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November 7, 2008

## Catholics and Muslims Pledge to Improve Links

By RACHEL DONADIO

VATICAN CITY — Catholic and Muslim leaders worked on Thursday to deflate suspicion between their two faiths, pledging at a high-level seminar here to work together to condemn terrorism, protect religious freedom and fight poverty.

The meeting came a year after 138 Muslim leaders wrote a letter to [Pope Benedict XVI](#) after he offended many Muslims by quoting a Byzantine emperor who called some teachings of the Prophet Muhammad “evil and inhuman.” In turn, top [Vatican](#) officials have worried about freedom of worship in majority-Muslim countries, as well as [immigration](#) that is turning Europe, which they define as a Christian continent, increasingly Muslim.

But on Thursday both sides said they hoped that the seminar would open a new and much-improved chapter in Catholic-Muslim relations, as the two groups said they might establish a committee that could ease tensions in any future crisis between the two religions.

“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 told the Muslim delegation. He called the gathering “a clear sign of our mutual esteem and our desire to listen respectfully to one another.”

Addressing the pope on behalf of the Muslim delegation, Seyyed Hossein Nasr of Iran, a professor of Islamic studies at [George Washington University](#) in Washington, said that throughout history, “various political forces” of both Christians and Muslims had carried out violence.

“Certainly we cannot claim that violence is the monopoly of only one religion,” he said.

The three-day forum brought together nearly 30 Catholic clerics and scholars, led by Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran, the head of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue; and as many Muslim clerics and scholars, led by Mustafa Ceric, the Grand Mufti of Bosnia and Herzegovina based in Sarajevo.

The meeting “exceeded our expectations,” said Ingrid Mary Mattson, the director of the Islamic Society of North America and a professor of Islamic studies at the Hartford Seminary.

“The atmosphere was very good, very frank,” said Tariq Ramadan, a professor of Islamic Studies at [Oxford University](#). A celebrated intellectual in Europe, Mr. [Ramadan](#) in 2004 was denied a visa to the United States on the grounds that he had donated to two European charities that the State Department later said gave money to [Hamis](#).

Mr. Ramadan said the thorniest questions the group tackled were “apostasy” and “freedom of worship in a minority situation.” Some Muslims believe it is apostasy to convert out of Islam.

The 15-point declaration the group issued on Thursday did not address issues of conversion.

It called on Catholics and Muslims to renounce “oppression, aggressive violence and terrorism, especially that committed in the name of religion.”

And it said religious minorities should be “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.”

In 2006, Muslims around the world protested, some violently, after a Danish newspaper printed cartoons of Muhammad.

One participant, Archbishop Louis Sako of Kirkuk in northern Iraq, called the meeting “a first step” but said he hoped that the declaration would “bear fruit.”

In recent years, Islamic militants in Kirkuk have killed, kidnapped or forced Iraqi Christians to convert. Archbishop Sako noted that in their homilies, “many imams are preaching against infidels and crusaders,” and that “some simple people” believed that this referred to all Christians.

He called on Muslim leaders to publicize the declaration, with its assertion of shared Christian-Muslim values. “This should be clarified, stated, given to the media to teach people about it,” he said. “For us Christians living in Muslim countries, that would be very, very helpful.”

The Muslim delegation included representatives of Sunni and Shiite Islam, as well as several converts and participants from North Africa, Indonesia, the Philippines and Uganda.

It notably did not include any participants from Saudi Arabia, where non-Muslim worship is not tolerated and with which the Vatican has had strained ties. Two Saudis were expected to attend, but had to cancel at the last minute for health reasons, said Ibrahim Kalin of Turkey, a spokesman for the Muslim delegation and a professor of Islamic Studies at [Georgetown University](#) in Washington.

Yet in July, Cardinal Tauran and other Vatican officials attended an interfaith dialogue organized by King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia in Spain.

Participants in this week’s conference pledged to hold another dialogue in a Muslim country in 2010.

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