

## Pope Francis Opens a New Chapter in Catholic-Muslim Relations

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My relationship with the Catholic community goes back to the time when I was 3 years old. My parents sent me to a Catholic school, a 150 year old institution in Hyderabad, India. I studied there from preschool to high school. This was an experience that would shape my view of Catholics and Christians at-large. I cherish the time I spent at the Catholic school and remember vividly the positive interactions I had with the Catholic Brothers, teachers, and fellow students. During the moral science class at the school, even though I was a Muslim, I was very much on a common ground due to the many similarities that Islam and Christianity share. This provided me with an enriching experience that would spur me on to pursue interfaith relations as a priority.

Growing up, someone I admired for his bridge building efforts was Pope John Paul II. He set the tone for bringing Muslims and Catholics closer. In Casablanca, Morocco in 1985, while addressing the Muslim youth, he said, "Christians and Muslims, we have many things in common, as believers and as human beings. We live in the same world, marked by many signs of hope, but also by multiple signs of anguish. For us, Abraham is a very model of faith in God, of submission to his will and of confidence in his goodness. We believe in the same God, the one God, the living God, the God who created the world and brings his creatures to their perfection."

This absolutely resonates with the Muslim belief that the God of humanity is one and that we worship the same one God. We find in the Qur'an the following verses:

"... and say, "We believe in what has been sent down to us and sent down to you and our God and your God is one, and to Him do we submit." (Qur'an 29:46)

"Say, 'O people of the book'! 'come to common terms as between us and you; that we worship none but God; that we associate no partners with Him; that we erect not from among ourselves lords and patrons other than God.'" (Qur'an 3:64)

Muslim-Catholic relations and interfaith initiatives made great progress during Pope John Paul II's time. However, this relationship hit a rough patch when Pope Benedict XVI became the pope. His ill-considered comment questioning Islam's contribution to world civilization threatened to undo the great ground work laid out by Pope John Paul II.

It is a testimony to the strength of these two communities that out of this apparently challenging moment, a project - "A Common Word Between Us and You" - was born. Thanks to the cool-headed initiative of world's major Muslim scholars who reached out to Pope Benedict XVI and sought dialogue with him, to which he responded to positively.

During this time of strained relationship, Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio, then Archbishop of Buenos Aires, Argentina and now Pope Francis disagreed with Pope Benedict XVI's comments saying, "Pope Benedict's statement[s] don't reflect my own opinions. These statements will serve to destroy in 20 seconds the careful construction of a relationship with Islam that Pope John Paul II built over the last twenty years."

It's no wonder that on the election of Pope Francis there was tremendous energy and positivity felt in the Catholic-Muslim circles. Major Muslim scholars and religious institutions welcomed Pope Francis' election. The new pope has lived up to his reputation of

humility, compassion, and a believer in dialogue. In a meeting with ambassadors from 180 countries, he called for more inter-religious dialogue - "particularly with Islam."

This should serve as an encouragement to the Minnesota Catholic and Muslim communities to take Catholic-Muslim dialogue to a new level. The Catholic and Muslim communities in Minnesota already enjoy a great relationship. The Archbishop of St. Paul and Minneapolis, The Most Reverend John C. Nienstedt, attended the 40th anniversary of the founding of the Islamic Center of Minnesota. The Muslim Christian Dialogue Center (MCDC) at the University of St. Thomas has one of the most vibrant programs in the Twin Cities to promote inter-religious dialogue between Muslims and Catholics. Several Muslims sit on the advisory board of MCDC. The Islamic Center of Minnesota and Al-Amal School enjoy a great relationship with Totino Grace High School and share each other's playing fields and parking lots. The Islamic Resource Group (IRG) has built a strong relationship with dozens of area Catholic churches and key leaders of the Catholic Church are regular invitees at events organized by the Muslim community. The positive interactions between Muslims and Catholics are far too many to list here.

Muslims and Catholics together comprise over half of the world's population. Increased cooperation and joint efforts by these two communities can bring about a positive change in the world. There are many values shared by both communities. In these challenging times, when humanity is beset with poverty, hunger, illiteracy, broken families, materialism, etc., Catholics and Muslims must draw upon their shared commitment to their mutual love of God and love for the neighbor to help make the world a better place for future generations. I also exhort the Catholic community to stand against Islamophobia and stand united against hate and bigotry which can destroy the moral fabric of our society. The Islamic Resource Group and other Muslim organizations look forward to greater co-operation and joint projects with the Catholic Church.

Lastly, I would like to end with these great words of wisdom from Pope John Paul II:

"Christians and Muslims, in general, we have badly understood each other, and sometimes, in the past, we have opposed and even exhausted each other in polemics and in wars. I believe that, today, God invites us to change our old practices. We must respect each other, and also we must stimulate each other in good works on the path of God."

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