

The Grand Imam of al-Azhar explains his world peace conference

Sheikh Ahmed al-Tayeb is organizing a World Conference on Peace in Cairo. His goal is “to eliminate the causes of conflict, violence and hate”. Pope Francis will be a featured speaker at the 27-28 April event.

Anne-Bénédicte Hoffner, *La Croix International*, 19 April 2017



The Grand Imam of al-Azhar, Sheikh Ahmed Mohamed al-Tayeb, meeting Pope Francis during his visit to the Vatican in May 2016. / Max Rossi/AFP

“Addressing a message to the whole world” to “call for peace between religious leaders, between societies and between all the countries of the world”. This is how the office of the Grand Imam of al-Azhar summarized the objectives of the forthcoming World Conference on Peace to which 300 people have been invited and in which Pope Francis will participate.

First proposed in May 2016 during the Vatican visit of Sheikh Ahmed al-Tayeb, the idea of the conference took form following the announcement of Pope Francis’ visit to Egypt. It will finally take place in Cairo on April 27 – 28.

The brief program for the pope’s trip to Cairo distributed by the Vatican indicates that the pope will give a speech on Friday, April 28 after the Grand Imam, immediately following his arrival in the Egyptian capital and a “courtesy visit” to President al-Sissi. It will be a highly anticipated speech coming three weeks after the two attacks for which ISIS claimed responsibility and which caused dozens of deaths during Palm Sunday celebrations in the Egyptian cities of Tanta and Alexandria.

Crises threatening the essence of human life

Observing that “human society is currently experiencing overwhelming crises threatening our existence and destroying the essence of human life”, al-Azhar, which is the principal religious institution of the Sunni world, affirms that the “bloody, armed conflicts” that have resulted “contradict sublime religious values and humanitarian ideals”.

In this context, seeking justice and peace by eliminating “the causes of poverty, sickness, violence and hate” is a “human necessity,” “a responsibility,” not only for those who share “a particular belief or philosophy” but for “the whole of humanity”.

Shared human principles

“Considering the expansion of the circle of wars and violence and the rise in terrorism and sectarianism, the voice of reason calls us to do our best to eliminate the causes of suffering and to seek the means of cooperation rather than seeking conflicts...,” the al-Azhar document emphasizes.

"[To] respect instead of rejecting each other, to live in peace instead of fighting, and to tolerate instead of being fanatical."

It is a document to which Egyptian President al-Sissi makes frequent reference in his calls “to renew religious discourse”.

The text presenting the document also echoes a speech by Sheikh Ahmad al-Tayyeb at a major conference on “Liberty, citizenship, diversity and integration” organized in Cairo on February 28 and March 1 in partnership with the Council of Muslim Sages.

Before a crowd of religious and political leaders from around the world, the Grand Imam recognized that “acquitting religions of terrorism”, which had previously been his leitmotiv, “is no longer enough”.

Another step

“We need to take the initiative and make a further step forward by bringing the principles and ethics of religions into this tumultuous reality,” he recognized in the speech, which was translated by the Oasis Foundation and published on its internet site. “In my personal view, this step requires preliminary actions beginning with the lowering of the tensions and contrasts which still exist between the leaders of different religions and which no longer have any reason today.”

In the view of the Grand Imam of al-Azhar, “peace between those who preach religion” is the key to the future. In fact, “those who do not possess something cannot transmit it to others”. And this lowering of tensions between religious leaders “may only be realized by mutual recognition”, the Grand Imam continued.

“I do not like to speak of Islamic violence,” Pope Francis declared in the plane returning from Krakow to Rome on Sunday, July 31, several days after the assassination of Fr Jacques Hamel by jihadists claiming adherence to Islam. During an earlier trip, he had also spoken of “war” with respect to terrorism while refusing to speak of a “war of religions”.

“Every day we hear people speak of violence, even here in Italy. But when baptized Catholics kill someone, do we speak of Catholic violence?” the pope asked journalists. “Not all Muslims are violent just as not all Catholics are violent... There are violent people in this religion, that’s true,” the pope said.

"But I believe that there is always a small group of fundamentalists in every religion. It is not fair to identify Islam with violence. It is not just and it is not true."