

Pope Encourages Islamic-Christian Group Studying Common Devotion to Mary

8th Prayer Meeting Held in Lebanon on Feast of Annunciation

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Pope Francis is encouraging Christians and Muslims to work together for peace by invoking together the Virgin Mary, as faithful of both creeds share a devotion to her.

The 8th Islamic-Christian Prayer Meeting was held Tuesday, feast of the Annunciation, in Beirut, Lebanon, and focused on the theme “Together around Mary, Our Lady.”

The Solemnity of the Annunciation is marked by both Christians and Muslims and was declared a national holiday by the Lebanese government in 2010

The meeting was organized by the St. Joseph University Alumni Association and the College of Our Lady of Jamhour.

The Pope's message was give through Secretary of State Pietro Parolin, who said the Holy Father was joyous at seeing "Christians and Muslims united in their devotion to the Virgin Mary,"

The Pontiff noted that "the shrine of Our Lady of Lebanon in Harissa is a blessed place where everyone can go to invoke her."

He also encouraged Christians and Muslims to “work together for peace and for the common good, thus contributing to the full development of the person and the edification of society," and entrusted the participants in the meeting “and all the inhabitants of Lebanon to the maternal intercession of the Virgin Mary, Queen of Peace and Protectress of Lebanon."

Mother of dialogue

The secretary of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, Father Miguel Angel Ayuso, gave an address at the meeting called "The Virgin Mary and Islamic-Christian dialogue."

In his address, which focused both on the figure of Mary and on the mission of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, Fr. Ayuso emphasised that the feast of 25 March was “a true example of the co-existence between Muslims and Christians that characterises Lebanese history, in the midst of so many difficulties, and which also constitutes an important example for many other nations”.

“Since Vatican Council II, the Catholic Church recognises that Muslims honour the Virgin mother of Jesus, Mary, and invoke her with piety. ... Mary is mentioned various times in the Koran. Respect for her is so evident that when she is mentioned in Islam, it is usual to add 'Alayha l-salam' ('Peace be upon her'). Christians also willingly join in this invocation. I must also mention those shrines dedicated to Mary which welcome both Muslims and Christians. In particular, here in Lebanon, how can we forget the shrine of Our Lady of Lebanon in Harissa?”

“Devotion creates sentiments of friendship: it is a phenomenon open to everyone. The cultural experiences that our communities can share encourage collaboration, solidarity and mutual recognition as sons and daughters of a single God, members of the same human family. Therefore, the Church addresses the followers of Islam with esteem. During the last fifty years, a dialogue of friendship and mutual respect has been constructed”.

With reference to the dialogue between Muslims and Christians, he went on to explain that the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue “seeks to establish regular relationships with Muslim institutions and organisations, with the aim of promoting mutual understanding and trust, friendship and, where possible, collaboration. In fact, there exist agreements with various Muslim institutions enabling the possibility of holding periodical meetings, in accordance with the programmes and procedures approved by both parties. With regard to the methods of interreligious dialogue and, therefore, the dialogue between Christians and Muslims, we must recall that dialogue is a two-way form of communication. ... It is based on witness of one's own faith and, at the same time, openness to the religion of the other. It is not a betrayal of the mission of the Church, and much less a new method of conversion to Christianity. The document 'Dialogue and Proclamation', published jointly by the Congregation for the Evangelisation of Peoples and the Council for Interreligious Dialogue in 1991, identifies four different forms of interreligious dialogue: the dialogue of life, the dialogue of works, the dialogue of theological exchange and the dialogue of religious experience. These four forms demonstrate that it is not an experience confined to specialists”.

Fr. Ayuso concluded by analysing the role of Mary, in the light of the motto of the national holiday in Lebanon, “Together around Mary, Our Lady”. “In the Apostolic Exhortation 'Marialis Cultus', promulgated in 1974 by Pope Paul VI, Mary is presented as 'the Virgin who listens', 'the Virgin who prays', 'the Virgin in dialogue with God'. ... But there is also the image of a model of dialogue of seeking when, addressing the Archangel Gabriel, she asks, 'How is it possible?'. Mary, a model for Muslims and Christians, is also a model of dialogue, teaching us to believe, not to close ourselves up in certainties, but rather to remain open and available to others”.

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