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Occasions of Interreligious Dialogue

The Second Vatican Council inaugurated a new era of dialogue with Islam, marked especially by the efforts of Pope Saint John Paul II. While Pope John Paul pressed for the rights of Catholics in Muslim lands, he also met with Muslims both in Rome and during his trips abroad. He made history on May 6, 2001, as the first pontiff to visit a mosque, the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus.

Pope Benedict XVI reiterated the Church's respect and esteem for Islam, and Catholics continue to hope for progress in dialogue with Islam, especially through the principle of reciprocity: the principle demands that Muslim countries safeguard the basic rights and freedoms of Christian minorities — including freedom to worship — in the same way that those freedoms are enjoyed by Muslims in Christian countries.

Jesus and Mary in the Quran

Islam acknowledges Jesus of Nazareth as the prophet preceding Muhammad. The Quran records his miraculous



birth, teachings, and miracles performed with God's permission, but it does not recognize him as the Son of God who was crucified. The Quran stresses that Jesus was only human, not divine. Thus Islamic teachings sharply vary from the Christian belief in the Holy Trinity.

The Blessed Virgin Mary is the only woman named in the Quran. She is venerated by Muslims as the mother of Jesus and as a righteous woman in her own right.

Troubled History of Christian-Muslim Relations

Christians and Muslims share an often-painful history of quarrels and dissensions that remain part of the modern consciousness and color Muslim and Christian reactions to events even today.

In the century after the founding of Islam, Muslim armies swept across the Holy Land, North Africa, and into Spain, driving north until A.D. 732, when a Christian army defeated them at Poitiers, France, and halted their advance in the West. The ancient Christian sees of Jerusalem, Antioch, and Alexandria were overrun, and countless dioceses ceased to exist. Muslim armies under the Ottoman Turks threatened Europe in a similar fashion in the sixteenth century, until the Turkish fleet was halted at the famous Battle of Lepanto in 1571.

At the same time, Muslims view as objectionable the medieval Crusades to recapture the Holy Land, the Reconquista that expelled the Moors from Spain in the fifteenth century, and the genocide against Muslims in the former Yugoslavia during the 1990s.

Islam and Christianity Today — Common Ground

In *Evangelii Gaudium* (“The Joy of the Gospel”), Pope Francis reiterates the teaching of the Second Vatican Council: “Our relationship with the followers of Islam has taken on great importance, since they are now significantly present in many traditionally Christian

countries, where they can freely worship and become fully a part of society. We must never forget that they ‘profess to hold the faith of Abraham, and together with us they adore the one, merciful God, who will judge humanity on the last day’ (*Lumen Gentium*, 16)” (252).



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WHAT THE CHURCH TEACHES

Islam



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Islam is the second largest religion on earth, with almost 1.8 billion projected members worldwide, according to Pew Research Center. By comparison, there are 2.3 billion projected Christians, of whom about 1.3 billion are Roman Catholic (CARA, 2015). As controversies and conflicts remind Catholics everywhere, the relationship between the Church and the Islamic world is complex. At the same time, having some understanding of the origins and common beliefs of the fastest-growing religion on the planet is essential for the future toward which God calls humanity.

What is Islam?

Islam is one of three great monotheistic world religions along with Judaism and Christianity. In Arabic, the word Islam means “grateful surrender or submission to the one God” and is commonly used to refer to the religion that began in the early seventh century. Islam teaches that Muhammad, a former merchant, received revelation near the city of Mecca, in present-day Saudi Arabia. This revelation, proclaimed in the Quran (sometimes spelled Qur’an or Koran), is from the one God, Allah, and communicated through Muhammad. Muhammad is considered the last in a long series of prophets sent by God throughout history — beginning with Adam and continuing through Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus — to guide people to live according to God’s will.

The followers of Islam are often referred to as Muslims. The Arabic word *muslim* refers to “one who submits (to God).” The Quran uses the word “muslim” to refer to anyone who submits to God’s will, not just to those who follow the prophet Muhammad.

Two of the major denominations within Islam are Shia and Sunni. Each approaches the nature of political and spiritual authority in a different way.

What is the Quran?

Qur’an in Arabic means “recitation.” Islam teaches that the Quran is the word of God revealed to Muhammad through the angel Gabriel. It is the holy scripture that contains the core of Islam as a dialogue between God and the people.

Like the Christian Bible, the Quran first existed as an oral tradition — it was spoken or sung rather than



read. Reciting, hearing, and experiencing the Quran is believed to engage the whole of a person in a profound encounter with God. The

principle of frequent recitation of the Quran makes the voice of God a part of the sounds of Muslim daily life, not just something experienced in religious ceremonies. Since the Quran was proclaimed originally in Arabic and no human can fully understand it, translations of the text into other languages are meant for personal use only and are not considered valid for official religious use.

What does Allahu Akbar mean?

Allah is the specific name for God used most often in the Quran. The Arabic phrase *Allahu Akbar* literally translates as “God is greater.” The phrase is common in daily Muslim life and prayer as a reminder that God is greater than anything in this world. Unfortunately, this profound statement of faith is too often reported only as a battle cry of violent extremists.

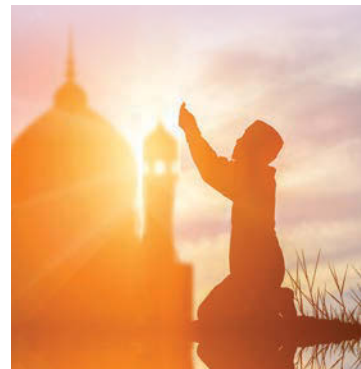


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How does the Catholic Church view Islam?

While serious differences such as belief in the divinity of Jesus exist, Catholics and Muslims share deep spiritual bonds. From our shared belief in the one true God of Abraham to seeking to know and follow God’s will through religious practices like prayer, fasting, and charitable acts, Catholicism and Islam have much in common.

The Second Vatican Council stated: “The plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator. In the first place amongst these there are the Muslims, who, professing to hold the faith of Abraham, along with us adore the one and merciful God, who on the last day will judge mankind” (*Lumen Gentium*, 16).

“May Jews, Christians and Muslims find in other believers brothers and sisters to be respected and loved, and in this way, beginning in their own lands, give the beautiful witness of serenity and concord between the children of Abraham.”
— Pope Benedict XVI (*Ecclesia in Medio Oriente*, 19)

Father Thomas Michel, S.J., highlighted the continuing implications of the Second Vatican Council’s document on non-Christian religions, *Nostra Aetate*, during the National Muslim-Catholic Plenary, Catholic-Muslim dialogues led by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops in 2012, stating: “The Council envisions nothing less than a shared mission in our world for Muslims and Christians. It is a partnership in which the two communities should work together for the common good in four key areas of modern life: to build peace, to establish justice in our societies, to defend moral values, and to promote true human freedom.”

Basic Principles of Islam

Muslims believe in the one God of Abraham who communicates with humanity through prophets sent with messages and warnings. The Islamic profession of faith, the *shahada*, states, “There is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is the messenger of God.” According to the Quran, God is one and transcendent, the Creator and Sustainer of the universe, the all-merciful and all-compassionate Ruler and Judge. God possesses numerous other attributes, known collectively as the 99 Names of God. Muslims believe the Quran is the revealed Word of God, which is interpreted through the centuries with the help of the *Sunnah*, the customs and words of the Prophet Muhammad, who best exemplified living God’s will.

The vast majority of Muslims in the world are not radical or extremist. Most Muslims believe in final judgment, resurrection of the body, heaven, and hell. They follow what they believe is God’s will regarding human behavior as they try to live in a state of unity, mutuality, and justice. They also follow the teachings of Muhammad in daily lifestyle choices — for example, avoiding alcoholic beverages and pork. Many practice Friday prayers as a community in a mosque with an imam giving a sermon.

Five Pillars of Islam

-  **Shahada** — the daily recitation of the profession of the Muslim faith
-  **Salat** — ritual worship five times a day, facing in the direction of the holy city of Mecca, the cradle of Islam
-  **Zakat** — almsgiving
-  **Sawm** — fasting from dawn to dusk during the holy month of Ramadan, the time when the revelation of the Quran to Muhammad is said to have begun
-  **Hajj** — making at least one pilgrimage to Mecca if one is able