

Muslim convert to Catholicism tells pope Islam is not inherently good

By Cindy Wooden

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VATICAN CITY (CNS) -- The Muslim-born journalist baptized by Pope Benedict XVI at Easter asked the pope to tell his top aide for relations with Muslims that Islam is not an intrinsically good religion and that Islamic terrorism is not the result of a minority gone astray.

As the Vatican was preparing to host the first meeting of the Catholic-Muslim Forum Nov. 4-6, Magdi Allam, a longtime critic of the Muslim faith of his parents, issued an open letter to Pope Benedict that included criticism of Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran, president of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue.

In the letter, posted on his Web site Oct. 20, Allam said he wanted to tell the pope of his concern for "the serious religious and ethical straying that has infiltrated and spread within the heart of the church."

He told the pope that it "is vital for the common good of the Catholic Church, the general interest of Christianity and of Western civilization itself" that the pope make a pronouncement in "a clear and binding way" on the question of whether Islam is a valid religion.

The Catholic Church's dialogue with Islam is based on the Second Vatican Council's Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions ("Nostra Aetate"), which urged esteem for Muslims because "they adore the one God," strive to follow his will, recognize Jesus as a prophet, honor his mother, Mary, "value the moral life and worship God especially through prayer, almsgiving and fasting."

The council called on Catholics and Muslims "to work sincerely for mutual understanding" and for social justice, moral values, peace and freedom.

Allam told Pope Benedict he specifically objected to Cardinal Tauran telling a conference in August that Islam itself promotes peace but that "'some believers' have 'betrayed their faith,'" using it as a pretext for violence.

"The objective reality, I tell you with all sincerity and animated by a constructive intent, is exactly the opposite of what Cardinal Tauran imagines," Allam told the pope. "Islamic extremism and terrorism are the mature fruit" of following "the sayings of the Quran and the thought and action of Mohammed."

Allam said he was writing with the "deference of a sincere believer" in Christianity and as a "strenuous protagonist, witness and builder of Christian civilization."

After Pope Benedict baptized Allam March 22 during the Easter Vigil and Allam used his newspaper column and interviews to condemn Islam, the Vatican spokesman, Jesuit Father Federico Lombardi, said that when the Catholic Church welcomes a new member it does not mean it accepts his opinions on every subject.

Baptism is a recognition that the person entering the church "has freely and sincerely accepted the Christian faith in its fundamental articles" as expressed in the creed, Father Lombardi had said.

"Of course, believers are free to maintain their own ideas on a vast range of questions and problems on which legitimate pluralism exists among Christians," he said.

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