

Pope Francis, a New Hope For Muslim-Catholic Relations

Maha Elgenaidi (ING – Islamic Networks Group) in *Huffington Post*, 15 April 2013

As an American Muslim activist, it may shock you to find out that I'm absolutely enthralled with the appointment of the new pope. Sure, like many Americans, I am fascinated by the timeless tradition of the papal conclave, but I am especially captivated by the story of *this* pope. Pope Francis [recently stated](#) it was important to strengthen dialogue between different religions, "particularly dialogue with Islam." Then on Holy Thursday he made history by washing the feet of juvenile prisoners, including a [young Muslim woman](#), walking the talk of serving outside the faith community.

This gives me much hope for the future of Catholic-Muslim relations. I have been very active in the space of interfaith relations in the Bay Area, where I founded [Islamic Networks Group](#) 20 years ago. Inspired by the anti-Muslim backlash as a result of the First Gulf War, we began creating educational programs, including speaker's bureaus, interfaith panels, and curricula on Islam and world religions for students grades 7-12 and college-aged. We've since reached over a million students in 20,000 classrooms combined with affiliated organizations we helped initiate across the country.

But it hasn't come without its challenges. We've done a better job engaging the Jewish community here in the Bay Area than we have the Catholic community. That represents a missed opportunity for us, as while the Jewish community represents 3 percent of the Bay Area population, Catholics comprise over 16 percent of the population. This missed opportunity is not without a source however. I specifically remember in 2006 when Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, quoting 14th century Byzantine emperor Manuel II Palaiologos stated, "Show me just what Muhammad brought that was new and there you will find things only evil and inhuman, such as his command to spread by the sword the faith he preached."

The vast majority of Catholic people, leaders, and institutions don't use this sort of rhetoric. We consider many of them our partners, allies, and friends.

What was heartening to learn recently that I didn't know then, was the [respectful rebuttal](#) to Pope Benedict XVI's comment of an Argentine Cardinal not well known outside the region. He shared, "Pope Benedict's statement don't reflect my own opinions. These statements will serve to destroy in 20 seconds the careful construction of a relationship with Islam that Pope John Paul II built over the last twenty years." While mild in tone, they represent a rare and bold stand for pluralism.

Perspectives of the new pope provide a fertile new context for increasing our efforts with the Catholic community. In the past when we've called on regional bishops to endorse our statements condemning Islamophobia such as the [one relating to attacks against Park51](#) the bishops have, but not without going through a third party to reach the bishops. However, in response to our outreach efforts more recently, ING hosted Bishop Patrick Joseph McGrath of the San Jose Diocese in a meeting with Muslim leaders in 2012 where we committed to working together. One of the outcomes of that meeting is an effort that is underway to collaborate with the Catholic and Jewish communities on five interfaith service days where we meet to volunteer for a local service organization, break bread, and have a conversation around a shared value. Through these we hope to build relations with the Catholic communities from the ground up. We thank Pope Francis for being a crucial part of that.