

## Christian-Muslim Dialogue

1. Amidst the stormy reactions of the Regensburg's lecture come countless blessings, for both the Catholic Church, the Muslim Scholars and Religious leaders, including the global community characterized by plural cultures and religions.
2. The Regensburg's letter has initiated an academic exchange that amounts to a theological dialogue between Christianity (Rome) and Islam (scholars & leaders), reinstating the centrality of REASON to the relationship between the two religions of the book (without diminishing the importance of affective maturity). In this exchange, the best of Islamic intellectuals allow their voices to be heard so that this collective voice becomes a REASONABLE and highly respectable and authoritative explanation of Islam vis-à-vis the seemingly more commanding voices within the regional and global Muslim community that are given importance by the western media (CNN, CNBC & BBC) to justify the "war on terror" which demonizes Islam as a religion of violence and bloodshed. Any bilateral conversation involving the Vatican gives the interlocutors (Muslim Scholars and leaders) a moral legitimacy, commanding a high degree of global respectability.
3. The OPEN LETTER reiterated their appreciation of the teachings of Vatican II in *Nostra Aetate* [Declaration on the Relations of the Church to Non-Christian Religions], 28<sup>th</sup> October 1965: "The Church has a high regard for the Muslims. They worship God, who is one, living and subsistent, merciful and almighty, the Creator of heaven and earth, who has also spoken to the hidden decrees of God, just as Abraham submitted himself to God's plan, to whose faith Muslims eagerly link their own."
4. The OPEN LETTER registers its esteem for the moral and religious leadership of the late John Paul II who paid his due tribute to Muslims: "We Christians joyfully recognize the religious values we have in common with Islam. Today I would like to repeat what I have said to young Muslims some years ago in Casablanca: "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." [*Insegnamenti, VIII/2, [1985], p. 497, quoted during a general audience on May 5, 1999. Also see Herald, Nov 5, 2006: 11*]
5. The OPEN LETTER also accepts the Pope's explanation in footnote 3 that "In the Muslim world, this quotation has unfortunately been taken as an expression of my personal position, thus arousing understandable indignation. I hope that the reader of my text can see immediately that his sentence does not express my personal view of the Qur'an, for which I have the respect due to the holy book of a great religion."
6. In the same breadth, the Vatican Statement clarifies: "He simply used it as a means to undertake- in an academic context, and as is evident from a complete and attentive reading of the text – certain reflections on the theme of the relationship between religion and violence in general, and to conclude with a clear and radical rejection of religious motivation for violence, from whatever side it may come." (Herald September 24, 2006:1)
7. In response the Vatican Statement assured the world of the papal option for interreligious and intercultural dialogue. In fact on August 20, 2005, in meeting with the representatives of the Muslim communities in Cologne, Germany, the Pope said that such dialogue between Christians and Muslims "cannot be

- reduced to an optional extra,” adding, “the lessons of the past must help us to avoid repeating the same mistakes. We must seek paths of reconciliation and learn to live with respect for each other’s identity.” (Herald September 24, 2006:1)*
8. Both leaders of the two major religions have rejected the perpetuation of violence in the name of religion. In the commemorative message of the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Interreligious Meeting of the Prayer at Assisi in October 1986, the Pope clearly states: “...*demonstrations of violence cannot be attributed to religion as such but to the cultural limitations with which it is lived and develops in time...In fact, attestations of the close bond that exists between the relationship with God and the ethics of love are recorded in all great religious traditions.*” (Herald September 24, 2006:1)
  9. The Vatican Statement makes a positive observation: “*Indeed it was he who, before the religious fervour of Muslim believers, warned secularized Western culture to guard against “contempt for God and the cynicism that considers mockery of the sacred to be an exercise of freedom.”*” (Herald September 24, 2006:1)  
The sentiments of Pope Benedict XVI echo that of the late John Paul II who “expressed his respect for “the religiosity of Muslims” and his admiration for the “fidelity to prayer.” He added, “ The image of believers in Allah who, without caring about time or place, fall to their knees and immerse themselves in prayer remains a model for all those who invoke the true God, in particular for those Christians who, having deserted their magnificent cathedrals, pray only a little or not at all.” ((Herald October 22, 2006:10)
  10. The Vatican Statement calls on both the leaders of the two major religions to resolve the crisis precipitated so as to witness to the “**Creator of heaven and earth, Who has spoken to women and men**” to witness to and intensify the mutual collaboration “**to promote together for the benefit of humankind social justice and moral welfare, as well as peace and freedom.**” (*Nostrae Aetate, no. 3*; Herald September 24, 2006:1)
  11. It is only through an intellectually open dialogue between the two great world religions as George Weigel, a senior fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Centre in Washington, asserts that the “religiously-warranted irrationality” which “is a lethal threat to the future of human civilization” can be averted. (Herald Oct 22, 2006:10) But it must be added that this is the burden not only of the papacy but of all the scholars and religious leaders of the major religions in our world.
  12. **May 7-17, 2007. Vatican Course entitled “The Catholic Church and International Politics of the Holy See”** was organized for Muslim Diplomats from Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, United Arab Emirates, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Syria and Albania (except for Oman and Tunisia). The course was organized by the Gregorian University Foundation and the Jacques Maritain International Institute with the aim of promoting, in the words of Roberto Papini, head of the Institute, “a politics of transparency,” in which participants can come to Rome, talk to Vatican officials “and see what the Holy See really does, and how many things we have in common. (Herald May 13, 2007:13) While in Rome, participants visited the city’s grand mosque, the largest mosque in Europe, the Sistine Chapel, the Colosseum and the city’s basilicas. From May 20-27, they visited the may church-run-charitable organizations and social centres in Turin that cater to the city’s immigrants, many of whom are Muslims. (Ibid.)

13. Pope's pre-Christmas address to the Roman curia on December 22, 2006: "In a dialogue to be intensified with Islam, we must bear in mind the fact that the Muslim world today is finding itself faced with an urgent task. The task is very similar to the one that has been imposed upon Christians since the Enlightenment, and to which the Second Vatican Council, as the fruit of long and difficult research, found real solutions for the Catholic Church." A Vatican analyst, Sandro Magister comments: "The Pope is asking Islam to make the same journey that the Catholic Church made under pressure from the Enlightenment. Love of god and neighbour must be realized in the full acceptance of religious freedom."
14. The religious freedom that the Vatican is seeking in dialogue with the Muslim scholars and leaders is explained further in the **Message for the End of Ramadan 'Id al-Fit 1428H./2007 a.d. Christian; and Muslim; called to promote a culture of peace.** No. 2. "In the troubled times we are passing through, religious believers have, as servants of the Almighty, a duty above all to work in favour of peace, by showing respect for the convictions of individuals and communities everywhere through freedom of religious practice. Religious freedom, which must not be reduced to freedom of worship, is one of the essential aspects of freedom of conscience, which is the right of every individual and a cornerstone of human rights. It takes into account the requirement that a culture of peace and solidarity between human beings can be built in which everybody can be firmly engaged in the construction of a increasingly fraternal society, **doing everything one can to reject, denounce and refuse every recourse to violence which can never be motivated by religion, since it wounds the very image of God in humankind. We know that violence, especially terrorism which strikes blindly and claims countless innocent victims, is incapable of resolving conflicts and leads only to a deadly chain of destructive hatred, to the detriment of humankind and of societies.**" [Message signed by Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran, President and Secretary Archbishop Pier Luigi Celata, Pontifical Council of Interreligious Dialogue].
15. Perhaps, the greatest blessing ensues from this blunder is a letter was sent on Oct 13, 2007, from Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad bin Talal of Jordan, seeking for a dialogue with Rome. On November 19, 2007, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, the Secretary of State sends his Royal Highness a reply (see Herald, December 9, 2007, Vol. 14, no. 28:1 carrying the headlines **RESPONSE OF THE HOLY FATHER**

*His Royal Highness  
 Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad bin Talal  
 The Royal Palace  
 Amman  
 Jordan.*

*From the Vatican, November 19, 2007.*

*On Oct 13, 2007, an open letter addressed to His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI and to other Christian leaders was signed by one hundred and thirty-eight Muslim religious leaders, including Your Royal Highness. You, in turn, were*

*kind enough to present it to Bishop Salim Sayegh, Vicar of the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem in Jordan, with the request that it be forwarded to His Holiness.*

*The Pope has asked me to convey his gratitude to Your Royal Highness and to all who signed the letter. He also wishes to express his deep appreciation for this gesture, for the positive spirit which inspired the text and for the call for a common commitment to promoting peace in the world.*

*Without ignoring or downplaying our differences as Christians and Muslims, we can and therefore should look to what unites us, namely, belief in the one God, the provident Creator and universal Judge who at the end of time will deal with each person according to his or her actions. We are all called to commit ourselves totally to him and to obey his sacred will.*

*Mindful of the content of his Encyclical Letter Deus Caritas Est (God is Love), His Holiness was particularly impressed by the attention given in the letter to the twofold commandment of love of God and one's neighbour.*

*As you may know, at the beginning of his Pontificate, Pope Benedict XVI stated: "I am profoundly convinced that we must not yield to the negative pressures in our midst, but must affirm the values of mutual respect, solidarity and peace. The life of every human being is sacred, both for Christians and for Muslims. There is plenty of scope for us to act together in the service of fundamental moral values." (Address to Representatives of Some Muslim Communities, Cologne, 20 August 2005). **Such common ground allows us to base dialogue on effective respect for the dignity of every human person, on objective knowledge of the religion of the other, on the sharing of religious experience and, finally, on common commitment to promoting mutual respect and acceptance among the younger generation.** The Pope is confident that, once this is achieved, it will be possible to cooperate in a productive way in the areas of culture and society, and for the promotion of justice and peace in society and throughout the world.*

*With a view to encouraging your praiseworthy initiative, I am pleased to communicate that His Holiness would be most willing to receive Your Royal Highness and a restricted group of signatories of the open letter, chosen by you. At the same time, a working meeting could be organized between your delegation and the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, with the cooperation of some specialized Pontifical Institute (such as the Pontifical Institute for Arabic and Islamic Studies and the Pontifical Gregorian University). The precise details of these meetings could be decided later, should this proposal prove acceptable to you in principle.*

*I avail myself of the occasion to renew to Your Royal Highness the assurance of my highest consideration.*

*Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone,  
Secretary of State*

- 16. Conclusion.** Dialogue among the scholars and learned leaders of the two major religions will ensure the deepening of an increasingly friendly and constructive relationships, in which the most authoritative voices take center-stage. In the frankness of dialogue, there will be greater willingness to collaborate in bringing an end to the spiral of senseless violence in the name of

religions. In this way, both believers bear a concerted witness to the God of Peace and Mercy, the God of creation and humankind.

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