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# Muslims seek crisis management plan with Vatican

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By Tom Heneghan, Religion Editor

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VATICAN CITY (Reuters) - Muslim scholars due to meet Pope Benedict and Roman Catholic officials this week hope the Vatican will agree to joint crisis management plan to defuse tensions that flare up between Christianity and Islam.

Violent protests in the Islamic world after a Danish newspaper printed cartoons of the Prophet Mohammad might have been averted if Christians and Muslims had spoken out jointly against such unrest and the provocation behind it, they say.

This proposal is one of several ideas for better interfaith cooperation that the Common Word group, a broad coalition of Muslim leaders and scholars pursuing dialogue between the world's two largest religions, will present at the November- 4-6 talks.

"We should develop a crisis reaction mechanism so if there is another cartoon crisis, we could get together and make a joint statement," said Ibrahim Kalin, an Islam scholar from Turkey who is spokesman for the group.

They would also speak out against religious persecution such as the oppression of Iraq's Christian minority, said delegation member Sohail Nakhoda, editor of the Amman-based magazine Islamica. "We have to look out for each other," he said.

The Common Word manifesto, which invited Christian churches to a new interfaith dialogue based on shared principles of love of God and neighbor, was issued in October 2007 partly in response to Pope Benedict's Regensburg speech a year earlier.

Bloody protests broke out in Muslim countries after Benedict hinted there that he considered Islam a violent and irrational faith. The Common Word group said the incident revealed such mutual ignorance that a new cooperation drive was needed.

In meetings this year with mostly Protestant leaders, Common Word delegates have proposed regular dialogue sessions, student exchanges, suggested reading lists and other ideas to help Christians and Muslims learn more about each other.

## DIALOGUE DEFUSES TENSION

Kalin, an Islamic studies professor at Georgetown University in Washington, said cooperation between churches and mosques in the Netherlands defused tensions before far-right politician Geert Wilders released his anti-Islam film *Fitna* early this year.

"That was the first fruit of the kind of cooperation we want to have," he said.

The Common Word manifesto, which now has 271 signatories, brings together leading Muslim officials and scholars from around the world. Its 24-member delegation to the Vatican talks will be led by Grand Mufti of Bosnia Mustafa Ceric.

Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran, head of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, will head the Catholic delegation made up of 24 Vatican officials and Catholic experts on Islam.

Christianity has about two billion followers worldwide, just over half of them Catholic, while Muslims number 1.3 billion.

The delegations will hold closed-door talks on theology on Tuesday and issues of mutual respect on Wednesday, including the question of religious freedom in Muslim countries that the Vatican is especially keen to discuss.

They will have an audience with Pope Benedict on Thursday before holding a public discussion session that afternoon.

Tauran told the French Catholic daily *La Croix* in an interview the delegations should discuss religious freedom but it was not a Vatican precondition for a dialogue.

He said if Muslims could build mosques in Europe, Christians should have the same right in majority Muslim countries. Saudi Arabia, which has launched its own interfaith dialogue this year, bars other religions from operating openly there.

"These dialogue initiatives seem quite out of step with the anti-Christian violence that is reported daily from several countries," he said. "How can we communicate the real openings we are making among elites down to the masses?"

(Editing by Giles Elgood)

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