

The Pope and the imam exchange an embrace: “Our meeting is the message”

The meeting with Muhammad al-Tayyib, imam of Al-Azhar: peace, rejection of terrorism and “the situation of Christians in the context of conflict and tension in the Middle East, and their protection.”



The meeting between Francis and Muhammad al-Tayyib

IACOPO SCARAMUZZI, VATICAN INSIDER, 23 MAY 2016

Pope Francis embraced the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Muhammad al-Tayyib, after the audience he granted today to the spiritual leader of the prestigious Egyptian Sunni Muslim Center which marks a resumption of dialogue after years of frosty relations. The meeting was centred around “the common commitment of the authorities and faithful of the great religions to peace in the world, the rejection of violence and terrorism, the situation of Christians in the context of conflict and tension in the Middle East, and their protection.”

The conversation was “very cordial” and lasted about thirty minutes, said the Vatican spokesman, Father Federico Lombardi. Francis and Al-Tayyib “highlighted the great significance of this new meeting in the framework of dialogue between the Catholic Church and Islam. They went on to focus on the common commitment of the authorities and faithful of the great religions to peace in the world, the rejection of violence and terrorism, the situation of Christians in the context of conflict and tension in the Middle East, and their protection.”

The meeting took place behind closed doors in the presence of a single interpreter, the Pope’s Egyptian Coptic secretary Yoannis Lahzi Gaid. At the end of the conversation Francis gave the Imam a copy of his Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si* and a Medallion of the olive tree of peace, one of the Pope’s traditional gift to his guests, which depicts an olive tree born from a rock. “Our meeting is the message,” said the Pope to Al-Tayyib, as reported by his entourage. After his meeting with the Pope, which took place in Francis’ library, the Imam and his entourage met in the corner room with a Vatican delegation led by Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran, president of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, and the secretary of the dicastery, Bishop Ayuso Guixot.

The Grand Imam was accompanied by a “large delegation”, specified Father Lombardi, including: Professor Abbas Shouman, under-secretary of Al-Azhar; Professor Mahmoud Hamdi Zakzouk, member of the Council of Senior Scholars of the Al-Azhar University and director of the Al-Azhar Centre for Dialogue; Judge Mohamed Mahmoud Abdel Salam, advisor to the Grand Imam; Professor Mohie Afifi Afifi Ahmed, general secretary of the Academy for Islamic Research; the ambassador Mahmoud Abdel Gawad, diplomatic advisor to the Grand Imam; Tamer Tawfik, advisor; and Ahmad Alshourbagy, second secretary, as well as the ambassador of the Arab Republic of Egypt at the Holy See, Hatem Seif el Nasr. The Grand Imam was welcomed and accompanied to the meeting with the Pope by Cardinal Tauran. Al-Tayyib left the Apostolic Palace shortly after 1 p.m.

In January of 2011, the prestigious Egyptian Sunni Centre decided to terminate their collaboration with the Holy See after Pope Benedict XVI cited an attack on the Copts of Alexandria among the reasons why there is an “urgent need for the governments of the region to adopt, in spite of difficulties and dangers, effective measures for the protection of religious minorities.” Those words were interpreted in Cairo as political interference. So much so that the Egyptian government recalled its ambassador to the Holy See and the Sunni University made the decision to suspend their dialogue also evoking Joseph Ratzinger’s speech in Regensburg as the reason. Last February, a Vatican delegation visited the University of Al-Azhar and expressed a willingness to host the great Imam for a meeting with Pope Francis.

The Imam of Al-Azhar is expected in Paris tomorrow. Later in the day he will participate in the second international meeting entitled “East and West: dialogue of civilizations”, states a note by the Community of Sant’Egidio. The long-prepared event is al-Tayyib’s second official European visit after an historic meeting held in Florence in June 2015. The prestigious Islamic institution wanted the meeting to take place in Paris, said the note, because the French capital was the victim of last November’s attacks. The meeting, continues the note, does not fit within the framework of the dialogue between Islam and the West but seeks to respond to a growing desire in both the Middle East and in Europe to write a new page in the history of relations between these two great civilizations. The conference, sponsored not only by Sant’Egidio and Al-Azhar but also by the Muslim Council of Elders, will be inaugurated tomorrow morning by the Grand Imam and by Andrea Riccardi, founder of the Community of Sant’Egidio. At 5:30 p.m. al-Tayyib is expected at the Elysée by French President Francois Hollande.