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TURNING INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE INTO ACTION

Interview With US Ambassador Miguel Díaz

By Andrea Kirk Assaf

ROME, OCT. 13, 2010 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- As the synod fathers gathered at the Vatican to begin the second day of the Special Assembly for the Middle East of the Synod of Bishops, another conference took place across the Tiber on a topic not dissimilar to that of the synod fathers.

The U.S. Embassy and the Pontifical Gregorian University hosted "Building Bridges of Hope: Success Stories and Strategies for Interfaith Action," which invited representatives of the three Abrahamic faiths of Christianity, Islam and Judaism to discuss ways of turning interreligious dialogue into interreligious action.

Among the conference's speakers was Archbishop Elias Chacour of Akka, Haifa, Nazareth and all of Galilee of the Melkite Greek Catholic Church, who was also in Rome for the synod.

Representing President Barack Obama's administration was the keynote speaker, the director of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships, Joshua DuBois.

ZENIT spoke with the host and creator of the event, Ambassador Miguel Díaz, who commented on the timing of the conference, and the ends it hoped to achieve.

ZENIT: Did you time this conference to coincide with the Synod for the Middle East?

Díaz: The timing of the conference during the synod was wonderful -- we originally chose it because we wanted to partner with the Gregorian University and hold the conference in this beautiful space, and so we needed to do that before the beginning of the academic year in

October. Then it just worked out perfectly that the theme of our conference tied in with the great work of the synod for Middle Eastern Churches.

ZENIT: What was the motivation behind the selection of the conference's theme and title of bridge-building?

Díaz: Part of the motivation for this conference was born a little over a year ago with President Obama's speech in Cairo, in which he invited faith communities to turn dialogue into action. We thought one of the ways we could follow up on this invitation is by sponsoring a conference on interfaith actions.

We need to gather Christians, Muslims and Jews together to address what I believe are the three great challenges of our time -- equitable development, conflict resolution, and the care of the environment. These are also three themes that are very much central to Benedict XVI's encyclical "Caritas in Veritate." We were bridging the signs of our times, the issues that have been identified by our Holy Father, and the invitation by President Obama to different religious communities to engage in conversation, but even further than that, to engage in common actions.

ZENIT: How did you structure the conference to create a constructive conversation between the representatives of different faiths?

Díaz: We began with sharing success stories, as we did this morning, and then to begin to create strategies that can bring about collaboration, friendship, and to build community among different religious groups in these three areas of climate change, development, and conflict resolution.

So I would say that bridge building, bridges of hope, sharing success stories, strategizing together around specific issues -- that in a nutshell is what we are about. I must stress that this is a beginning, not a conclusion, and it is a humble beginning. We need to engage more partners, more men and women of good will, to engage this project.

ZENIT: Just as the synod fathers are coming together right now along with non-Catholic observers, would you say that your conference is a meeting point for those who are doing

common work but from different faith traditions?

Díaz: The work that the synod fathers are doing in the Middle East is crucial for the building of peace and the respect of religious freedom. In our own ways, we are building peace and respect for religious freedom at this conference by allowing each of these speakers to speak out of their own religious convictions that have informed their ideas and their actions, and to do so in a way that is not destructive, as unfortunately we all too often hear, but rather with a constructive program.