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## Out of Many Faiths

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# Out of Many Faiths : University of Dayton, Ohio

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By Eric F. Spina

Masha Kisel is drawn to the colorful mosaic of Mary in the courtyard outside St. Mary's Hall.

"I think of her as a fellow Jewish mother. Even before I was on the faculty, I'd come to that spot to sit and pray," said Masha, a lecturer in English who teaches a course in Jewish-American film to classes of largely Catholic undergraduates.

I like to think of Mary wrapping her cloak protectively around all faculty, staff, and students, welcoming all to our community of faith, no matter their religious traditions. Pope Francis in his recent encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti*, and during his visit to Iraq re-affirmed the Catholic Church's call for interfaith dialogue. It's a bridge leading to a greater understanding and respect for all people as children of God — and dialogue deepens our own faith.

Huthayfa Usman, president of the Muslim Student Association, chose UD partly because it is a Catholic university. "I've always felt at home here. I appreciate the tradition of respecting everyone and treating them as neighbors," said the senior criminal justice major, who's deeply engaged in campus life.

Huthayfa started the Public Safety Advocate program, which serves as a liaison between UD students and the police. He's also written a reference guide to help law enforcement agencies build trust between Muslims and police officers. Professors often invite him to speak to classes about Islam, and he's as comfortable doing that as he is stopping in Rike Center for Jummah prayers on Friday.

"I'll go into religion classes and take questions from students who are Catholic. People truly care and want to learn about my faith, something that's important to me," he said.

Masha hopes her discussions with students help them think about seeing people in a new light — not as "the other" but as part of a diverse community. "It took me a little while to feel comfortable even telling my students I was Jewish. Now I embrace it."

Jason Combs' students learned that he's a Bahá'í when he called an early break in an evening class so he could break his fast. Bahá'ís fast from sunrise to sunset during the first 19 days of March.

"They showed a curiosity and openness about the religion, and we all had a good laugh as I went off to eat my sandwich before resuming class," he said. "My comfort level is very high being at UD. I was raised Catholic, so the symbols are familiar to me, and there's still a love for Catholicism deep in me.

"UD is such a welcoming place," he said, echoing others from a range of diverse faith traditions who have found a home here. "There's an openness to religion and the Marianist philosophy. It's not unusual to have discussions about faith and reason."

As Ragini Bhardwaj, a "proud Hindu," finishes up her master's degree in computer science this spring, she reflects on why she chose a Catholic university.

"UD is not just a school, it's a community. A community where everyone looks out for one another," she said. "I feel very welcomed here because of the fact that it is so diverse and the Marianist tradition truly exists within all of its faculty, staff and among its students. I believe that all religions have one destination, God."

We're in a season of holiness, a sacred time. As Christians prepare for Easter, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, and Bahá'ís are observing meaningful religious holidays, too.

Masha and her husband, Sam Dorf, associate professor of musicology, will celebrate Passover at an outdoor Seder with Jewish friends from UD. During Ramadan, Huthayfa and other Muslim students will invite classmates to enjoy an Iftar meal at sunset one evening. Instead of gathering, because of COVID-19 restrictions, they'll improvise and prepare take-away boxes of Arabic, Indian, and Chinese halal dinners. Jason is looking forward to celebrating Ridván, a joyous 12-day festival, and Hindus in our campus community will observe Holi, which celebrates the arrival of spring and the triumph of good over evil.

For me, Easter will bring joy and renewed hope. It will celebrate the central mystery of my Catholic faith.

A Catholic university puts faith as the centerpiece and invites all to gather around the table and share their gifts. When we engage in dialogue about our deeply held beliefs, we learn how much we share in common.

We learn to appreciate our shared humanity.