



washingtonpost.com

Catholics and Muslims to fight terror and defend faith

Advertisement

By Tom Heneghan, Religion Editor
Reuters

Thursday, November 6, 2008; 3:31 PM

VATICAN CITY (Reuters) - Catholic and Muslim leaders at unprecedented Vatican meetings vowed on Thursday to jointly combat violence committed in God's name, to defend religious freedom and to foster equal rights for minority faith groups.

After three days of meetings, the 58 scholars and leaders -- 29 from each faith -- issued a joint declaration that also appealed for respect for religious figures and symbols.

The meetings came two years after the pope gave a speech hinting Islam was violent and irrational, sparking angry protests in the Middle East. The Muslim participants formed a group to challenge that and seek better mutual understanding.

The joint manifesto, *A Common Word*, called for dialogue based on shared principles of love of God and neighbor.

"We profess that Catholics and Muslims are called to be instruments of love and harmony among believers, and for humanity as a whole, renouncing any oppression, aggressive violence and terrorism, especially that committed in the name of religion, and upholding the principle of justice for all," said the statement describing the talks as "warm and convivial."

Religious minorities were "entitled to their own places of worship, and their founding figures and symbols they consider sacred should not be subjected to any form of mockery or ridicule," it said.

The Vatican has long defended minority Christians in places such as Saudi Arabia, where they cannot worship publicly, and urged safety for Iraqi Christians. Muslims in western countries say they face discrimination and suspicion by the majority.

The declaration's words about avoiding mockery or ridicule reflected continued Muslim concern about the 2005 publication in a Danish newspaper of caricatures of the Prophet Mohammad that sparked violent protests in the Islamic world.

VAST FIELD FOR COOPERATION

Earlier in the day, Pope Benedict received the delegations at the Vatican and said the faiths should cooperate much more.

"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 said.

"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," he added.

The Abu Dhabi-based Bishop of Arabia Paul Hinder said he discussed with Muslim delegates the Vatican wish's to build churches in Saudi Arabia for Catholic migrant workers there.

"I don't think we'll get any right away, but things are changing," he told journalists.

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.

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."

The Catholic delegation included Vatican officials, Catholic scholars of Islam and bishops leading minority communities in Iraq, Syria, Pakistan and the Gulf states. Three were women.

The Common Word group, an independent union of Islamic thinkers from across the Muslim world, sent Sunni and Shi'ite religious leaders and scholars from the Middle East, Africa, Asia and western countries, including two women.

Ingrid Mattson, a convert who heads the largest Muslim organization in North America, said the Common Word represented "the broad mainstream of the Muslim world ... Those who oppose us, their voices will become increasingly marginalized."

© 2008 Reuters