

Pope Francis holds talks with Sunni Islam leader

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VATICAN CITY (RNS) Pope Francis has welcomed an authoritative leader among Sunni Muslims to the Vatican in a step forward in relations between the two largest blocs in Christianity and Islam.

“The meeting is the message,” Francis said on Monday (May 23) upon greeting Ahmed el-Tayeb, a sheikh and grand imam of Al-Azhar, a mosque and university complex in Cairo that is viewed as the heart of Sunni Islam, which accounts for about 85 percent, or 1.3 billion, of the world's Muslims.

While the late Saint John Paul II had met the previous leader of Al-Azhar during a visit to Egypt in 2000, this was the first time a Sunni grand imam had visited the Vatican.

Francis had formally invited el-Tayeb to visit last year and church sources said the imam—a moderate who has sought to blunt Islamic extremism—was also responding to the various overtures that Francis, leader of some 1.2 billion Roman Catholics, has made to Islam since his election in 2013.

Relations between the Vatican and Al-Azhar had been troubled since the pontificate of Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, who made various remarks about Islam that had offended many Muslim leaders.

The two leaders met for nearly a half hour in the Apostolic Palace in what was described by the Vatican as a “very cordial” meeting. Both leaders recognized the “great significance of this new encounter in the framework of the dialogue between the Catholic Church and Islam,” the Vatican said.

World peace was at the top of their agenda, while they also discussed violence and terrorism, according to the Vatican statement. The situation in the Middle East

regarding Christians—whose plight Francis often highlights—was another central topic.

In a sign of the overarching theme of the trip, el-Tayeb concluded his visit by meeting Jean-Louis Tauran, president of the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue. The imam was accompanied to Rome by a seven-person delegation from Cairo.

As is customary with such a high-level meeting, Francis arrived bearing gifts: a medallion of the olive tree of peace and a copy of *Laudato Si'*, the pontiff's encyclical on the environment.

Just days before the meeting, Francis voiced his views on Islam and the so-called Islamic State group, or ISIS, that has repeatedly threatened to attack the Vatican.

"Today, I don't think that there is a fear of Islam as such but of ISIS and its war of conquest, which is partly drawn from Islam," the pope told French Catholic newspaper *La Croix*.

"It is true that the idea of conquest is inherent in the soul of Islam," he said. "However, it is also possible to interpret the objective in Matthew's Gospel, where Jesus sends his disciples to all nations, in terms of the same idea of conquest."

Francis' carefully chosen words came nearly a decade after Benedict, his predecessor, received death threats after describing the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad as "evil and inhuman."

Benedict afterwards attempted to repair ties with the Muslim community, visiting the Blue Mosque in Istanbul, and Francis has continued to promote interreligious dialogue.

The pope's meeting with el-Tayeb followed his condolences, sent by the Vatican's secretary of state to Egyptian president Abdel-Fattah el-Sissi, over the EgyptAir plane crash on Thursday.

"Pope Francis wishes to assure you of his prayers and solidarity at this difficult time and commends the souls of the deceased of various nationalities to the mercy of the Almighty," Pietro Parolin wrote of the 66 victims.