

Pope Francis embodies the saint who talked peace with Muslims

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Muslims around the world have congratulated Catholics on the election of Pope Francis Bergoglio — many in a spirit of hope that a new Christian dialogue with Islam could start a much needed exchange of ideas.

Today, questions about Islam and its relationship with Christianity still rate high in the public consciousness. A fresh initiative for peace and understanding would certainly find a captive audience.

Back in 2006, then-Cardinal Bergoglio broke protocol by distancing himself from remarks by Pope Benedict XVI that were insulting to Islam and Muhammad and deeply hurtful to Muslims worldwide.

Now as pope, Francis Bergoglio has made one of his earliest requests: for the Catholic Church to intensify dialogue with Islam. It's a sincere gesture and one I believe Muslims are eager to embrace.

There is much in a name, and to Muslim ears the new pope's choice of Francis recalls the 13th century St. Francis of Assisi, who broke protocol during wartime to initiate one of the first Islamic-Christian dialogues.

In 1219, when the Fifth Crusade was attacking the walled Egyptian city of Damietta, St. Francis walked across enemy lines unarmed to meet Sultan Malik al-Kamil of Egypt.

The Muslim sultan was known for his compassion toward Egypt's Christian minority and this courageous act by St. Francis allowed him the opportunity to discuss peace, the war and faith.

The sultan agreed to receive St. Francis due to Francis' peaceful approach at a time of war. They had an engaging conversation and he eventually left unharmed, safely returning to his camp.

From its inception, Islam has recognized Christians and Jews as “people of the Book” and God even cues all three faiths to an alliance in the Holy Qur'an:

O' People of the Book! Let us rally to a common formula to be binding on both us and you: That we worship none but God; that we associate no partners with Him; that we erect not, from among ourselves, Lords and patrons other than God. (3: 64)

Throughout the Middle East, Christians and Muslims have lived together for hundreds of years, sharing their culture and language, both calling God by His Arabic name “Allah,” the proper name of God.

Since the 12th century, these two Abrahamic religions have shared a very special trust in the holy city of Jerusalem, where two Muslim families are honored to be entrusted the key to the holiest site in Christendom.

The 12-inch iron key is to the door to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the place that most Christians believe is the site of the crucifixion, tomb and resurrection of Jesus, and only these Muslims open it and lock it each day.

It's no surprise Muslims have many shared teachings with Christians — including Abraham as a role model, our love of Jesus and his awaited return, reverence for Mary and views on morality, poverty, and family values.

As a Muslim, I appreciate the spiritual bond that unites our two faiths. My wish today is that we can renew our respect for one another as believers in a loving God.

If Muslims and Christians can begin a new era of talking and relating to one another in a true spirit of fraternity, it will send a strong message of hope to the world.

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