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Vatican hosts meeting with Muslim scholars

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VATICAN CITY -- In a bid to improve strained Catholic-Muslim relations, the Vatican hosted scholars, imans and clerics from both religions Tuesday as it opened a three-day religious conference.

The forum aimed to counter the effects of a speech two years ago by Pope Benedict XVI that angered many in the Islamic world.

The meetings will culminate in a papal audience and is intended to help the two faiths find common ground. The closed-door forum, which gathers 29 scholars and clerics from each religion, started Tuesday and will last through Thursday.

The Vatican said in a statement the first day was dedicated to the "spiritual and theological fundamentals" of the two religions, and the second will focus on "human dignity and mutual respect."

The presence of an archbishop from Iraq suggests that violence targeting Christians in Iraq and other countries could be one topic on the agenda.

The forum was set up in response to a letter written last year by 138 Muslim scholars to Benedict and other Christian leaders urging that Christianity and Islam to build on their common belief in one God.

The Vatican welcomed the letter. It has been eager to improve relations with moderate Islam since Benedict angered many Muslims with a 2006 speech about Islam and violence.

In the speech, Benedict quoted a Medieval text that characterized some of the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad as "evil and inhuman," particularly "his command to spread by the sword the faith."

The pope later said he was "deeply sorry" over the reaction to his remarks, and the passages he quoted did not reflect his own opinion.

In their letter, the Muslim scholars, muftis and intellectuals drew parallels between Islam and Christianity and their common focus on love for God and love for one's neighbor. They also noted that such a focus is found in Judaism.

Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran, who heads the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, has said Thursday's papal audience could start a historic

dialogue between the faiths.

Tauran is heading the Vatican delegation, which also includes the retired archbishop of Washington, Cardinal Theodore McCarrick, and Chaldean Archbishop Louis Sako of the northern Iraqi city of Kirkuk.

The Muslim group includes Swiss scholar Tariq Ramadan and Seyyed Damad, dean of the Department of Islamic Studies at Iran's Academy of Sciences. Other representatives come from countries ranging from the United States and Afghanistan to Saudi Arabia and Iraq.

A spokesman for the Muslim delegation said both sides had agreed not to release details on the meeting until Thursday.

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