

My Visit to the Islamic School

BY BISHOP THOMAS J. TOBIN 5/16/13

Since becoming a bishop about 20 years ago, I've had plenty of opportunities to visit our Catholic schools, on both the elementary and secondary level. The visits are always enjoyable and rewarding; I always come away impressed by our teachers, students and staff and very proud of the great work that's being done in our Catholic schools every day.

I had a similar experience a couple of weeks ago when I was invited to visit the Islamic School of Rhode Island located in West Warwick. Of course there are some differences between an Islamic School and a Catholic school but the similarities are striking. The hospitality I experienced at the Islamic School was truly heart-warming, beginning with the large "Welcome Bishop Tobin" sign that was placed at the entrance of the school.

I was greeted at the school by Imam Farid Ansari who has been a good friend to the Catholic Church in Rhode Island, his wife Naima, and by the principal, Basima Shiladeh Al-Jallad and other members of the staff. As a gesture of friendship the Imam presented me with a beautiful little wood carving of the Last Supper which he obtained during a recent visit to the Holy Land.

The Islamic School of Rhode Island is located in a former Catholic elementary school and is relatively new. The Mission Statement explains that the school is "to provide an education that is rooted in Islamic faith and ideals, that draws upon its noblest traditions of knowledge, piety, righteousness and justice . . . The curriculum, system of discipline, and leisure activities at the school combine knowledge of Islam with the best training in the sciences, humanities and business, so that our students can grow up to be conscientious citizens, following the 'straight path' while also aspiring to the highest goals in the vocations they choose."

Following an introductory conversation, we toured the school, stopping in every classroom. The school is relatively small – about 120 students in grades Pre-K to Eighth Grade. The students come from families of diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds and all walks of life. The school has limited resources, but like our Catholic schools, makes effective use of what they have. It is clear that the Islamic School of Rhode Island is indeed providing a sound education in the context of religious faith.

In visiting with the students I found them to be very similar to Catholic school students. The younger students were active, excitable and fun; the older students quiet and reserved. They were studying a variety of typical subjects. The art work of the students, spread throughout the hallways, was especially impressive.

I was also impressed to find one group of students learning Arabic so that they could read the Koran in its original language. The school has a prayer room where the students gather each day, and there are sayings from the Koran – some of which are very similar to Bible passages – attached to posters outside of the prayer room.

The visit to the school prompted me to review the "Five Pillars of Islam," in other words the basic principles of the faith. Here too I found a remarkable convergence between Islam and Christianity.

The first pillar of Islam is Shahada, a formal declaration of faith and trust. The essential belief is that there is only one God, Allah, and that Muhammad is God's messenger. Reciting this statement of faith is required in daily prayer.

Muslims are devoted to Salat, prayer, which consists of five daily prayers offered at designated times of the day. Muslims typically recite their prayers while facing Mecca and the prayers are accompanied by set postures including bowing, standing, prostrating, and sitting.

Another pillar of Islam is Zakat or almsgiving. Muslims are expected to give generously of their personal wealth to eliminate inequality and assist the poor and needy. Giving is based on one's ability to pay, and if an individual is not wealthy, they fulfill this obligation by performing good deeds.

Sawm is the act of fasting. Fasting is offered in conjunction with rituals, or as compensation for sins, and for ascetic, spiritual reasons. Fasting is obligatory during the holy days of Ramadan, when Muslims fast from dawn until dusk.

The final pillar of Islam is the Hajj, the pilgrimage. Every able-bodied Muslim is expected to make a pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca at least once in their life. There are specific rituals and directives that accompany this journey and it should lead the pilgrim to strive for personal self-improvement and spiritual growth.

So . . . a profession of faith, prayer, almsgiving, fasting, and pilgrimage are the pillars of Islam. Sound familiar? These practices, of course, are also the building blocks of the devout Christian Faith, aren't they?

The Second Vatican Council spoke about the elements of common faith shared by Muslims and Christians. The bishops of the Council urged us to work together for common understanding and to promote social justice, moral values, peace and freedom. (Nostra Aetate, #3)

Although worldwide events sometimes cause fear and tension between Christians and Muslims, we can be grateful that at least here locally in Rhode Island there is a bond of strong friendship between the local Catholic Church and the Muslim community. I experienced that friendship and trust in a personal way during my visit to the Islamic School of Rhode Island.