

Pope Benedict to attend 'historic' Catholic-Muslim Forum

Pope Benedict XVI would meet Muslim religious leaders and scholars later this year as part of a push for dialogue between Catholics and Muslims, the Vatican said yesterday.

The occasion for the meeting will be a November 4-6 seminar in Rome.

Two dozen leaders and scholars from each side will participate in the Catholic-Muslim forum.

Church officials have said such a papal audience would be 'historic'.

The Vatican is eager to improve relations with moderate Islam, after a speech by Benedict in 2006 about Islam and violence angered many in the Muslim world.

A group of Muslim scholars who have called for greater dialogue with Christians wrapped up two days of talks yesterday at the Holy See, including with Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran, to prepare for the audience.

The talks led to setting up a permanent structure "to guarantee that Catholic-Muslim dialogue continues", one of the talks' participants, Aref Ali Nayed, said.

That would be the forum, to be in Rome northern autumn and, in later years, alternatively between Muslim countries and Rome, Mr Nayed said. He is director of the Royal Islamic Strategic Studies Centre in Amman, Jordan.

Those periodic meetings were aimed at ensuring that the Vatican-Muslim dialogue was "not a momentary exciting moment but a process", Mr Nayed said. Cardinal Tauran, who heads the Vatican's council for inter-religious dialogue, has said the planned papal audience could inspire the sort of historic dialogue between the faiths.

The group that concluded its talks yesterday included representatives of 138 Muslim scholars and intellectuals who wrote to the Pope Benedict and other Christian leaders last year to encourage Christian and Muslims to develop their common ground of belief in one God. More scholars have since signed on, raising the number to 240, Muslim representatives said. In a 2006 speech in Germany, Pope Benedict cited a medieval text that characterised some of the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad as "evil and inhuman", particularly "his command to spread by the sword the faith". The Pope later said he was "deeply sorry" about the reactions his remarks sparked and stressed that they did not reflect his own opinions. AP

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