

INAUGURATION OF THE CATHOLIC-MUSLIM STUDIES PROGRAM
THE JOSEPH CARDINAL BERNARDIN CENTER AT
CATHOLIC THEOLOGICAL UNION

RESPONSE ON BEHALF OF THE COUNCIL OF RELIGIOUS LEADERS OF
METROPOLITAN CHICAGO

Rev. Paul H. Rutgers

October 26, 2000

I am here very much as guest in this unique family gathering, both as Executive Director of the Council of Religious Leaders of Metropolitan Chicago, and as an ordained Presbyterian minister, deeply rooted in that branch of the Christian faith generally referred to as Reformed or Presbyterian. I assure, my staunch Dutch Reformed grandmother would never have understood this evening.

Dr. Scott: we welcome you! We welcome you in awe of the challenges you face as the first Director of the Catholic Muslim Studies Program at CTU and your willingness to face them, and as we read your *vitae*, we stand in awe of the academic and personal qualifications you bring to this inspired calling.

I welcome you particularly on behalf of the Council of Religious Leaders, a group made up of some 40 of the chief leaders of the Chicago area's Anglican, Eastern and Oriental Orthodox, Jewish, Protestant, Roman Catholic and – now, I am most happy to say – Islamic communions and institutions.

Having said that about the Council, let me make it very clear that we are not the only game in town when it comes to religious leaders, and indeed we may not even be first among equals, much less the most important. Far, far more leaders and their communions are absent from this list of membership than are on it. But we are at the least an intimation for you of the vibrant, vital, remarkable ecumenical and interfaith activity which exists in this metropolitan area.

The reasons for this welcome reality are multiple, but none perhaps more significant than the life and witness of Joseph Cardinal Bernardin, after whom your Center is named, and none no better furthered and exemplified now than by the creativity and graceful spirit of your president, Father Don Senior.

I believe that almost everyone shares in the judgment that if there was ever a place or ever a time for inaugurating this particular studies program it is here and now. Both the astonishing religious diversity of this area and the widespread willingness among us to enter into dialogue, across often strange and unfamiliar lines, contribute to this *kairos* moment.

There is certainly an awakening within the one-time “main stream” religious communities to the presence and significance of countless numbers of Islamic faithful. We believe that your presence will help us all in constructively coming to terms with this new reality.

Having said that, let me also suggest that this will not be easy. Once past the initial welcomes and accolades, your ministry here faces some real problems – and I am sure you are aware of them.

In spite of all the contact and communication that now exists across religious lines, we still know very little about one another, and part of what we think we know is wrong. We are overloaded with cliches and cinematic impressions, and it will be difficult to replace these with truth and substance.

More critical, I think, is the element of fear among us: fear of being replaced; fear that historic enmities are still just below the surface in spite of our declared intent to start anew in this place, unburdened by past histories and current conflicts in other parts of the world; fear that some of the absolutist truth claims seemingly inherent in our religions will lead us again to a dead end in discovering what new things God might be doing in this world.

And always at its roots, are the difficulties inherent in true dialogue between human beings where differences abound, the difficulty of meeting the other in that I-Thou relationship of which the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber spoke so often, where we no longer treat one another as objects to study and, if possible, get the better of – a well known phenomenon in both religious and academic circles – but subjects searching together for a deeper truth and oneness with the God who created us, sustains us, judges us, and saves us.

And so, it seems clear as this new venture begins, that in the Apostle Paul’s words, “It does not yet appear what we shall be.” But we live in hope, and we are delighted that you are here, and we look forward to the difference that you and the Center will make in our life together.