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Vatican distances Pope from views of baptized Muslim

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By Phil Stewart

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VATICAN CITY (Reuters) - The Vatican sought on Thursday to put distance between Pope Benedict and the political views of a Muslim whom he baptized over Easter weekend, known in Italy for his stinging attacks on Islam.

It also tried to quell Muslim fears about proselytism at Christian schools in Muslim nations, like the one the Egyptian-born convert once attended.

The high-profile baptism of journalist Magdi Allam during an Easter Vigil service on Saturday has thrown a spotlight on the pontiff's often tense relationship with Islam, and upset key proponents of Christian-Muslim dialogue.

The Vatican said it wanted dialogue to continue and stressed that Allam's opinions did not reflect Church policy.

"(Allam) has the right to express his own ideas," chief Vatican spokesman Rev. Federico Lombardi said in a statement.

"They remain his personal opinions without in any way becoming the official expression of the positions of the Pope or the Holy See."

Explaining his decision to become a Christian, Allam wrote in Sunday's edition of daily Corriere della Sera, where he is deputy editor: "The root of evil is innate in an Islam that is physiologically violent and historically conflictual."

Catholic-Muslim relations nosedived in 2006 after Benedict delivered a lecture in Regensburg, Germany, that Muslims said implied Islam was violent and irrational.

Muslims around the world protested and the Pope, who said he did not agree with the Byzantine emperor he had quoted, sought to make amends by visiting the famous Blue Mosque in Istanbul and praying towards Mecca with its imam.

Earlier in March, the Vatican agreed with Muslim leaders to establish a permanent, official dialogue to improve relations.

PROSELYTISING IN SCHOOLS?

Allam's baptism sparked criticism from a leading participant in Christian-Muslim dialogue, Aref Ali Nayed, director of the Royal Islamic Strategic Studies Centre in Amman, who said it raised questions about the Vatican's approach to Islam.

Lombardi said the Vatican held Nayed in the highest respect and that dialogue "must not be interrupted, and has priority over episodes that may be the subject of misunderstandings."

But the Vatican expressed "displeasure" at suggestions by Nayed that Allam was an example of the risks involved with placing Muslims in Christian schools.

Lombardi said the majority of non-Christian students at Christian schools "have happily remained so ... while showing appreciation for the education they have received."

"We do not think the Church today merits the accusation of lack of respect for the dignity and freedom of the human person," Lombardi said.

(Writing by Phil Stewart; editing by Andrew Roche)

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