Remarks by
His Eminence William Cardinal Keeler
Archbishop of Baltimore National Press Club

January 13, 2005

It is both an honor and a personal pleasure to be here with my colleagues in the Interreligious Initiative for Peace in the Middle East. We believe in the same one God and know that God calls us to find the common path to a just peace in the land we all call "Holy." In the words of the Psalmist, we labor for the day when "justice and peace will kiss." (Psalm 85:11)

I come as a Catholic bishop who has for many years engaged in interfaith and ecumenical work, the Jewish-Catholic Dialogue, and interreligious partnerships that have led to wonderful friendships with many Jewish, Christian, and Muslim religious leaders. I feel especially close to those within the interreligious community with whom I have worked on the cause of peace in the Middle East.

We are here today as religious leaders of three traditions, but with one purpose—to pursue a just peace for Israelis and Palestinians. As Jews, Christians and Muslims we do not come here to take sides in the dispute, but rather to take the side of peace with justice.

We gather at a time of great change that may bring the promise of peace closer. Pope John Paul II, in a recent address to diplomats, stated: "In the Middle East, the land so dear and sacred to believers in the God of Abraham, armed confrontation appears to be decreasing, with the hope of a political breakthrough in the direction of dialogue and negotiation." We in the Interreligious Initiative share this hope.

Israel has embarked on a plan to withdraw from some of the occupied territories. The Palestinians have elected a new President. And our own nation's President is about to begin his second term. These events create a new opportunity to work for a peaceful and just resolution of this long conflict that has inflicted terrible suffering on both Palestinians and Israelis. The time for bold new leadership is now.

Here in our nation's capital, we urge President Bush to help Israelis and Palestinians come together to make peace. This task should be an immediate priority in his second term. The religious community is also making peace a priority. Both at the national level and in local cities throughout the country, religious leaders of our three traditions are meeting to build bridges of understanding and to press the case for peace. In fifteen cities stretching from Seattle, Washington to Charlotte, North Carolina, religious leaders are forging partnerships and engaging public officials in making peace a priority. From my personal experience in Baltimore and at the national level, I can attest to the energy and commitment that religious leaders are bringing to this task.

I might add we are also working within our respective faith communities. For example, this week Bishop William Skylstad, the President of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, is in the Holy Land with other Catholic leaders. They had a substantive and positive meeting with the President of Israel and are scheduled to meet with the newly elected President of the Palestinian Authority today.

The Interreligious Initiative has shared with President Bush a framework for building a just peace. This framework promotes a two-state solution with security for both peoples. We have assured the President of our support as the leaders of Israel and the Palestinian Authority walk step-by-step along the road to justice and peace in the Holy Land.

Our prayer is for peace and justice. Our hope is for Palestinians and Israelis. May God bless the land we call Holy with justice and peace for all.