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Pope in about-face over Muslim dialogue office

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VATICAN CITY (Reuters) - In a surprising about-face, Pope Benedict has decided to restore power and prestige to the Vatican department that oversees dialogue with Islam a year after he controversially downgraded it.

The department's return to its former status occurred as Catholic-Muslim dialogue is still suffering the negative effects of Benedict's Regensburg speech last September in which he appeared to equate Islam with violence.

Catholic and Muslim officials on Monday hailed the decision as a positive step that could help improve relations.

Vatican Secretary of State Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone said in Italy's La Stampa newspaper at the weekend that the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue would again become "a separate department."

Benedict downgraded the office in March 2006 by putting it under joint presidency with the Vatican's culture ministry and removing its president, Archbishop Michael Fitzgerald, a Briton.

"This would be a very positive thing for Muslims," said a senior Muslim official active in inter-faith dialogue who asked not to be named. He said Muslims had seen the council's downgrading as a sign Benedict was not very interested in Islam.

"I think it's a great idea," said Father Tom Reese, senior fellow at Georgetown University's Woodstock Theological Center and a world-renowned Vatican expert.

In France, home to Europe's largest Muslim minority, the priest in charge of relations with Islam said the change would help him in discussions and debates with Muslims.

"This is a sign, to Muslims and people of other faiths, that the policies of Pope John Paul will continue," Father Christophe Roucou said, noting Muslims respected the late Polish-born pontiff for his pioneering openness towards other faiths.

Vatican sources said Bertone's comments meant the department would soon get its own head again.

REGENSBURG SPEECH

In his speech last September in Regensburg, Germany, the Pope quoted a 14th century Byzantine emperor as saying Islam had only brought evil to the world and that it was spread by the sword, which was unreasonable and contrary to God's nature.

He later said he regretted any misunderstanding it caused among Muslims, after protests including attacks on churches in the Middle East and the killing of a nun in Somalia.

But as late as this month, the Regensburg speech was still having repercussions on Catholic-Islam dialogue.

When former Iranian President Mohammad Khatami met the Pope on May 4 he said wounds between Christians and Muslims were still "very deep" as a result of the Regensburg speech.

Some observers saw the Regensburg issue as a direct consequence of the Pope's downgrading of the Muslim dialogue office and the removal of Fitzgerald, since the Vatican no longer had a world-class expert on Islam to advise the Pope.

The Muslim official said he hoped Fitzgerald would be reappointed to head the council. Catholic officials spoke in more general terms.

"I just hope they get the right man," Reese said. "In the 21st century, inter-religious dialogue is too important not to have experts advising the Pope so that we don't have the kind of disaster that we had in Regensburg.

(Additional reporting by Tom Heneghan)

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