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Vatican, Muslims prepare historic meeting with Pope

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By Philip Pullella

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VATICAN CITY (Reuters) - Muslim representatives and Vatican officials begin talks this week that they hope will lead to an unprecedented Catholic-Islamic meeting.

Five representatives from each side will meet on Tuesday for two days in Rome to work out the details of a larger meeting that will include Pope Benedict later this year.

"We have to bring the dialogue up to date following the great successes of the pontificate of John Paul II," said Yahya Sergio Yahe Pallavicini, vice-president of the Italian Islamic Religious Community.

Catholic-Muslim relations nosedived in 2006 after Benedict delivered a lecture in Regensburg, Germany, that was taken by Muslims to imply that Islam was violent and irrational.

Muslims around the world protested and the Pope sought to make amends when he visited Turkey's Blue Mosque and prayed towards Mecca with its Imam.

After the fallout from the Regensburg speech, 138 Muslim scholars and leaders wrote to the German-born Pontiff and other Christian leaders last year, saying "the very survival of the world itself" may depend on dialogue between the two faiths.

The signatories of the Muslim appeal for theological dialogue, called the "Common Word," has grown to nearly 225 since.

"Now there is a need for deeper dialogue on doctrine, theology and the character of religions in today's world and the challenges we face," Pallavicini told Reuters.

"We must try, together with the Pope, to get on a path of dialogue on issues confronting humanity today," he said.

Besides Pallavicini, the Muslim delegation to the preparatory talks will include a Turk, a Briton, a Jordanian and a Libyan.

The Vatican delegation includes Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran, head of the Vatican's Council for Interreligious Dialogue, the head of the Pontifical Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies in Rome and a professor from Rome's Gregorian University.

Pallavicini said the larger meeting later this year will undoubtedly talk about terrorism.

"Terrorism is one thing that has to be discussed," he said. "All religious leaders must renew a message of peace in their faith. Then it will be easier to isolate extremists and avoid the wrong use of religion," he said.

Although Benedict repeatedly expressed regret for the reaction to his speech in Regensburg, he stopped short of a clear apology sought by Muslims.

Pallavicini said the enlarged meeting would likely take place either at the Vatican before the summer or at Benedict's summer residence south of Rome in August.

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