Vatican

Francis, the comic strip



Pope Francis embraces Sheik Ahmad el-Tayeb, grand imam of Al-Azhar University, at a conference on international peace in Cairo April 28, 2017. (CNS/Paul Haring)

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Christians, Muslims and Jews who are sincere about their faith must be committed to protecting the special character of Jerusalem and to praying and working for peace in the Holy Land, Pope Francis wrote in a letter to the grand imam of Egypt's al-Azhar University.

Only a special, internationally guaranteed statute on the status of Jerusalem "can preserve its identity and unique vocation as a place of peace," the pope wrote. And only when the city's "universal value" is recognized and protected can there be "a future of reconciliation and hope for the entire region."

"This is the only aspiration of those who authentically profess themselves to be believers and who never tire of imploring with prayer a future of brotherhood for all," Francis wrote in the letter to Sheik Ahmad el-Tayeb, the grand imam.

El-Tayeb hosted a meeting Jan. 17 with Christian and Muslim clerics and regional political leaders in reaction to U.S. President Donald Trump's decision in December to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and to begin preparations to move the U.S. embassy there from Tel Aviv.

The sheik had invited Francis to the meeting even though he knew the pope would be in Chile. Still, the pope said in his letter, "I assure you, I will not fail to continue praying to God for the cause of peace -- a true, real peace."

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"In particular, I raise heartfelt prayers that leaders of nations and civil and religious authorities everywhere would work to prevent new spirals of tension and support every effort to make agreement, justice and security prevail for the populations of that blessed land that is so close to my heart," the pope said in the letter, which was published Jan. 18 by the Vatican.

Francis repeated the Vatican's long-standing position calling for renewed peace talks between Israelis and Palestinians to find a negotiated agreement that would guarantee both could live in peace within internationally recognized borders "with full respect for the particular nature of Jerusalem, whose significance goes beyond any consideration of territorial questions."