



**CHRISTIANS IN  
THE CONTEMPORARY  
MIDDLE EAST**

**CONFERENCE 2016**

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**RELIGIOUS  
MINORITIES  
AND THE STRUGGLE  
FOR SECULAR  
NATIONALISM  
AND CITIZENSHIP**

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December 5-6, 2016

Villanova Room, Connelly Center



**VILLANOVA  
UNIVERSITY**

“Arab Christians are an integral part  
of the cultural identity of Muslims,  
just as Muslims are an integral part  
of the cultural identity of Christians . . .

We are responsible for each other  
before God and humanity.”

—*Catholic Patriarchs of the Orient  
in their Pastoral Letter for Easter 1992,  
“Christian Presence in the Orient:  
Witness and Mission”*

## INTRODUCTION

For more than 2,000 years, Christian communities and other religious minorities have thrived as an important piece of a vibrant Middle East mosaic. These communities share the same rich history and a large part of the cultural heritage of the Muslim majority population.

As the 28th Session of the United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva noted in its March 13, 2015, Joint Statement: “The situation of Christians in the Middle East, a land on which they are living for centuries and have the right to remain, raises deep concerns. There are more and more reasons to fear seriously for the future of the Christian communities that have more than two thousand years of existence in this region, where Christianity has its full place, and began its long history.”

These communities have faced economic and political insecurity and sectarian violence—giving rise to religious radicalism and militant groups that threaten the very existence of religious minorities, especially those steeped in Christian heritage and tradition. Although religious extremism threatens all Middle Eastern religious and ethnic minorities, Christians, in particular, represent a significant group whose status is a barometer of whether the coexistence of religious and ethnic diversity will be possible in the Middle East.

As an Augustinian Catholic institution of higher education, Villanova University is committed to raising awareness and seeking solutions that will protect and preserve the human and civil rights of all religious minorities in the Middle East.

### VILLANOVA UNIVERSITY IS PLEASED TO PARTNER WITH:

- American University of Science & Technology
- Bethlehem University
- Catholic Near East Welfare Association
- Catholic Relief Services
- The Center for Arab and Islamic Studies, Villanova University
- College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, Villanova University
- *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies*, Villanova University
- Office for Mission and Ministry, Villanova University

## THIS CONFERENCE WILL EXAMINE

- the reasons for the decline in pluralistic and cosmopolitan spaces in the Middle East, and the consequences for Christians and other minorities;
- the historic role of Christian intellectuals and their contributions to Arab politics and promoting religious freedom;
- prospects for securing the equality of citizens, given current interpretations of Islamic law that tend to create separation and marginalization, even among Muslim citizens not of the majority sect;
- strategies that could be implemented to combat the persecution of minority and religious communities and enable them to stay in their home countries;
- the geopolitical and regional tensions that have threatened the presence of Christians and other vulnerable communities in the Middle East; and
- the impact of the Shia-Sunni conflict on the status of ethnic and religious minorities in the region.





## VILLANOVA UNIVERSITY: ARABIC CARTOUCHE

Artist Kamal Boullata created this cartouche in 1983 for Villanova University. Based on a modernized rendering of a traditional, angular Arabic script, the calligraphic lettering reads, "Villanova."

Artist's Description:

"Like an ancient seal or a walled city, the vertical structure is all self-contained. The three rhombic points appearing twice within the cartouche (to spell the letter 'V') are drawn in a pyramidal shape and may recall the three points at the three ends of the golden Orthodox cross (as viewed in the Mount of Olives Russian church, representing the Trinity)."

"In the very middle of the seal, two other rhombic points, appearing once next to each other (to spell the letter 'i'), may mirror how two people have been destined to live side by side in the heart of the same city. To the right of these point groupings, there is a single rhombic point (to spell the letter 'n'), which may sum up the echo of the Oneness to which we all belong."

Kamal Boullata is considered one of Palestine's great modernist artists. Born in Jerusalem, he went on to study at the Fine Arts Academy of Rome and the Corcoran School of the Arts and Design in Washington, D.C. Boullata's work is found in private collections throughout the United States, Europe and the Arab world.

مَرْكَزُ الدَّرَاسَاتِ العَرَبِيَّةِ وَالإِسْلَامِيَّةِ - جَامِعَةُ فِيلَانُوفَا

CALLIGRAPHY (Arabic Inscription)

"Center for Arab and Islamic Studies, Villanova University"



"Mary Queen of Peace"

Written by the Rev. Richard G. Cannuli, OSA, MFA  
Director, Villanova University Art Gallery;  
Professor, Studio Art/Theatre,  
Villanova University

## MARY QUEEN OF PEACE

The Rev. Richard G. Cannuli, OSA, MFA, wrote the icon "Mary Queen of Peace" specifically for the Christians in the Contemporary Middle East Conference.

Artist's Description:

"This icon was written because all Christians and Muslims, especially in the Middle East, venerate Mary (Maryām), the mother of Jesus. She is considered one of the greatest and most righteous women in the Islamic religion and is the only female mentioned by name in the Quran. In fact, Mary's name appears more often in the Quran than in the New Testament."

"The title, written in Arabic, comes from the Litany of the Blessed Virgin Mary, which is associated with a shrine in Loreto, Italy, but the icon depicts Mary as a Middle Eastern woman. Instead of a crown on her head, she wears a row of gold disks; a gold halo encircles her head. In her hands are the traditional symbols of peace: a dove with an olive branch in its beak. Today, we ask for Mary's intercession for peace and stability amid the violence and turmoil affecting all people of the Middle East."

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“States must be secular. Confessional states end badly. That goes against the grain of History. I believe that a version of laicity (secularism) accompanied by a solid law guaranteeing religious freedom offers a framework for going forward.

We are all equal as sons (and daughters) of God and with our personal dignity. However, everyone must have the freedom to externalize his or her own faith. If a Muslim woman wishes to wear a veil, she must be able to do so.

Similarly, if a Catholic wishes to wear a cross. People must be free to profess their faith at the heart of their own culture not merely at its margins.”

—Pope Francis  
Exclusive Interview with *La Croix*,  
May 17, 2016

## DAY ONE—MONDAY, DECEMBER 5

9:15–9:30 a.m.	<p><b>Welcome</b> <b>The Rev. Peter M. Donohue, OSA, PhD</b>, <i>President, Villanova University</i></p> <p><b>Introduction</b> <b>The Rev. Kail C. Ellis, OSA, PhD</b>, <i>Assistant to the President; Conference Director, Villanova University</i></p>
9:30–10 a.m.	<p><b>US and International Efforts to Address the Situation of Religious Minorities in the Middle East</b> <b>Knox Thames</b>, <i>US Department of State</i></p>
<p><b>Session I: Christian Cultural and Intellectual Life in the Islamic Middle East: The Shared History of Pluralistic and Cosmopolitan Spaces</b> Moderator: <b>Hibba Abugideiri</b>, <i>Villanova University</i></p>	
10–10:30 a.m.	<p><b>Christianity’s Historic Roots in the Middle East</b> <b>Sidney Griffith</b>, <i>The Catholic University of America</i></p>
10:30–11 a.m.	<p><b>Christian Contributions to Art, Culture and Literature in the Arab-Islamic World</b> <b>Bernard Sabella</b>, <i>Palestinian Legislative Council, representing Jerusalem</i></p>
11–11:30 a.m.	<p><b>Christian Contributions to Education and Social Advancement</b> <b>Sami El-Yousef</b>, <i>Catholic Near East Welfare Association-Pontifical Mission for Palestine, Jerusalem</i></p>
11:30 a.m.–12 p.m.	Open Discussion/Q&A
12–1 p.m.	Lunch

**DAY ONE—MONDAY, DECEMBER 5** (continued)

**Session II: Christian Contributions to Arab Politics and Religious Freedom**

Moderator: **Nabeel Haider**, *American University of Science & Technology*

1-1:30 p.m.	<b>The Role of Christian Intellectuals in Arab Politics and the Movement for Secular Nationalism and Religious Freedom</b> <b>Tarek Mitri</b> , <i>Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs, American University of Beirut</i>
1:30-2 p.m.	<b>The Human Rights of Minorities Under the Laws of Republics and Monarchies</b> <b>Fateh Azzam</b> , <i>Asfari Institute for Civil Society and Citizenship, American University of Beirut</i>
2-2:30 p.m.	Open Discussion/Q&A

**Session III: Strategies to Combat Persecution of Minority and Religious Communities**

Moderator: **Catherine Warrick**, *Villanova University*

2:30-3 p.m.	<b>Political Strategies to Combat Persecution of Minority and Religious Communities and Safeguard Their Ability to Remain in Their Home Countries</b> <b>Alon Ben-Meir</b> , <i>New York University Center for Global Affairs; World Policy Institute</i>
3-3:30 p.m.	<b>The “Responsibility to Protect” and the Dangers of Military Intervention in Fragile States to Combat Jihadism</b> <b>Retired Gen. Anthony C. Zinni, USMC</b> , <i>Former Commander-in-Chief of the United States Central Command; Former Special Envoy for the United States to Israel and the Palestinian Authority</i>
3:30-4 p.m.	Open Discussion/Q&A
4-6 p.m.	<b>“Mary Queen of Peace: Liturgical Objects From the Middle East”</b> <b>Villanova University Art Gallery</b> <i>An exhibit featuring icons, vestments and artifacts; reception will be held in the lounge adjacent to the gallery</i>

**DAY TWO—TUESDAY, DECEMBER 6**

**Session IV: The Shia-Sunni Conflict and Its Effect on the Region and International Relations**

Moderator: **Samer Abboud**, *Arcadia University*

9:30-10 a.m.	<b>The Arab Uprisings, Erosion of Nationalist Movements, and the Expansion of Terrorism and Political Violence</b> <b>Rami Khouri</b> , <i>Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs, American University of Beirut</i>
10-10:30 a.m.	<b>The Impact of the Shia-Sunni Political Struggle and Future Strategies for Christians and Other Minorities in the Middle East</b> <b>Brian Katulis</b> , <i>Center for American Progress</i>
10:30-11 a.m.	<b>Geopolitical Tensions: Russia, the United States and Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Iran and Their Effect on Christian and Other Minority Communities</b> <b>Elizabeth H. Prodromou</b> , <i>Tufts University</i>
11-11:30 a.m.	Open Discussion/Q&A
11:30 a.m.-12:30 p.m.	Lunch

**Session V**

12:30-1 p.m.	<b>“Is it possible to elevate a secular awareness of religious diversity in the Middle East and to think of ‘minorities’ not as marginalized but as people who share concerns that are common to the inhabitants of the region in the context of war and interventionism?”</b> <b>Ussama Makdisi</b> , <i>Rice University</i>
1-2:30 p.m.	Open Discussion/Q&A Moderator: <b>The Rev. Kail C. Ellis, OSA</b> , <i>Villanova University</i>

## CONFERENCE PARTICIPANTS: DAY ONE

Complete biographical information may be found online at [novaconference.villanova.edu](http://novaconference.villanova.edu)



**KNOX THAMES, JD**

Special Advisor for Religious Minorities in the Near East and South/Central Asia, US Department of State



**SIDNEY H. GRIFFITH, PHD**

Ordinary Professor Emeritus, Department of Semitic and Egyptian Languages and Literatures, The Catholic University of America



**BERNARD SABELLA, PHD**

Member, Palestinian Legislative Council representing Jerusalem; Executive Secretary, Department of Service to Palestinian Refugees



**SAMI EL-YOUSEF**

Regional Director, Catholic Near East Welfare Association- Pontifical Mission for Palestine, Jerusalem Field Office



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**ALON BEN-MEIR, PHD**

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**RETIRED GEN. ANTHONY C. ZINNI, USMC**

Four-star general; Former Commander-in-Chief, United States Central Command; Former Special Envoy for the United States to Israel and the Palestinian Authority

### MODERATORS

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**NABEEL HAIDAR, PHD** Provost, American University of Science & Technology, Beirut

**CATHERINE WARRICK, PHD** Associate Professor, Political Science; Co-director, the Center for Arab and Islamic Studies, Villanova University

**SAMER ABBOD, PHD** Associate Professor, Historical and Political Studies, Arcadia University

**THE REV. KAIL C. ELLIS, OSA, PHD** Assistant to the President; Dean Emeritus, College of Liberal Arts and Sciences; Conference Director, Villanova University



**CONFERENCE PARTICIPANTS: DAY TWO**



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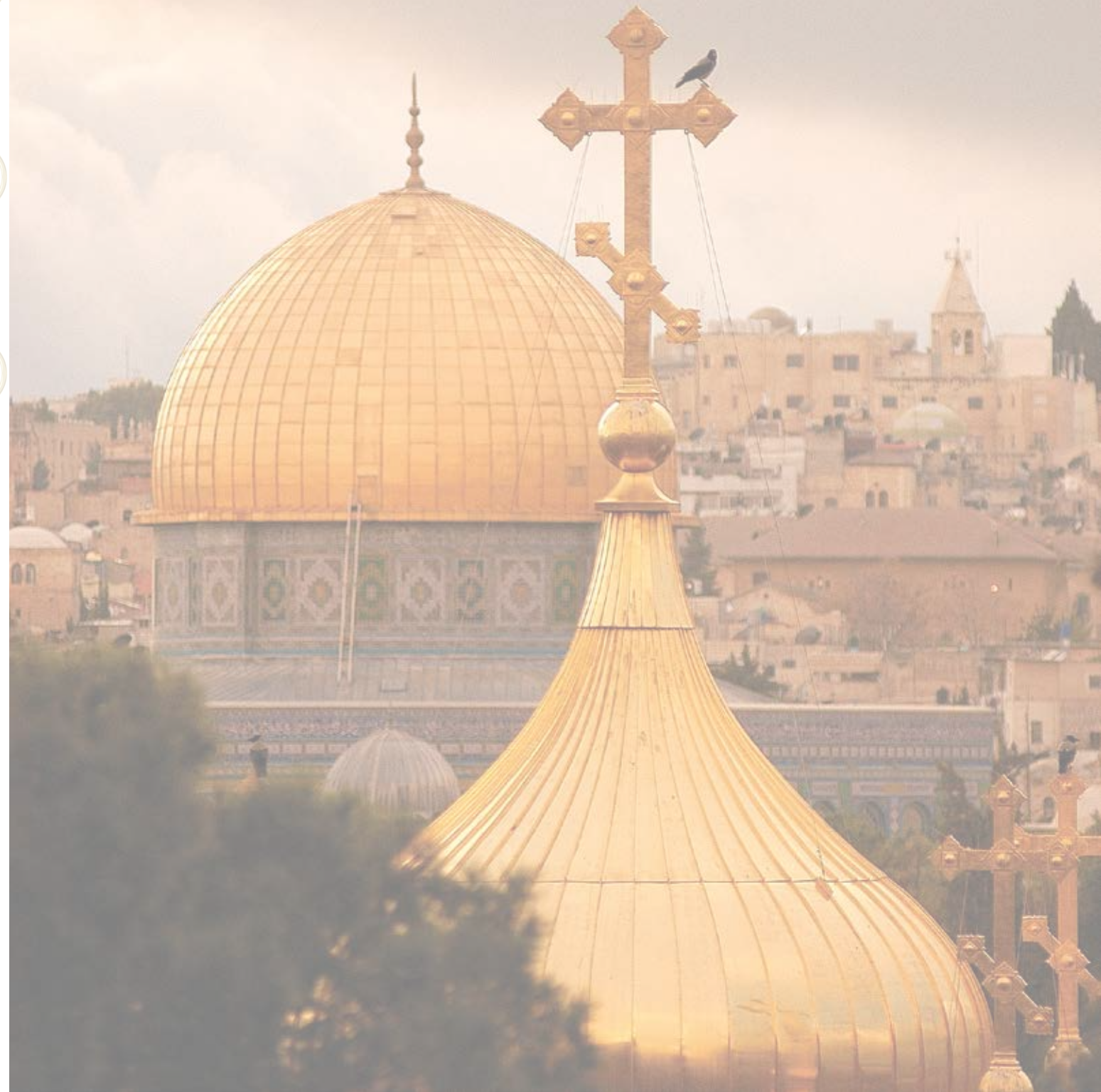
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**USSAMA  
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## VILLANOVA UNIVERSITY

Villanova University was founded in 1842 by the Order of St. Augustine. To this day, Villanova's Augustinian Catholic intellectual tradition is the cornerstone of an academic community in which students learn to think critically, act compassionately and succeed while serving others. There are more than 10,000 undergraduate, graduate and law students in the University's six colleges.