



The Russell Berrie Foundation  
*Making a Difference*

## *Letter From Our CEO*

Dear Friends,

The energy was palpable in Jerusalem last month as more than 50 religious leaders, practitioners, scholars and students, representing a rich tapestry of faiths and perspectives, gathered to reaffirm their commitment to interfaith bridge-building.



The gathering was part of a year-long celebration marking the 10th anniversary of the John Paul II Center for Interreligious Dialogue, a partnership between The Russell Berrie Foundation and the Pontifical University of St. Thomas Aquinas (the Angelicum) in Rome.

In September, to kick off the year, the Center for the Study of World Religions at Harvard Divinity School hosted a symposium

exploring the concept, history, strengths and limitations of grouping Judaism, Christianity and Islam under the umbrella of the “Abrahamic religions.” The celebration will culminate in May, with a conference at the Angelicum on “Education for Action: The Urgency of Interreligious Leadership for the Global Good.”\*

As we reflect on the work of the John Paul II Center and its flagship program, the Russell Berrie Fellowship in Interreligious Studies, I have been struck by its incredible reach and potential. To date, 95 fellows from 33 countries have graduated from the program. Among them: A Catholic priest from Nigeria who, as vice chairman of the Christian Association of Nigeria, has worked to build bridges at the grassroots level between Christian and Muslim leaders. A Reconstructionist rabbinical student who recently organized a unique tour of Jerusalem’s Old City, designed to give Jewish participants insight into Christian and Muslim connections to the land. A nun from Kerala, India, who manages a school for 500 Muslim, Hindu and Christian students and will soon begin a term as Provincial superior.

Building on the successes of the fellowship year, in 2016 we launched the Russell Berrie Alumni Grant Program, encouraging fellows to create innovative, high-quality interfaith dialogue and action projects. One alumni grant recipient, Lidiia Batig, recently received the Austrian government’s Intercultural Achievement Award for innovation for her project: the School of Interreligious Journalism in Ukraine, devoted to equipping journalists with the skills and tools to cover interfaith issues and portray religion accurately in the media. Another recipient, Sister Purobi Paschalina Chiran, used her grant to organize an interreligious dialogue training course for female Catholic graduate students in her majority Muslim home country of Bangladesh.

In advance of the 10th anniversary, last year we commissioned the Institute of International Education to evaluate the John Paul II Center’s work. The evaluators found that the Russell Berrie Fellowship transformed not only the lives and perspectives of the fellows themselves, but a truly impressive and diverse range of communities that the fellows returned to throughout the world. We were delighted to see how they took on greater leadership roles, embarked on promising new initiatives and created dialogue and action programs based on their learnings.

The evaluation also found that the fellows continue to have an impact on the field of interreligious dialogue itself — publishing articles, organizing conferences and otherwise shaping this important field.

It was particularly meaningful to mark the John Paul II Center's first decade with a gathering in Jerusalem, a holy city to so many faiths and a place that the fellows visit each year as part of their Israel Academic Seminar. The Israel seminar is repeatedly cited by alumni as a highlight of their Fellowship experience.

Alumnus Father Robert Reikli, a vice-parish priest who is charged with the pastoral care of several Catholic communities in Greece, described the Israel visit as his “most remarkable memory” from the fellowship year. He singled out the experience of engaging in traditional *havruta*-style partnered learning, saying, “I think that on [an] academic and even on a human level, this will be the way in which we should start the interreligious dialogue.”

Amid the myriad challenges of our fractured world, the work of the John Paul II Center, the Russell Berrie Fellowship and the remarkable fellows themselves are truly cause for celebration. We look forward to continuing the conversation in Rome this spring — and in the years to come.

Sincerely,

Ruth Salzman

*\*If you plan to be in Rome and would like to join the public events, please sign up [here](#).*

Photo credit: Noam Feiner

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