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Pope meets with Muslim scholars, urges better ties

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VATICAN CITY -- Christians and Muslims must overcome their misunderstandings, Pope Benedict XVI told Muslim clergy and scholars Thursday as he pressed for greater freedom of worship for non-Muslims in the Islamic world.

His meeting in the Apostolic Palace with a delegation of scholars and other Muslim representatives capped a three-day conference in Rome involving Catholic clergy and professors and Islamic experts. Benedict told participants he had followed the "progress" of the talks closely.

The pope's baptism of a prominent Egyptian-born Muslim last Easter in St. Peter's Basilica upset some in the Muslim world. Benedict also angered Muslims with comments linking Islam to violence in a speech in 2006.

"Dear friends, let us unite our efforts, animated by good will, in order to overcome all misunderstanding and disagreements," the pope said in a speech to the delegates. "Let us resolve to overcome past prejudices and to correct the often distorted images of the other, which even today can create difficulties in our relations."

Benedict has expressed regret for any offense caused by his 2006 remarks.

Beyond repairing strained relations, the Vatican views the talks between both sides as an opportunity to push for better treatment of Christians in parts of the Muslim world.

In Saudi Arabia, non-Muslims cannot worship in public, Christian symbols like crosses cannot be openly displayed and Muslims who convert face death. The Vatican has also spoken out about the plight of Christians in Iraq, where churches have been attacked, clergy kidnapped and many faithful forced to flee the country.

Benedict expressed hope that fundamental rights will be "protected for all people everywhere."

"The discrimination and violence which even today religious people experience throughout the world, and the often-violent persecutions to which they are subject, represent unacceptable and unjustifiable acts," the pope continued.

The call for tolerance also applies to countries that are essentially "failed states" for their Muslim citizens, too, said Hamza Yusuf Hanson, a U.S.-based scholar among the Muslim participants.

"Muslims are suffering under the yoke of tyrannies where rights which should be afforded to anyone" are denied, Hanson told reporters.

The discussions at the Vatican made important strides, according to Abdal Hakim Murad Winter, an Islamic studies lecturer at the Divinity School at England's Cambridge University.

"Both sides agreed to respect the sanctity" of each other's beliefs and to "not tolerate any mockery," Winter told journalists.

Mufti Mustafa Ceric of Bosnia predicted that Barack Obama's election and family background will foster better Muslim-Christian understanding.

Obama is a Christian. Yet the U.S. president-elect's grandfather in Kenya converted to Islam from Roman Catholicism, according to the grandfather's second wife, and Obama spent part of his childhood in Indonesia, a predominantly Muslim nation.

Catholic delegates to the conference included Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran, who heads the Vatican's council on interreligious dialogue, retired Washington, D.C. archbishop, Cardinal Theodore McCarrick and Chaldean Archbishop Louis Sako of the northern Iraqi city of Kirkuk.

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