

## At unplanned meeting, imam thanks Francis for his comments on Islam



*Pope Francis prays in the Porziuncola in Assisi, Aug. 4, 2016. Credit: L'Osservatore Romano.*

Assisi, Italy, Aug 5, 2016 (CNA/EWTN News).- During his visit to Assisi Thursday, Pope Francis had a brief, unscheduled meeting with the imam of Perugia, Abdel Qader Mohammed, who thanked the Roman Pontiff for his recent statement that true Islam is not a religion of violence, but of peace.

Pope Francis met briefly with Mohammed during his Aug. 4 visit to the Porziuncola inside the Basilica of Saint Mary of the Angels.

According to San Francesco, the official magazine of the Franciscans in Assisi, Mohammed thanked Pope Francis for statements he made during his July 31 papal flight to Rome where he affirmed, in Mohammed's words, "that Islam is not a religion of terrorism, but a faith of peace."

When asked by a French journalist during the flight whether or not Islam as a whole can be considered a violent religion, the Pope responded that "I do not believe it is right to identify Islam with violence... This is not right and it is not true."

"I don't like to speak about Islamic violence," he said, noting that while "one can speak of the so-called ISIS," it is "an Islamic state which presents itself as violence."

"This is a small fundamentalist group called ISIS," he said. But "I do not believe it is true or correct that Islam is terrorist."

According to San Francesco, Mohammed said the unexpected meeting with Pope Francis was "an exciting, important and necessary encounter, now more than ever... because dialogue is built on mutual respect and sincerity. And today more than ever, firm stances are needed against all forms of violence and terror."

"A heartfelt thanks to Pope Francis for his closeness to us Muslims," Mohammed commented, closing by praising "Allah, the Merciful."

Pope Francis visited Assisi to mark the 800th anniversary of the "Pardon of Assisi," when, according to tradition, Saint Francis had a vision of Christ and Our Lady surrounded by angels. When the Lord asked what he wanted for the salvation of souls, Saint Francis responded by asking God to grant a plenary indulgence to all pilgrims who visited the church.

This isn't the first time Francis has met with an imam. On March 19 he embraced the grand imam of Ahmed el-Tayeb, grand imam of the al-Azhar Mosque, during a meeting at the Vatican, a move which is seen as a step toward reopening dialogue between Christians and Sunni Muslims.

On that occasion, el-Tayeb issued a global appeal to counter terrorism, which he said is "deviant" from true Islam and threatens both east and west alike.

While in Assisi, Pope Francis also heard the confessions of 19 people and visited the hospital of the friars of the Porziuncola in the evening, where he gave a brief speech before heading back to Rome.

"Thank you so much for your welcome and I ask the Lord to bless you," Pope Francis said. "I thank you for this desire to be close to me. Do not forget: always forgive. Forgive from the heart, or if you can get closer... but forgive, because if we forgive the Lord forgives us, and we all need forgiveness. Is there anyone not in need of pardon here? All (are)!"