

BELIEFS

# Pope worked to improve Catholic-Muslim relations

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For Muslims, Pope John Paul II was known for his endeavors to improve Catholic-Muslim relations. For the past several days, many Muslims around the world have been joining Catholics and others in expressing their sorrow at the pope's passing and paying tribute to him.

There is no doubt that the death of the pope is a great loss not only for Catholics but for humanity in general and for Muslims interested in interfaith dialogue in particular. John Paul

was one who promoted positive relationships with Muslims as well as adherents of other religions. It would not be an exaggeration to say he was the most successful pope, who put into practice the principles of "Nostra Aetate" (1965), which says that the church looks at Muslims with esteem.

During his papacy, John Paul's visits to Islamic countries marked a great development between Muslims and Catholics. One of his first foreign trips after he became pope was to Turkey, a predominantly Islamic country, in 1979. There he was received

by members of the parliament and the Turkish community.

In 2001, he became the first pope to visit a mosque, in Damascus, Syria, where, surrounded by hundreds of Islamic clergy, he addressed Muslims, saying, "Peace be with you" in Arabic.

His meetings with Islamic figures, such as Moroccan leader King Hassan II and Fetullah Gulen, a prominent Islamic figure in Turkey, aimed to develop positive relationships. According to some newspapers, the pontiff and Gulen even discussed the founding of an interfaith university in Harir, in southeastern

Turkey, the place where many believe Abraham was born. Once established, such a university would greatly contribute to furthering relationships between members of the Abrahamic family.

In 1985, John Paul's visit to Casablanca, Morocco, and his address to 60,000 Muslim students was remarkable. In his address, the pope emphasized that Muslims and Christians share the same God and the same values. However, even within his own church, some people criticized this notion. In one instance, a priest published an open letter to

the Holy Father questioning his stand on the shared concept of God.

Although the number is few, there are still some Christians who, out of ignorance, believe that Muslims worship an idol whose name is Allah, ignoring that even Christians in the Arab world call God "Allah." Through mentioning that Muslims and Christians believe in the same God, the pope helped many Christians to come to a new understanding about Islam and renewed an interest in interfaith dialogue.

I hope the next pope will take

further steps to carry on the legacy of interfaith dialogue. The Muslim world, by showing its great respect for John Paul, hopefully will keep that spirit of understanding alive.

The members of the Abrahamic family — Muslims, Christians and Jews — constitute more than half of the world's population and carrying on the endeavor of the pope toward interfaith dialogue will bring mutual understanding and peace.

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