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The International Society for Krishna Consciousness
Founder-*Acharya* His Divine Grace A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada

Media Release

ISKCON Scholar Greet Pope on Behalf Of American Hindus

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ISKCON Communications

Washington, D.C.

ic@pamho.net

Contact: Anuttama Dasa, 240-286-2751

Vineet Chander, 201-925-4973

Washington, D.C.—Dr. Ravi Gupta, a professor of Hinduism at William and Mary College in Williamsburg, Virginia, and an initiated brahmana priest of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), presented a gift of an elaborate OM symbol to Pope Benedict XVI at an interfaith gathering in Washington, D.C., on behalf of the Hindu American community on Thursday, April 17.

The Pope, the spiritual leader of the Roman Catholic Church including 65 million Americans, is in Washington as part of a North American tour that will include an address later in the week to the United Nations General Assembly in New York.

The interfaith meeting where Dr. Gupta met the Pope was organized by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), and was held at the Pope John Paul II Cultural Center in Washington. Approximately one hundred and fifty interfaith leaders attended the session, including representatives from the Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, and Jain traditions.

“It was a great honor to meet His Holiness Pope Benedict on behalf of the Hindu community in America,” said Dr. Gupta. “I was impressed by the intimacy of the gathering, and the Pope’s genuine interest in meeting with us. It was my feeling that the Pope—as both a holy man and a scholar—wished he had more time to spend with his guests, and to be able to know us all better,” Gupta said.

The meeting, entitled “Peace Our Hope—An Interreligious Gathering with His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI” concluded a diverse and event-filled day for the pontiff including his celebrating Mass in the local sports stadium with 45,000 adherents and Washington elite.

Dr. Gupta, 26, whose devotional name is Radhika Raman Dasa, was one of five young representatives of religious traditions who were invited to greet the Pope and offer him a gift from their respective traditions. Anuttama Dasa, ISKCON’s Minister of Communications and a Governing Body Commissioner (GBC), also attended the private event on behalf of the Hare Krishna society.

Due to tight security, attendees to the interfaith gathering were ushered into their meeting room two hours before the Pope. The Pontiff arrived at the John Paul II Center just after 6 PM in his

'Pope Mobile' escorted by security vehicles and limousines carrying an entourage of cardinals, bishops and priests.

After brief welcoming remarks, the Pope spoke for twenty minutes on the importance of interfaith dialogue and cooperation. He quoted former President Franklin Roosevelt who said, "No greater thing could come to our land today than a revival of the spirit of faith."

The Pope invited the group to bear "witness to those moral truths which they hold in common with all men and women of goodwill" and thus, as religious people "exert a positive influence on the wider culture."

After speaking, the Pope stepped down from his elevated seat to greet his visitors more intimately, beginning with the youth representatives. Just minutes before he was to offer his gift to the Pope, Dr. Gupta, dressed in traditional dhoti, kurta, and tilak, was told he was welcome to also share some personal words with the Holy Father.

"I greeted the Pope with our traditional Hare Krishna greeting," reported Gupta. "Then I said, 'Your Holiness, you are well aware of the richness within Hinduism, including a strong tradition of monotheism and religious tolerance. I hope these can be a foundation for a strong and continued dialogue with the [Catholic] Church.'"

The Pope responded positively, "Yes, our dialogue should continue to grow," accepted the OM symbol, and held Dr. Gupta's hand warmly before the next representative came forward.

"It was a historical occasion," said Anuttama Dasa, ISKCON GBC Member. "The tensions on the world stage call for religious leaders to understand each other better and to teach their respective congregations to not only respect, but to learn from one another. The Pope, while careful to not minimize his own tradition's values and faith commitments, opened the door wider for increased cooperation with the Church."

Both Gupta and Dasa are also in Washington this week to attend the 11th Annual Vaishnava-Christian dialogue, which coincided with the Pope's visit.

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