

'The meeting is the message,' pope tells head of al-Azhar

By Junno Arocho Esteves

Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY - After five years of tension and top-level silence, Pope Francis and the grand imam of one of the most important Sunni Muslim universities in the world embraced at the Vatican May 23.

"The meeting is the message," the pope told Ahmad el-Tayeb, the grand imam of al-Azhar University, as the religious scholar approached him just inside the door of the papal library.

El-Tayeb's spring visit was the first meeting between a pontiff and a grand imam since the Muslim university in Cairo suspended talks in 2011.

Established in 1998, the formal dialogue between al-Azhar and the Vatican started to fray in 2006, after now-retired Pope Benedict XVI gave a speech in Regensburg, Germany. Al-Azhar officials and millions of Muslims around the world said the speech linked Islam to violence.

Al-Azhar halted the talks altogether in 2011 after the former pope had said Christians in the Middle East were facing persecution. Al-Azhar claimed that Pope Benedict had offended Islam and Muslims once more by focusing only on the suffering of Christians when many Muslims were suffering as well.

In February, Bishop Miguel Ayuso Guixot, secretary of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, delivered a letter to el-Tayeb from Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran, council president, inviting him to the Vatican to meet the pope.

Cardinal Tauran and Bishop Ayuso welcomed the imam to the Vatican May 23 and accompanied him to the papal meeting.

Pope Francis sat to the side of his desk facing the grand imam rather than behind his desk as he customarily does when meeting with a visiting head of state.

Jesuit Father Federico Lombardi, Vatican spokesman, said the pope spoke privately with el-Tayeb for 25 minutes and the conversation included a discussion about "the great significance of this new encounter within the scope of dialogue between the Catholic Church and Islam."

"They then dwelled upon the common commitment of the authorities and the faithful of the great religions for world peace, the rejection of violence and terrorism (and) the situation of Christians in the context of conflicts and tensions in the Middle East as well as their protection," Father Lombardi said in a statement.

At the end of the audience, Pope Francis presented the grand imam with two gifts: a copy of his encyclical “Laudato Si’, on Care for Our Common Home” and peace medallion depicting an olive tree holding together two pieces of a fractured rock. After meeting the pope, the grand imam was scheduled to travel to Paris to open the second international conference on “East and West: Dialogue of Civilizations” May 24 sponsored by al-Azhar University and the Catholic Sant’Egidio Community.

Also see:

Pope Benedict denies latest rumors about Fatima ‘secret’

Copyright ©2016 Catholic News Service/U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.