

# DIALOGUE WITH MUSLIMS COMMITTEE STATEMENT

## Dialogue with Muslims

### Statement of the Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs

#### United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

*The Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs (CEIA) receives its mandate to engage in dialogue with Muslims from the Second Vatican Council's (1962–1965) Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (Nostra Aetate [NA]). It states unequivocally that the Church urges its members to "enter with prudence and charity into discussion and collaboration with members of other religions" (NA, no. 2). With respect to Islam, the council fathers say that "the Church has also a high regard for the Muslims" and that despite centuries of conflict "the sacred Council now pleads with all to forget the past, and urges that a sincere effort be made to achieve mutual understanding" (NA, no. 3).*

*The declaration has been consistently upheld by recent popes. Pope John Paul II affirmed the need for dialogue with Muslims on numerous occasions throughout his long pontificate (1978–2005). For example, in *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* he remarked in the chapter entitled "Muhammad?" that "believers in Allah are particularly close to us" and that "the religiosity of Muslims deserves our respect" ([New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005], 91, 93). The pope also reiterated the central mandate of *Nostra Aetate* by reminding the faithful that they are called to maintain "a dialogue with followers of the 'Prophet'" and that "the Church remains always open to dialogue and cooperation" (*ibid.*, 93, 94).*

*Sadly, in recent years, there has been a deliberate rejection of this call to engage in dialogue with our Muslim brothers and sisters by some in the Catholic Church and in other ecclesial families. We understand the confusion and deep emotions stirred by real and apparent acts of aggression and discrimination by certain Muslims against non-Muslims, often against Christians abroad. We, and increasingly our Muslim partners in dialogue, are concerned about these very real phenomena. Along with many of our fellow Catholics and the many Muslims who themselves are targeted by radicals, we wish to voice our sadness, indeed our outrage, over the random and sometimes systematic acts of violence and harassment—acts that for both Christians and Muslims threaten and disrupt the harmony that binds us together in mutual support, recognition, and friendship.*

*Still, it is our belief that the most efficient way to work toward ending or at least curtailing such violence and prejudice is through building networks of dialogue that can overcome ignorance, extremism, and discrimination and so lead to friendship and trust with Muslims.*

*For nearly twenty years, the CEIA has been engaged in official dialogues with several national Muslim organizations. These dialogues have already produced many fruits, not least of which include jointly prepared documents on education, marriage, and revelation. Perhaps most importantly, our work together has forged true bonds of friendship that are supported by mutual esteem and an ever-growing trust that enables us to speak candidly with one another in an atmosphere of respect. Through dialogue we have been able to work through and overcome much of our mutual ignorance, habitual distrust, and debilitating fear. Indeed, we gratefully attach our own sentiment to the words of Pope Francis in his address to the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue. On November 28, 2013, he asserted:*

*As I stated in the Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii Gaudium, "an attitude of openness in truth and in love must characterize the dialogue with the followers of non-Christian religions, in spite of various obstacles and difficulties, especially forms of fundamentalism on both sides" (no. 250). Indeed, situations in the world where coexistence is difficult are not lacking: often political or economic motives overlap with cultural and religious differences, which also play upon misunderstandings and mistakes of the past: this is all likely to generate suspicion and fear. There is only one road for conquering this fear and it is dialogue and encounter marked by friendship and respect. When we take this path it is a human one.*

*Dialogue does not mean renouncing one's own identity when it goes against another's, nor does it mean compromising Christian faith and morals. To the contrary, "true openness involves remaining steadfast in one's deepest convictions, clear and joyful in one's own identity" (ibid., no. 251) and therefore open to understanding the religion of another, capable of respectful human relationships, convinced that the encounter with someone different than ourselves can be an occasion of growth in a spirit of fraternity, of enrichment and of witness. This is why interreligious dialogue and evangelization are not mutually exclusive, but rather nourish one another. We do not impose anything, we do not employ any subtle strategies for attracting believers; rather, we bear witness to what we believe and who we are with joy and simplicity. In fact, an encounter wherein each party sets aside his beliefs, pretending to renounce what he holds most dear, would certainly not be an authentic relationship. In this case we could speak of a false fraternity. As disciples of Jesus we have to make every effort to triumph over fear, always ready to take the first step, without becoming discouraged in the face of difficulty and misunderstanding.*

*We affirm with the pope that "dialogue does not mean renouncing one's own identity" nor accepting compromises on "Christian faith and morals." Like the pope, we are convinced that the encounter and dialogue with persons different than ourselves offers the best opportunity for fraternal growth, enrichment, witness, and ultimately peace.*

*Our path is therefore to proceed confidently in our Christian faith with an openness to receive intimations of truth wherever it is found in other traditions, including Islam. We are not alone in our commitment to dialogue. In the 2007 document A Common Word Between Us and You, 138 of the Islamic world's most respected leaders asserted the following:*

*To those who nevertheless relish conflict and destruction for their own sake or reckon that ultimately they stand to gain through them, we say that our very eternal souls are all also at stake if we fail to sincerely make every effort to make peace and come together in harmony. . . . So let our differences not cause hatred and strife between us. Let us vie with each other only in righteousness and good works. Let us respect each other, be fair, just and kind to another and live in sincere peace, harmony and mutual goodwill.*

*Following the lead of the Second Vatican Council, the unambiguous and consistent support of recent popes, and the goodwill of many celebrated leaders in the Islamic world, we whole-heartedly reassert our commitment to interreligious dialogue and, given the severe tension between Christians and Muslims, dialogue with Muslims in particular.*

*Finally, for those concerned about the value and need for dialogue with Muslims and other religions, we have compiled an extensive list of salient remarks made by recent popes in order to demonstrate our solidarity with and devotion to the expressed will of both the Council and the popes (see Quotes: [Vatican Council II and Papal Statements on Islam](#)).*

*Dialogue with Muslims* was developed as a statement of the Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB). It was authorized by the USCCB president, Archbishop Joseph E. Kurtz, and the undersigned approved it for publication.

Msgr. Ronny E. Jenkins

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