

By any standard, one of the most remarkable Americans in Rome over the last quarter-century has been Jesuit Fr. Thomas Michel, a St. Louis-born expert on Islam who has served the Vatican, the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences and, for more than a decade now, as head of the Jesuits' Secretariat for Inter-religious Dialogue.

Michel knows the Muslim world from the inside out, speaking its languages and knowing its people. He studied Arabic and Islam in Egypt and Lebanon, did his doctoral dissertation on the 14th century Muslim scholar Ibn Taymiyya, and received a Ph.D. in Islamic thought from the University of Chicago. A true citizen of the world, Michel took his Jesuit vows in Indonesia, the world's most populous Islamic country, and is a member of the Jesuits' Indonesian Province. He probably racks up more frequent flier miles moving in and out of Muslim nations than any other Western-born Catholic one might name.

I can testify from personal experience that Michel is one of the few people I know in Rome who can converse freely with waiters at Roman restaurants in Italian, then go back and swap hellos in their own languages with the Egyptians or Lebanese or Turks who often work in the kitchens.

Inevitably, that background makes Michel an object of fascination. For example, when the late journalist Tad Szulc wrote a novel about the 1981 assassination attempt against John Paul II called *To Kill the Pope*, his hero was an American Jesuit expert on Islam secretly called upon by the Vatican to investigate. Szulc was actually compelled to stipulate that this was a fictional character not meant to be Michel.

All this by way of announcing that Michel is leaving Rome. He has completed his term as head of the Jesuit Secretariat on Inter-religious Dialogue, and will spend a year in the United States at the Woodstock Theological Center in Washington, D.C. Eventually, he thinks he'll settle into a Jesuit parish in Turkey.

I sat down with Michel on Tuesday, his last day in the office before leaving for Washington. We talked about the current state of Catholic/Muslim relations, and the prospects for dialogue created by the recent letter from 138 Muslim scholars and jurists to Pope Benedict XVI and other Christian leaders, proposing love of God and of neighbor as theological common ground. Pope Benedict is slated to meet with a group of signatories to that letter later this year.

Michel said this will be the first time, at least in the modern era, that a pope will take part in a serious theological conversation with Muslims.

"During the second inter-religious gathering in Assisi, in 1993, John Paul II listened as Muslims explained their views on peace," Michel said, who helped organize meetings of religious leader in Assisi both in 1986 and 1993 while serving in the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue. "He wasn't just speaking, he was listening to them. But this was a much more limited conversation."

The normal pattern when Muslims (or leaders of other religions) come to the Vatican, Michel said, is to have a ceremonial event with the pope, but the substantive conversations are held with the president and secretary of the Council for Interreligious Dialogue. In that sense, Michel said, it's important that the pope himself will be at the table.

"It's good for us, for the church, and for the pope to listen to Muslims," he said. "When the conversation is all one-way, something is obviously lacking."

Michel said the letter from the 138 Muslims represents a watershed moment for three reasons:

- First, it reflects a "broad spectrum" from across the Islamic world, representing more than 40 countries, and transcending historical intra-Muslim conflicts pivoting on sect, language, and ethnicity. In that sense, Michel suggested, the letter may be as significant for dialogue among Muslims themselves as it is for Muslim/Christian relations.
- Second, Michel said, "it's about time that somebody moved the conversation off geopolitical conflicts and onto faith questions." Although some Vatican officials have argued that inter-religious dialogue ought to be seen as part of a broader dialogue among cultures, Michel said he doesn't share that view. "Religion is already too often relegated to the status of folklore, of being a mere artifact of culture," he said. "Muslims are making us all aware that if we're not talking directly about God and religion, we're not accomplishing anything."
- Third, Michel pointed out that the letter was "an Arab initiative," led by the Al al Bayt Foundation in Jordan. "In recent decades, most of the initiatives for dialogue from the

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Muslim side have come from Turks, Iranians, Southeast Asians and Muslims living in the West, in the diaspora," he said. "Central Arab countries haven't shown much leadership. It's important to see them returning to their traditional role."

I asked Michel to comment on one issue certain to surface in any Muslim/Christian conversation: "reciprocity," or the insistence that if Muslim immigrants in the West receive the benefit of religious freedom and protection of law, Christian minorities in the world's 56 majority Muslim states ought to get the same deal.

"We have to be careful," Michel said. "Reciprocity is not a gospel value, but something that comes out of diplomatic and trade negotiations."

It's entirely appropriate, Michel said, to insist that Muslims treat minorities fairly. On the other hand, he said, respect for human dignity can't become a bargaining chip. The true Christian attitude, he said, is to honor the rights of others because of their inherent worth, rather than threatening to withhold equal treatment in order to influence someone else's behavior.

He also said that perceptions of reciprocity differ widely across the Muslim/Christian divide.

"When I talk to Muslims, it's very important to give them concrete instances of when and how we've respected their rights," he said. "For example, when we've helped them open mosques, or have access to *halal* food, or get time off to pray on Fridays."

It's important to tell those stories, he said, because often what Muslims see from the media or hear about in the street are contrary instances, such as recent images of right-wing Germans parading pigs across grounds where a local Islamic group hopes to build a mosque. Michel said he picked up reactions to those images in far-away locales such as Bangladesh and Indonesia.

Perhaps the biggest challenge in the Muslim "street," Michel said, is that many Muslims struggle to distinguish resentments directed against the American government and the foreign policy of the Bush administration from the West generally, and from Christianity.

In that context, Michel waded directly into contemporary American politics. If the Muslim world had a vote, he said, he's confident it would go overwhelmingly to Democratic candidate Barack Obama.

"I was just in Indonesia, and whenever people found out I was an American, they began shouting, 'Barak Obama! Barak Obama!'" Michel said. He compared that to his experience 40 years ago of entering Palestinian refugee camps and seeing pictures of Egyptian President Gamal Abdle Nasser on one wall and John F. Kennedy on another.

"Kennedy represented something positive to them," Michel said. "There's a longing to be able to support the American ideal of freedom and respect for the rights of persons, but that has been blasted in the last eight years. America is now seen as a global oppressor."

Whatever one makes of the merits of that perception, of course, it's still interesting as a barometer of global attitudes. In that context, Michel predicted that Obama would have a special appeal.

"Throughout the Third World, and especially in the Muslim world, there's a feeling that the world has been run so long by white males -- from their point of view, badly -- that somebody different like Obama would be welcome. My sense is that they'd bend over backwards to give him a break."