

Pope Benedict meets with Muslim leaders: Calls for "authentic dialogue"

News in the [October 17, 2006](#) issue

In an unprecedented meeting with Muslim envoys on September 25, Pope Benedict XVI called for “authentic dialogue” between religions and cultures. He also said Christians and Muslims “must learn to work together” to safeguard the world “against all forms of intolerance” and “all manifestations of violence.”

Attending the gathering at Castel Gandolfo, the pope’s summer residence south of Rome, were local Muslim clerics and ambassadors from 22 countries with predominantly Muslim populations. It came 13 days after the pope’s controversial speech at the University of Regensburg in Germany in which he quoted a 14th-century Christian emperor as referring to elements of Islam as “evil and inhuman”—a speech that sparked angry and sometimes violent reactions in the Islamic world.

In a subsequent effort at damage control, Benedict said that his speech had been misunderstood, that the medieval quotation he had cited did not reflect his own views, and that “I wanted to explain that religion and reason, not religion and violence, go together.”

Climaxing a diplomatic campaign to soothe Muslim sensitivities and to dampen the post-speech protests, the Castel Gandolfo session was seen as marking a change of tactics in the way the 79-year-old pontiff will seek to deal with Islam. Critics note that as Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, he was far more skeptical about Catholic-Muslim relations than was his papal predecessor, John Paul II—the first pontiff ever to visit a mosque.

For example, Ratzinger expressed strong doubts about Islam’s capacity for self-criticism, and he opposed the admission of Turkey to the European Union because its Muslim identity put it “in permanent contrast” to Europe’s Christian culture.

Shortly after his election as pope he removed Archbishop Michael Fitzgerald, the Vatican's leading authority on Islam, from his position as head of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue.

Some of the pope's Muslim guests on September 25 were heartened by his conciliatory words and by the way he greeted them one by one and clasped their hands. "The Holy Father stated his profound respect for Islam. This is what we were expecting," said Iraqi envoy Albert Ismail Yelda. "It is now time to put what happened behind and build bridges." Others later expressed regret that the pope had not, in their view, offered a complete apology during the 30-minute meeting, and said that as a result the protests would probably continue. The format of the session did not provide for an exchange of opinions with the pontiff.