

Our interfaith family in Madrid, Spain gathered to ask God for New Year blessings

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On Tuesday evening, December 18, our interfaith family in Madrid gathered together to ask God for his blessings on the New Year and to show the beauty of spiritual diversity through music, words and food. We decorated the stage simulating an altar. Our desire was to help the very diverse attendance group to have a deep experience through the setting itself.

Music is at the core of any religious ritual. Therefore, the first half hour was composed of short interventions. We started with a female Catholic choir singing Gregorian chants. That set the tone. The seventy people attending calmed down and opened themselves up to the silence and the sacredness. We had, after that, two Jewish hymns by Nora Usterman, a soprano and singer of Sephardic music of Spanish-Argentine origin; one Ethiopian Orthodox Church hymn and Arab religious song by Sara Habasha and Wafir Sheikheldin, a beautiful inter-religious blessed couple of musicians who are a bridge between Islam and Christianity, Sudan and Ethiopia. Following that calming offering, Antonio Martin of Ananda Marga (Path of Bliss) Association invited us to stand up and dance to the singing of a Hindu mantra. This part ended with Sirus Shanavaz, the Persian director of the Sufi Tariqa Molaviye, who read a poem by Rumi and led a dervish whirling dancer on the stage. That was the amazing finale of the first part.

Gopala, a famous poet follower of Sivananda Vedanta, opened the second part dedicated to poems and prayers by reading some of his spiritual verses. We continued with the reading of a blessing (berakhah) by Yael Cobano, the director of a Jewish Reformed Synagogue. It was beautiful to see many members of the synagogue in the audience. We proceeded with the reciting of the Koran by Wafir Sheikheldin, a Tibetan Buddhist prayer by Lama Jampa Chojor and ended with Father Demetrios (Rogelio Saez Carbo) reciting the prayer that will be said in the Greek Orthodox churches to start the new year. It was a very moving

moment because he asked the audience to stand up and respond to the prayer as if we were in an Orthodox Church. After that, we had a moment of silent meditation so that all people could offer their prayers, since not all could participate. We had Catholic participants, theologians and lay people, Orthodox Christians, Unificationists, Reformed Jewish, Sunni, Sufi and Ahmadi Muslims, a great diversity of Hindu groups, Zen, Thich Nhat Hanh and Tibetan Buddhist, Scientologists, and others.



Following the meditation, we distributed cups of sacramental wine and juice. Then, I, as moderator, read three wishes: May love and compassion fill the earth. May all humankind find the way to gather as one family. May each living being reach liberation and achieve enlightenment. A prayer for God's blessing on them, their families and loved ones and partaking of the wine or juice followed. It was a great moment and people seemed genuinely touched.

We ended with an interfaith banquet. Nothing is more unifying than food. I had asked each community coming to bring small food offerings of their traditions. They were so generous that we ended up with a real banquet of sweet delicacies and exotic snacks from around the world, each with a tag showing what it was. We talked and talked and people didn't seem to get tired. It was beautiful to see all as one, a little sample of what could be the human family united by the love of God.