

## **A Bosnian Muslim welcome to Pope Francis** by Mustafa Ceric, *The Daily Star*, 5 April 2013

The election of Argentine Pope Francis, the 266th Bishop of Rome and head of the Roman Catholic Church, deserves both our congratulations and our reflection for the future of Muslim-Christian coexistence and dialogue.

As a survivor of genocide at the end of 20th century in Bosnia, I am very interested in the policy of the Vatican and the message of the Holy See, which speaks for the Catholic Church. While the political influence of the Vatican might be limited to public diplomacy, the spiritual influence has great significance for millions of Christians worldwide. Consequently, the pope has always had a great impact on global peace and security.

Pope Francis may find in his two immediate predecessors important lessons that could guide his future relations with Muslims.

Pope John Paul II was a good communicator and supporter of interfaith dialogue. His relationship with the Muslim world was respectful and promising.

For example, he spoke against the four year siege of Sarajevo every Sunday. Pope John Paul's message, "Never again war. Never again hatred and intolerance," has been well received by all people. When he visited Sarajevo in April 1997, the late Bosnian president, Alija Izetbegovic, called him "one of the most influential men of the 20th century."

While relations with Muslims were strained in an unfortunate way with Pope Benedict XVI's remarks about Islam and the Prophet Mohammad at the University of Regensburg in 2005, his subsequent apology rekindled dialogue.

This dialogue began with the A Common Word Initiative, launched by 138 Muslim scholars and academics. On Oct. 13, 2007, these scholars released an open letter entitled "A Common Word between Us and You" to Christians worldwide, inviting them to seek common ground with Muslims based on the love of One God and neighbor. Every major Muslim-majority country in the world was represented, and Christian leaders responded positively to this initiative.

This led to the establishment of the Catholic-Muslim Forum. Two summits have been held so far. The first one took place at the Vatican in 2008, where Pope Benedict met all the participants and the second one in Jordan in 2011. Relations were also strengthened through the pilgrimage Pope Benedict made to Jesus' baptism site in Jordan and his visit to the King Hussein Mosque during the same trip in 2010.

Pope Francis' statement on dialogue, published in his 2011 book "On Heaven and Earth" says, "Dialogue is born from an attitude of respect for the other person, from a conviction that the other person has something good to say. It assumes that there is room in the heart for each individual's point of view and opinion. To dialogue entails a cordial reception, not a condemnation. In order to dialogue it is necessary to know how to lower defenses, open the doors of one's house, and offer human warmth."

With this in mind, I hope that Pope Francis has inherited the best of both of his predecessors: the openness and good will of Pope John Paul toward Muslims, and the willingness of Pope Benedict to continue dialogue and strengthen relations with Muslims worldwide.

Indeed, I hope that Pope Francis will renew the Catholic-Muslim Forum with new energy and commitment to the spirit of the A Common Word Initiative which Pope Benedict helped begin. With such work, I am hopeful for my two grandchildren that they may live in peace in Bosnia without fear of religiously motivated violence.

With strong interfaith relations, there are three areas of common human concern that Pope Francis might make important. First is the issue of poverty, which should have an appeal to our human and religious conscience. Second is the issue of climate change due to global pollution caused by human negligence and greed. And third is the issue of nuclear threats that could lead to human self-destruction.

These issues are global in nature and local in action. Regardless of our faith, culture, race, nationality and ideology, we are in the same boat of global collapse or salvation. Therefore, we need to build our ark with peace, dialogue and mutual respect. I hope that Pope Francis will do what he can to work with Muslims and others in order to build an ark that will save this common humanity of ours.

May God bless us all to be friends to one another. We all take different paths in life, but no matter where we go, we take a little of each other everywhere. Friends are God's way of caring for us.

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