

Pan-Muslim group accepts invitation for Vatican dialogue: A response to Muslims' open letter

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A groundbreaking group of prominent Muslim scholars and clerics has accepted the invitation of Pope Benedict XVI for a “working meeting” on interreligious dialogue at the Vatican within the next two months.

According to Catholic News Service, Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad bin Talal of Jordan wrote to Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, the Vatican secretary of state, on December 12 to accept the pope’s invitation.

Representatives of Muslim participants at the meeting will travel to the Vatican in February or March to prepare for the event, Ghazi wrote. The Vatican’s proposal was itself a response to an open letter published October 13 by 138 Muslim leaders of Sunni, Shi’ite, Sufi and other schools of thought in Islam seeking better relations with the Christian world.

That letter invoked the common principles of “love of the One God, and love of the neighbor” as the ultimate basis for peace between Muslims and Christians. The Muslim letter was addressed to a long list of heads of Christian communions and denominations, many of whom responded enthusiastically.

On November 29, Bertone wrote on the pope’s behalf to Ghazi, a key framer of the letter, inviting the prince and a “restricted group of signatories” of his choosing to visit the Vatican, for both an audience with Benedict and a “working meeting” with Vatican experts on interreligious dialogue.

While thanking Bertone for the invitation, Ghazi’s reply alluded to tensions besetting Muslim-Catholic dialogue, mentioning “some recent pronouncements emerging from the Vatican and from Vatican advisers . . . as regards the very principle of theological dialogue with Muslims.”

That reference is apparently linked to comments by Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran, president of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, who told a French newspaper that Muslim belief in the Qur'an as the literal word of God makes theological dialogue between Muslims and Christians "difficult."

Ghazi said theological differences should not prevent Christians and Muslims from seeking and affirming areas of agreement, "whether we wish to call this kind of dialogue 'theological' or 'spiritual' or something else."

In late December, the Jordan-based institute headed by Ghazi continued the overtures to Christian leaders worldwide by sending them warm Christmas and New Year greetings. "May the coming year be one in which the sanctity and dignity of human life is upheld by all," said the letter.

The letter, available on the group's Web site, www.acommonword.com, notes that in 2007 Christmas came just after the Muslim hajj, or pilgrimage, to Mecca and Eid al-Adha, the feast of sacrifice, remembering how the prophet Abraham almost sacrificed his son.

"God's refusal to let Abraham sacrifice his son . . . is to this day a divine warrant and a most powerful social lesson for all followers of the Abrahamic faiths, to ever do their utmost to save, uphold and treasure every human life and especially the lives of every single child," states the letter.