious differences. He noted that many people now do not profess to have a religion and the impact that faiths coming together in solidarity could have on them.

Fr Patrick McInerney from the Columban Centre described participants as “united in spiritual communion” during the *mahgrib* prayer, where each prayed in their own way. “It was a profound atmosphere of shared faith,” he said.

Jatinder Singh of Sikh Youth Australia described being part of the experience. “The whole ‘vibe’ was like you would find at one of our temples. You are all praying to the Almighty,” he said. “It takes you from the darkness to the light.”

“There are many similarities among the religions,” said Fr Reg from the Columbans. “It is the same message, just different ways of expressing it.”

The iftar dinner generated an extraordinary atmosphere of warmth and friendship. In this same spirit of collaboration among people from different faiths, the Diocese and the Columban Centre are committed to spreading the apostolate of interfaith dialogue in western Sydney.