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Pope seeks Muslim help to defend moral values

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VATICAN CITY (Reuters) - Pope Benedict urged Muslim religious leaders and scholars on Thursday to join Christians in defending their common moral values and respect for human rights despite theological differences between them.

In an unprecedented Vatican audience, the pope received a 29-strong delegation of Muslims from the Middle East, Africa, Asia and western countries who last year invited Christian churches to redouble efforts to improve interfaith relations.

The meeting came two years after the pope gave a speech hinting Islam was violent and irrational, which sparked angry protests in the Middle East. The Muslims formed their group to refute that speech and seek better mutual understanding.

"There is a great and vast field in which we can act together in defending and promoting the moral values which are part of our common heritage," the German-born pope told his guests, including 29 Catholic experts who have been holding closed-door talks with the Muslims for the past two days.

"We should thus work together in promoting genuine respect for the dignity of the human person and fundamental human rights, even though our anthropological visions and our theologies justify this in different ways."

Benedict noted this meeting with the group linked to the dialogue invitation entitled "A Common Word" was one of several the Vatican was conducting with Muslims.

The Vatican has also participated in interfaith talks launched this year by Saudi Arabian King Abdullah, who will meet at the United Nations in New York next week with other heads of state to further promote his initiative.

These and other dialogues reflect a new urgency Muslim leaders have felt after the September 11 attacks, the "clash of civilizations" theory and the pope's 2006 speech in Regensburg showed a widening gap between the world's two largest faiths.

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Benedict said the Catholic-Muslim Forum, the official name for this dialogue now set to take place every two years, was "now confidently taking its first steps."

Also addressing the meeting, Islamic philosopher Seyyed Hossein Nasr said: "We should join together in the battle against the desacralising and anti-religious forces of the modern world, and joining effort should bring us closer together."

Nasr, an Islamic studies professor at George Washington University in the United States capital, said both faiths have been violent at times and neither had a monopoly on using force.

Muslims believed in religious freedom, he said, but would not allow "aggressive proselytizing in our midst that would destroy our faith in the name of freedom."

Delegation head Mustafa Ceric, the Grand Mufti of Bosnia, reminded the pope that his predecessor John Paul had prayed for him during the four-year siege of Sarajevo in the 1990s.

After the speeches, the pope walked around the ornate hall greeting each delegate and talking with them.

Delegates at the closed-door talks on Tuesday and Wednesday called them frank but cordial, with participants openly discussing their differences.

"The discussion is not getting derailed where it could get derailed, if someone wanted to do that," one delegate said.

The delegations were due to hold a public discussion on Thursday and issue a communique summing up the talks.

Before the audience, Benedict received the new Egyptian ambassador to the Vatican, Lamia Aly Hamada Mekhemar, and told her the Vatican would like to see Catholic churches built at "the new tourist sites that have developed in recent years."

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