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POPE FRANCIS' NEW PEACE INITIATIVE. JOINT STATEMENTS WITH MUSLIM LEADERS SIGNED IN MOSQUES

NOWA INICJATYWA POKOJOWA PAPIEŻA FRANCISZKA: WSPÓLNE
DEKLARACJE Z PRZYWÓDCAMI MUŻULMAŃSKIMI PODPISYWANE
W MECZETACH

Streszczenie: Jaką rolę mogą odegrać przywódcy religijni w zatrzymaniu wojen i promowaniu ludzkiej godności? Inicjatywy papieża Franciszka pokazują, że motywacja religijna może być istotnym źródłem budowania pokoju. Nowatorskim działaniem w tym zakresie jest podpisywanie wspólnych deklaracji z przywódcami muzułmańskimi w meczetach – gest bez precedensu w papieskiej dyplomacji. Podpisano dwie takie deklaracje: „Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together” z wielkim imamem Ahmadem Al-Tayyebem w Abu Zabi (2019) oraz „Fostering Religious Harmony for the Sake of Humanity” z wielkim imamem Nasaruddinem Umarem w Dżakarcie (2024). Dokumenty te, choć powstały w odmiennych kontekstach, są komplementarne i odzwierciedlają zaangażowanie papieża w dialog zarówno z islamem bliskowschodnim, jak i azjatyckim. Papież Franciszek proponuje przyjęcie antropologii religijnej – wspólnej wizji osoby ludzkiej – jako fundamentu dialogu międzyreligijnego. To podejście przekracza różnice doktrynalne, wskazując na wspólne powołanie człowieka do pokoju, braterstwa i ochrony ludzkiej godności.

Słowa kluczowe: papież Franciszek, inicjatywy pokojowe, dialog międzyreligijny, Human Fraternity, Fostering Religious Harmony

Abstract: What role can religious leaders play in halting war and promoting human dignity? Pope Francis' initiatives demonstrate that religious motivation can be a powerful resource for peacebuilding. A notable innovation is his signing of joint declarations with Muslim leaders inside mosques – an unprecedented act in papal diplomacy. Two such documents have been signed: “Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together” with Grand Imam Ahmad Al-Tayyeb in Abu Dhabi (2019), and “Fostering Religious Harmony for the Sake of Humanity”

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with Grand Imam Nasaruddin Umar in Jakarta (2024). These declarations, while different in context, are complementary and reflect the Pope's engagement with both Middle Eastern and Southeast Asian Islam. Pope Francis frames religious anthropology – a shared vision of the human person – as a foundation for interreligious dialogue. This anthropological focus transcends doctrinal differences and emphasizes a common human calling: to peace, fraternity, and the protection of human dignity.

Keywords: Pope Francis, peace initiatives, interreligious dialogue, Human Fraternity, Fostering Religious Harmony

Introduction

In recent years, a growing body of research has explored the role of interreligious dialogue in promoting peace and mitigating armed conflict. This includes both global perspectives (Vaca 2013; Pilario 2015; Garred, Abu-Nimer 2018; Hempton, Lee-Hood 2018; van der Borgh 2018; Di Marzio 2019; DuBois 2021; Pratt 2021; Zagoon-Sayeed 2022) and studies focused on specific regions of unrest (Murzaku 2015; Kluij 2016; Palihapitiya 2018; Grit 2019; Hayward, Frydenlund 2019; Solarz, Kornichuk 2023; Balmaceda, Gerstbauer, Huff 2023).

This article examines one distinctive aspect of papal engagement in interreligious peacebuilding under Pope Francis: the signing of joint declarations with Muslim leaders during visits to mosques. This gesture, both symbolic and diplomatic, marks a new chapter in the Catholic Church's contribution to global dialogue and peace initiatives.

Initiatives of post-conciliar popes

In their teaching, the popes have long promoted peacemaking. Through various initiatives, they have sometimes inspired and often preceded the actions of political leaders. This attitude has become particularly evident in recent times. For example, the Catholic Church's World Day of Peace was introduced by Pope Paul VI in 1967, and its celebration was set for January 1. From the beginning, the popes also wrote messages for the day. This was inspired, among other things, by John XXIII's encyclical "Pacem in Terris", as well as Paul VI's own encyclical "Populorum Progressio". The international community's response to this initiative, a dozen years later, was the establishment of the International Day of Peace (also known as the World Day of Peace) by the United Nations in 1981. Since 2002, it has been celebrated on September 21.

After Paul VI, another unique initiative was Pope John Paul II's convening of a meeting of religious leaders in Assisi on October 27, 1986, for a day of prayer, fasting, and pilgrimage for peace. After the events of September 11, 2001, the pope again invited religious leaders to Assisi for a similar meeting on January 24, 2002.

This tradition was continued by Pope Benedict XVI in 2011 and Pope Francis in 2016. Comparing the two most recent meetings, it can be noted that the first had more of an interreligious character, while the second was more clearly oriented toward the intention of peace. At the conclusion of the latter meeting, the pope made a direct appeal to world political leaders to take into account the efforts of religious leaders for world peace.

In addition to the personal initiatives of the popes, various Vatican dicasteries have also contributed. Since 1978, the Dicastery for Interreligious Dialogue has addressed an annual message to Muslims on the occasion of Id al-Fitr (the end of Ramadan). The dicastery has gone by various names: until 1988, it was known as the Secretariat for Non-Christians; then, as the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue; and now as the Dicastery for Interreligious Dialogue. These messages are usually signed by the dicastery's president, but in 1991 and 2013, they were signed by the pope (John Paul II and Francis, respectively). Under the leadership of Pope Francis, in 2016, the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue issued the document "Celebrating Mercy with Believers of Other Religions". In 2019, the same council and the World Council of Churches issued the document "Educating for Peace in a Multi-Religious World". In 2024, on the 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith issued the declaration on human dignity, "Dignitas infinita".

Initiatives on the part of the Catholic Church have elicited various responses. One such initiative was undertaken by the President of Kazakhstan, who organized Congresses of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions, held every three years since 2003. The first congress was held in Astana in 2003. Over the years, it has grown from 17 delegations from 23 countries at the first gathering to more than 100 participants, including Pope Francis, at the seventh congress in 2022. Delegations from 29 countries took part in the second congress (2006). In the third (2009), there were 77 delegations from 35 countries. The fourth (2012) hosted 85 delegations from 40 countries. The fifth (2015) included 80 delegations from 42 countries, and the sixth (2018) saw 82 delegations from 46 countries. On the last occasion, the Pope sought (though unsuccessfully) a personal meeting with Chinese leader Xi Jinping and Patriarch Kirill of Russia. Another response to Catholic initiatives from the world of international politics was the UN's establishment of a global interreligious week in 2010 (held during the first week of February).

Pope Francis' predecessors were already actively engaged in dialogue with Muslims and visited Islamic places of worship. John Paul II visited the Blue Mosque (Sultan Ahmed Mosque) in Istanbul during his trip to Turkey in 1979, met with young Muslims in a stadium in Casablanca in 1985, and in 2001 even kissed the Quran during a visit to the Umayyad Grand Mosque in Damascus. Benedict XVI also visited the Blue Mosque in Istanbul (2006), and in 2009, both the Mosque of the Rock in Jerusalem and a mosque in Amman, Jordan. An extraordinary moment occurred during a Mass in Bethlehem in 2000, when he

paused his homily to allow for the Muslim call to prayer from a nearby mosque. This gesture had been pre-arranged; the Pope was informed in advance, and the Muslims chose the shortest possible form of prayer.

This tradition has not only been continued but also developed further by Pope Francis. He has visited the Blue Mosque in Istanbul (2014), the Koudoukou Mosque in Bangui, Central African Republic (2015), the Baku Mosque in Azerbaijan (2016), the Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque in the United Arab Emirates (2019), and the Mohammad VI Institute in Morocco (2019), where future imams are trained. After a break in travel due to COVID-19, he visited the Sakhir Mosque in Bahrain in 2022 and, most recently, the Istiqlal (Independence) Mosque in Jakarta in 2024.

In Christian-Muslim relations, a particularly important religious response to Catholic initiatives was the issuing and signing of the open letter “A Common Word Between Us and You” by 138 Muslim scholars and leaders, addressed to Christian leaders in 2007.

Context of the signing of the declarations

What is particularly noteworthy is that Pope Francis signed joint declarations with Muslim spiritual leaders on two occasions during his visits to mosques. The more widely recognized of these is the document “On Human Brotherhood for World Peace and Coexistence”, signed on February 4, 2019, together with the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar University, Ahmad Al-Tayyeb.

Before analysing the content of both declarations, it is important to understand that Islam lacks a hierarchical institution analogous to the papacy in the Catholic Church. The Pope serves as the immediate spiritual superior for a large group of Christians and enjoys recognized authority among other Christian denominations. In Islam, however, there is no comparable office. Not only do Sunnis not constitute the entirety of the ummah – about 10% of Muslims are Shiites – but even among Sunnis, there are numerous factions. No single leader holds universal authority. Given the close ties between Islam and politics, leaders of several countries strive to assert religious leadership and present themselves as representatives of Islam to the non-Muslim world. Within the Sunni world of the Middle East, Egypt, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates are among those vying for influence. Iran, meanwhile, seeks a similar role within the Shiite tradition.

In this context, the person chosen by Pope Francis to sign the 2019 declaration is significant. In Abu Dhabi, the Pope selected his friend, Grand Imam Ahmad Al-Tayyeb of Al-Azhar University, as his counterpart. Al-Azhar, located in Cairo, is regarded as the most prestigious institution of Sunni Islamic learning. It aspires to global leadership in articulating an authentic and moderate Islamic vision, committed to excellence in education and research, while fostering independence, freedom, democracy, and equality. The university respects the four traditional

Sunni schools of Islamic jurisprudence, while rejecting fundamentalist currents such as Wahhabism and Salafism. It is also significantly influenced by Sufi thought.

Although Grand Imam Al-Tayyeb holds no authority over other Muslim factions, he is an important voice for moderate Islam. His theological leadership, though not unchallenged, represents a current within Sunni Islam that aligns with the Vatican's aims for peaceful interreligious dialogue. Al-Tayyeb and Pope Francis have met on multiple occasions – beginning in 2017 at the Vatican, where they discussed promoting a culture of peace and coexistence while opposing both extremism and Islamophobia. After signing the 2019 declaration, they met again that November in Rome. Further encounters followed, notably during the Pope's visit to Bahrain in 2022 and at the 2023 Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions in Astana, Kazakhstan.

The Pope's choice of Al-Tayyeb as his partner in signing the declaration was not only a personal gesture, but also a signal that he seeks to engage in dialogue with a moderate expression of Islam. Moreover, the document's signing in Abu Dhabi highlights the importance of the Arabic cultural and religious tradition as part of this initiative.

The second declaration, "Fostering Religious Harmony for the Sake of Humanity", has particular symbolic relevance for Islam in the Far East, where Indonesian Islam is dominant. The religious and political situation in this context differs significantly from the Middle Eastern landscape. While Arabia, Turkey, and Egypt have a long-established Islamic identity, Indonesia is a relatively young state, formed after World War II from the remnants of Dutch colonial holdings. The new state emerged in the wake of wars fought during the 1940s and 1950s. Some former colonies merged into what is now Indonesia, while others, such as Malaysia and Singapore, pursued independence. Indonesian Islam is generally moderate, with relatively limited influence from Arab culture. It has developed within a pluralistic democratic society, where Islam coexists with multiple faith traditions. In Southeast Asia, Islam predominates in Indonesia, Malaysia, and the southern islands of the Philippines, though fundamentalist movements are present in northern Sumatra (formerly the Sultanate of Aceh).

In constructing the postcolonial Indonesian state, its leaders – shaped by the trauma of war – deliberately sought to avoid a radical form of Islam. Although in recent years, some radicalisation has occurred under the influence of pilgrimages to Mecca, the state remains grounded in a principle known as "Pancasila". This national philosophy affirms five foundational principles: belief in the One Supreme God; a just and civilised humanity; the unity of Indonesia; democracy guided by the wisdom of representative deliberation; and social justice for all Indonesians. These principles, widely accepted by Muslim, secular, and non-Muslim leaders alike, form the shared ideological framework of a state marked by extensive cultural, ethnic, and religious diversity (Azra 2007).

Unlike the first declaration, the 2024 Jakarta signing appears not to have involved any particular personal choice by the Pope. Rather, the signature was affixed by Grand Imam Nasaruddin Umar, the head of Indonesia's main mosque – the Istiqlal Mosque in Jakarta. This mosque, one of the largest in the world, was built in 1978 and can accommodate more than 100,000 worshippers. Following the declaration's signing, Pope Francis and Grand Imam Nasaruddin visited the so-called “tunnel of friendship” – an underground passage linking the Istiqlal Mosque with the Catholic Cathedral of the Assumption of Mary. On this occasion, the Pope remarked that while much may divide us on the surface, it is by going deeper into our relationship with God that we can discover what unites us.

Content of the declaration

The declaration signed in Abu Dhabi in 2019 has already sparked considerable interest and controversy – not only due to the fact that it was signed with a Muslim leader, but also because of its theological content. The introduction begins with a profession of faith in God, which reminds the reader to see in every person a brother or sister to be supported and loved. Indirectly, it also reflects concern for the protection of creation, our common home.

The rationale provided in the document for initiating joint efforts for peace is highly significant. It appeals to religious motivations that encompass both a vision of God and an understanding of human dignity. It articulates an important form of theological anthropology – an understanding of the human being from a faith-based perspective. The declaration demonstrates that there are substantial convergences between Christian and Islamic conceptions of the human person, thus opening promising avenues for cooperation. The initiative is taken in the name of God, but also in the name of the innocent human soul, of the poor, of orphans, widows, refugees, and exiles, as well as of all those who have lost security, peace, and the chance to live together. In essence, it is taken in the name of human fraternity torn apart by the politics of extremism and division.

In political and cultural discourse, peace is often defined as the absence of war. Yet conflict arises from various sources: economic pressures, value-based disputes, and struggles for power. In many regions, such tensions escalate dramatically. While some may profit from war, the majority suffer its consequences.

The declaration offers an alternative vision rooted in a shared religious anthropology, insisting that peace is more than the absence of conflict. Even the Old Testament term “shalom” expresses a broader and deeper notion. From a Christian perspective, Jesus Christ represents the fullest revelation of the human person. Humanity becomes more fully itself through openness to God. Although this is not the place to develop that line of thought in depth, the declaration offers a telling example from the Letter to the Ephesians (2:14–18):

For He is our peace, He who has made the two parts [of mankind] one, for He has broken down the wall that separates them – hostility. [...] That out of two [kinds of people] He might create in Himself one new man, making peace, and [thus] reconcile one as well as the other again to God in one Body through the Cross, having put to death enmity in Himself. And having come, He proclaimed peace to you who were far off, and peace to those who were near, for through Him, one and all in one Spirit, we have access to the Father.

The 2019 declaration speaks of faith in God and the final encounter with Him. It identifies various practical expressions of the absence of peace, such as genocide, terrorism, forced displacement, human organ trafficking, abortion, and euthanasia. It calls for the cessation of all practices that promote these realities. It condemns the shedding of innocent blood and the perpetuation of war, but also the erosion of moral values, cultural degradation, and the destruction of the planet. Where religious leaders have responded differently to such issues, the declaration clarifies that the problem lies not in religion itself, but in its distortion and politicization. It denounces the misuse of God's name to justify murder, extermination, terrorism, and oppression.

Perhaps the most theologically sensitive passage for Christians is the one that refers to pluralism and diversity – of religions, skin colour, gender, race, and language – as expressions of God's wisdom in creating humanity. This statement has generated the most intense theological debate. It must be interpreted within the context of the declaration, which is rich in references drawn from both Scripture and the Qur'an, though without direct citations. Christians readily recognise biblical allusions, while Muslims discern echoes of the Qur'an – particularly surah 5 (al-Ma'ida), verse 48.

Nevertheless, the broader aim of the declaration is clear: interreligious dialogue is not primarily systematic theology, but rather a "dialogue of life," which includes prophetic and humanitarian dimensions. In Pope Francis' documents, the focus on the poor and the defence of the Earth – our common home – remains constant, regardless of the religious identities involved.

The declaration also proposes concrete actions, such as the protection of places of worship – synagogues, churches, and mosques. It reminds us that the absence of peace often results in the violation of women's rights to education, employment, and political participation, as well as insufficient protection against sexual violence. The rights of children, the elderly, the weak, the disabled, and the marginalised must also be safeguarded. The signatories speak out against terrorism in all its forms, including the support it sometimes receives through media. They suggest that such support should be recognised as an international crime.

At the document's conclusion, the signatories call for its content to "become the object of research and reflection in all schools, universities, and institutes

of formation”, so that it may serve as “a witness to the greatness of faith in God that unites divided hearts and elevates the human soul”.

The second declaration, signed on September 5, 2024, at the Istiqlal Mosque in Jakarta, has so far attracted significantly less attention—perhaps because it is still recent, or perhaps because of its brevity. It is far shorter than the Abu Dhabi declaration and more focused in scope. The document centres on two major global crises: dehumanisation and climate change.

It draws attention to the way in which religion is sometimes manipulated within broader processes of dehumanisation marked by violence and conflict, causing suffering—especially for women, children, and the elderly. In response, the declaration urges a renewed commitment to promoting and protecting the dignity of human life. It also addresses a theme that is especially close to Pope Francis’ heart: the threat of climate change, including its consequences such as natural disasters, global warming, and increasingly unpredictable weather events.

Drawing on the teachings of both religious traditions, and simultaneously invoking the Indonesian state philosophy of “Pancasila”, the document outlines four key actions: to promote shared values from both faiths in order to overcome cultures of violence and indifference; to increase cooperation among religious leaders in addressing global crises; to recognise interreligious dialogue as a tool for resolving regional and international conflicts; and to take decisive action to safeguard the integrity of the environment and its resources.

Summary

What role can religious leaders play in breaking the cycle of war and promoting the dignity of the human person? History shows that, at times, religious authorities have failed to prevent conflict – and have sometimes even exacerbated it. Nevertheless, the position taken by Pope Francis demonstrates that religious conviction can serve as a powerful resource for peacebuilding. From the perspective of Pope Francis, as well as of his post-conciliar predecessors, this represents a valuable but underutilised source of new initiatives. One of his most distinctive contributions is the signing of joint declarations with Muslim leaders inside mosques.

While belief in one God provides a common ground between Christians and Muslims, doctrinal differences – such as the divinity of Christ and the mystery of the Trinity – remain. For this reason, Pope Francis proposes that interreligious dialogue be grounded in religious anthropology: a shared vision of the human person. A compelling expression of this approach can be found in the encyclical “Fratelli Tutti”, written after the signing of the first declaration. Drawing on the Pope’s encounters with Muslim leaders, it reaffirms the message that we are all brothers. The basis for dialogue and joint initiatives, then, lies in a vision of humanity that affirms peace and protects human dignity.

Since the first declaration was signed with Grand Imam Ahmad Al-Tayyeb, representing Middle Eastern Islam, the Indonesian leadership saw value in affirming its own voice. The second declaration, shorter in length and more focused in content, can be seen as a complementary statement that balances the Abu Dhabi initiative within the broader Islamic world. Its signing in Indonesia – the world's most populous Muslim country – also signals the Pope's openness to engaging with Islam beyond the Middle East. Pope Francis' actions indicate that he does not view Europe and the Middle East as the centre of the Church or the world. Instead, Asia is expected to play a crucial role in shaping the socio-economic, political, and religious landscape of the 21st century.

By undertaking these initiatives, Pope Francis introduces a new dimension to the Holy See's commitment to global peace. He affirms that religions not only guide individual spiritual development but can also contribute meaningfully to democratic and pluralistic societies.

The decision to sign these two declarations should therefore be understood within the wider framework of Pope Francis' teaching on human fraternity and interreligious dialogue. These actions carry profound symbolic significance. Until now, popes have generally signed official documents in Rome or during major ecclesial events and apostolic visits – but never before within mosques.

Inspired by such gestures, new peacebuilding efforts have already begun to emerge in the political sphere. In 2020, the United Nations established the International Day of Human Fraternity to promote greater cultural and religious tolerance. Supported by Egypt and the United Arab Emirates, the resolution designated February 4 – the anniversary of the Abu Dhabi declaration – as the official day of observance, beginning in 2021.

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