

Pope Francis calls for intensified dialogue with Muslims

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VATICAN CITY (RNS) Pope Francis on Friday (March 22) called for more intense dialogue between religious leaders, particularly Muslims, as he tries to recalibrate relations between the world's two largest religious groups.

Speaking in the Vatican's majestic Sala Regia, the Argentine pontiff said that part of his mission is to connect "all people, in such a way that everyone can see in the other not an enemy, not a rival, but a brother or sister."

In a meeting with Vatican diplomats and foreign leaders, Francis also reaffirmed the church's commitment to protect the poor and the environment, an early theme in his young pontificate.

"Fighting poverty, both material and spiritual, building peace and constructing bridges: these, as it were, are the reference points for a journey that I want to invite each of the countries here represented to take up," the pope said.

Francis said that his namesake, St. Francis of Assisi, "teaches us profound respect for the whole of creation and the protection of our environment, which all too often, instead of using for the good, we exploit greedily, to one another's detriment."

He also said his family's international roots -- his parents were born in Italy but moved to Argentina -- means that the "dialogue between places and cultures a great distance apart matters greatly to me."

As today's world becomes "more interdependent," he added, it is necessary to "intensify dialogue among the various religions," particularly Islam. Francis also expressed appreciation for the "presence of so many civil and religious leaders from the Islamic world" at his installation Mass on Tuesday.

"It is also important to intensify outreach to non-believers," he added, echoing his Wednesday appeal to those who have no religion to collaborate with faiths in order to build peace and protect the environment.

On Friday Francis drew on of Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI's favorite themes, when he condemned the "'tyranny of relativism', which makes everyone his own criterion and endangers the coexistence of peoples." He said "richer countries" are "seriously" affected by this form of "spiritual poverty."

Francis and Benedict are scheduled to meet on Saturday, the first time in centuries that a pontiff has met his predecessor.