

Benedict signals that non-Catholic ties are important: The new pope's interfaith outreach

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At a meeting that underlined the high priority he may give to dialogue with non-Catholics—both Christians and the faithful of other religions—Pope Benedict XVI met with more than 30 non-Catholic representatives within a week of his election as Pope John Paul II's successor.

Addressing religious leaders—including Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, who attended his inaugural mass—Benedict said April 25 that it is “imperative to engage in authentic and sincere dialogue built on respect for the dignity of every human person.” The German-born pope also supports efforts to build world peace together.

The emphasis that the new pope has given to ecumenical and interfaith dialogue contrasts sharply with views he expressed when, as Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, he served as the Vatican's guardian of doctrine and was called “God's Rottweiler” and the “Grand Inquisitor” for his relentless opposition to deviations from orthodoxy.

“At the start of my pontificate I address to you and to all the believers of the traditional religions whom you represent, as well as to all those who search for the truth with a sincere heart, a strong invitation to become builders of peace in a reciprocal commitment to understanding, respect and love,” he said.

In his interfaith outreach, and in mildly jocular remarks to German pilgrims in which he recalled seeing “the guillotine moving closer” in the papal conclave as support for his election solidified, the pope seemed to reveal a softer, more pastoral side than was evident in Cardinal Ratzinger.

In the controversial declaration *Dominus Iesus* issued in September of 2000, Ratzinger alarmed ecumenical partners by saying that only Catholics have “the

fullness of salvation” and that followers of other religions “are in a gravely deficient situation.”

But as Benedict XVI, starting with a message to the College of Cardinals on April 20, the day after he was elected, he seized every opportunity to declare his commitment to dialogue.

At the installation mass April 24 he called on Catholics to do “all we can” to achieve Christian unity and spoke of “a great shared spiritual heritage” with Jews. Benedict singled out Muslim representatives in the audience, saying he appreciated the growth of dialogue between Muslims and Christians.

Williams, spiritual leader of the Anglican Communion, expressed confidence in Benedict’s desire for dialogue at a news conference with English cardinal Cormac Murphy-O’Connor. Williams said he saw three phases in Benedict’s life—first he was a theologian in Germany who did “extraordinary and abiding work on the nature of the church and faith,” and second he was a Vatican official charged with maintaining “doctrinal precision.”

“Now he is being asked to perform a third task. How he will perform that we don’t yet know,” Williams said, “but he’s given signals of a real willingness to [look at] ways of taking it forward in fellowship with others in the light of the late pope’s encyclical *Ut Unum Sint*.” In that 1995 document John Paul expressed the church’s commitment to ecumenism and offered to reexamine the way papal authority is exercised.

A similar wait-and-see attitude was urged by the American cardinals who talked to reporters after Ratzinger received a two-thirds majority on the second day of conclave balloting.

Some U.S. church leaders also said they would not assume that the new pope would act like the cardinal who five years ago lobbed a theological hand grenade at Christians around the world. Even after the release of *Dominus Iesus*, some Vatican observers said it was really aimed at internal dissension—regardless of how abrasive it sounded to outsiders.

“I’m not going to measure this pope’s commitment to deeper unity in the body of Christ solely on the basis of that document,” said Mark S. Hanson, presiding bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and president of the Lutheran World

Federation.

Ratzinger helped orchestrate a 1999 agreement between Catholics and Lutherans that settled centuries-old disputes on the nature of salvation. That agreement, Hanson said, is much more important than *Dominus Iesus*. “The fact that he was a theologian in Germany and a bishop in Germany means he . . . knows Lutherans,” Hanson said.

“What I think we all have to understand is that [the mandate of] Cardinal Ratzinger was to be the church disciplinarian,” said Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, general secretary of the Reformed Church in America and architect of a new ecumenical group, Christian Churches Together in the USA. “His own role was devoted more internally to those doctrinal issues of discipline and less devoted to the church’s external and ecumenical relationships.” –*Religion News Service*