

Religion Must Not Be Source of Division, Says Pope

Spokesperson Denounces Sheikh's Unscheduled "Negation" of Dialogue

JERUSALEM, MAY 11, 2009 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- Benedict XVI affirmed that religious differences should not be a cause of division, but rather an opportunity for encouraging others to follow God's ways. The Pope said this today in a meeting with representatives of organizations for interreligious dialogue in the Holy Land, the last public act of his first day in Israel.

The Pontiff affirmed that it is necessary to respect religious differences and to promote all that unites us.

The meeting with Christians, Jews, Muslims, Druze and Samaritans took place in the auditorium of the Pontifical Institute Notre Dame of Jerusalem Center, created by Pope John Paul II for religious, cultural, charitable and educational programs.

In his speech, delivered in English, the Holy Father noted that "some would have us believe that our differences are necessarily a cause of division and thus at most to be tolerated."

He continued: "A few even maintain that our voices should simply be silenced. But we know that our differences need never be misrepresented as an inevitable source of friction or tension either between ourselves or in society at large."

Rather, Benedict XVI said, "they provide a wonderful opportunity for people of different religions to live together in profound respect, esteem and appreciation, encouraging one another in the ways of God."

The Pope encouraged the meeting participants to "step forward with courage, respecting all that differentiates us and promoting all that unites us as creatures blessed with the desire to bring hope to our communities and world."

Incident

After the Pontiff's address, Sheikh Taysir Tamimi, supreme judge of the Islamic Courts of Jerusalem, took the podium although he was not in the program, and launched a verbal attack against Israel in Arabic.

While the sheikh was speaking, amid the general surprise, two Jews left their seats. The Latin patriarch of Jerusalem, Archbishop Fouad Twal, went forward to stop him. The Pope, not understanding Arabic, did not know what the sheikh said.

Afterward, Jesuit Father Federico Lombardi, director of the Vatican press office, issued a statement confirming that the intervention of the sheikh "was not scheduled by the organizers of the meeting." He stated: "In a meeting dedicated to dialogue this intervention was a direct negation of what a dialogue should be. We hope that such an incident will not damage the mission of the Pope aiming at promoting peace and also interreligious dialogue, as he has clearly affirmed in many occasions during this pilgrimage."

The Vatican spokesman expressed the hope that "interreligious dialogue in the Holy Land will not be compromised by this incident."

Benedict XVI's apostolic visit to the region will last through Friday.

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