

# **Catholic-Muslim forum affirms respect for beliefs: "Love of God, Love of Neighbor"**

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The first meeting at the Vatican of a Roman Catholic-Muslim Forum has affirmed the right of individuals and communities to practice their religion in private and in public, while also rejecting terrorism in the name of religion.

"Genuine love of neighbor implies respect of the person and her or his choices in matters of conscience and religion," stated the 48 Catholic and Muslim scholars and leaders in their final declaration November 6 after two days of discussions.

Catholics and Muslims, they stated, "are called to be instruments of love and harmony among believers, and for humanity as a whole, renouncing any oppression, aggressive violence and terrorism, especially that committed in the name of religion; and upholding the principle of justice for all."

Respect is due no less to women, the participants said. "We commit ourselves jointly to ensuring that human dignity and respect are extended on an equal basis to both men and women."

The seminar was made up of 24 Catholics, chosen by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, and 24 signatories of "A Common Word," a 2007 open letter by Muslim scholars to Christian leaders. The meeting's theme, "Love of God, Love of Neighbor," reflected what the unprecedented Muslim letter had identified as two imperatives shared by Islam and Christianity.

The "Common Word" letter had been sent to Pope Benedict XVI and to other Christian leaders, including Samuel Kobia, head of the World Council of Churches. It contended that world peace depends on cooperation between Christianity and Islam.

Last month's Vatican meeting came two years after a speech by Pope Benedict in Germany in which he quoted a Byzantine emperor who linked Islam and violence.

The speech caused a furor in many parts of the Muslim world. The pope later said the words of the emperor did not represent his own views.

Negotiations led to the face-to-face forum. Recognizing that the two faiths work within “a world which is becoming more and more secularized and materialistic,” the participants agreed to explore the possibility “of establishing a permanent Catholic-Muslim committee to coordinate responses to conflicts and other emergency situations,” and to organize a second seminar in a Muslim-majority country.

Benedict greeted participants to the forum, inviting them to strengthen their dialogue. But he also reaffirmed that, for Christians, Jesus Christ is the Son of God made human, and rejected any “unacceptable” discrimination against believers. - *Ecumenical News International*