



The Holy See

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**MEETING WITH THE PRESIDENT OF THE
RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS DIRECTORATE**

ADDRESS BY THE HOLY FATHER

*Conference Room of the "Diyamet", Ankara
Tuesday, 28 November 2006*

Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am grateful for the opportunity to visit this land, so rich in history and culture, to admire its natural beauty, to witness for myself the creativity of the Turkish people, and to appreciate your ancient culture and long history, both civil and religious.

As soon as I arrived in Turkey, I was graciously received by the President of the Republic. And it was also a great pleasure for me to meet and greet the Prime Minister, Mr Erdogan, at the airport. In greeting them, I was pleased to express my profound esteem for all the people of this great country and to pay my respects at the tomb of the founder of modern Turkey, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk.

I now have the joy of meeting you, the President of the Religious Affairs Directorate. I offer you my sentiments of respect, in recognition of your great responsibilities, and I extend my greetings to all the religious leaders of Turkey, especially the Grand Muftis of Ankara and Istanbul. In your person, Mr President, I greet all the Muslims in Turkey with particular esteem and affectionate regard.

Your country is very dear to Christians: many of the earliest Church communities were founded here and grew to maturity, inspired by the preaching of the Apostles, particularly Saint Paul and Saint John. The tradition has come down to us that Mary, the Mother of Jesus, lived at Ephesus, in the home of the Apostle Saint John.

This noble land has also seen a remarkable flowering of Islamic civilization in the most diverse fields, including its literature and art, as well as its institutions.

There are so many Christian and Muslim monuments that bear witness to Turkey's glorious past. You rightly take pride in these, preserving them for the admiration of the ever increasing number of visitors who flock here.

I have set out upon my visit to Turkey with the same sentiments as those expressed by my predecessor Blessed John XXIII, when he came here as Archbishop Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli, to fulfil the office of Papal Representative in Istanbul, and I quote him: "I am fond of the Turks", he said, "to whom the Lord has sent me ... I love the Turks, I appreciate the natural qualities of these people who have their own place reserved in the march of civilization" (*Journal of a Soul*, pp. 228, 233-4).

For my own part, I also wish to highlight the qualities of the Turkish population. Here I make my own the words of my immediate predecessor, Pope John Paul II of blessed memory, who said on the occasion of his [visit in 1979](#): "I wonder if it is not urgent, precisely today when Christians and Muslims have entered a new period of history, to recognize and develop the spiritual bonds that unite us, in order to preserve and promote together, for the benefit of all men, 'peace, liberty, social justice and moral values'" (*Address to the Catholic Community in Ankara*, 28 November 1979).

These questions have continued to present themselves throughout the intervening years; indeed, as I indicated at the very beginning of my Pontificate, they impel us to carry forward our dialogue as a sincere exchange between friends. When I had the joy of meeting members of Muslim communities last year in Cologne, on the occasion of [World Youth Day](#), I reiterated the need to approach our interreligious and intercultural dialogue with optimism and hope. It cannot be reduced to an optional extra: on the contrary, it is "a vital necessity, on which in large measure our future depends" ([Address to representatives of some Muslim Communities](#), Cologne, 20 August 2005).

Christians and Muslims, following their respective religions, point to the truth of the sacred character and dignity of the person. This is the basis of our mutual respect and esteem, this is the basis for cooperation in the service of peace between nations and peoples, the dearest wish of all believers and all people of good will.

For more than forty years, the teaching of the [Second Vatican Council](#) has inspired and guided the approach taken by the Holy See and by local Churches throughout the world to relations with the followers of other religions. Following the Biblical tradition, the Council teaches that the entire human race shares a common origin and a common destiny: God, our Creator and the goal of our earthly pilgrimage. Christians and Muslims belong to the family of those who believe in the one God and who, according to their respective traditions, trace their ancestry to Abraham (cf. Second Vatican Council, Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions [Nostra Aetate](#) 1, 3). This human and spiritual unity in our origins and our destiny impels us to seek a common path as we play our part in the quest for fundamental values so characteristic of the people of our time. As men and women of religion, we are challenged by the widespread longing for justice, development, solidarity, freedom, security, peace, defence of life, protection of the environment and of the resources of the earth. This is because we too, while respecting the legitimate autonomy of temporal affairs, have a specific contribution to offer in the search for proper solutions to these pressing questions.

Above all, we can offer a credible response to the question which emerges clearly from today's society, even if it is often brushed aside, the question about the meaning and purpose of life, for each individual and for humanity as a whole. We are called to work together, so as to help society to open itself to the transcendent, giving Almighty God his rightful place. The best way forward is via authentic dialogue between Christians and Muslims, based on truth and inspired by a sincere wish to know one another better, respecting differences and recognizing what we have in common. This will lead to an authentic respect for the responsible choices that each person makes, especially those pertaining to fundamental values and to personal religious convictions.

As an illustration of the fraternal respect with which Christians and Muslims can work together, I would like to quote some words addressed by Pope Gregory VII in 1076 to a Muslim prince in North Africa who had acted with great benevolence towards the Christians under his jurisdiction. Pope Gregory spoke of the particular charity that Christians and Muslims owe to one another "because we believe in one God, albeit in a different manner, and because we praise him and worship him every day as the Creator and Ruler of the world."

Freedom of religion, institutionally guaranteed and effectively respected in practice, both for individuals and communities, constitutes for all believers the necessary condition for their loyal contribution to the building up of society, in an attitude of authentic service, especially towards the most vulnerable and the very poor.

Mr President, I should like to finish by praising the Almighty and merciful God for this happy occasion that brings us together in his name. I pray that it may be a sign of our joint commitment to dialogue between Christians and Muslims, and an encouragement to persevere along that path, in respect and friendship. May we come to know one another better, strengthening the bonds of affection between us in our common wish to live together in harmony, peace and mutual trust. As

believers, we draw from our prayer the strength that is needed to overcome all traces of prejudice and to bear joint witness to our firm faith in God. May his blessing be ever upon us! Thank you.

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