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A Black woman wearing a colorful dress and a headdress shakes Pope Francis' hand

Pope Francis greets a participant from the conference "Women Building a Culture of Encounter Interreligiously," during an audience at the Vatican Jan. 26, 2023. Women from 12 religions attended the conference, sharing their experiences of interreligious dialogue. (CNS photo/Vatican Media)

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The world's religious traditions and their followers are called to offer wisdom to the world and to "infuse it with a spirit of warmth, healing and fraternity," which requires the participation of women as well as men, Pope Francis said.

"It is not a common occurrence for followers of 12 religions -- 12! -- from around the globe to come together and discuss important questions concerning encounter and dialogue for promoting peace and understanding in our wounded world," the pope said Jan. 26 during an audience with women attending a conference in Rome on women and interreligious dialogue.

The conference, "Women Building a Culture of Encounter Interreligiously," was taking place Jan. 24-27 and was sponsored by the Dicastery for Interreligious Dialogue and the World Union of Catholic Women's Organizations.

Participants shared their experiences as members of the Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, Sikh, Zoroastrian, Confucian, Taoist, Jain, Hindu, Shinto and African Traditional Religion communities. They also looked at depictions of women in their sacred texts and highlighted the women saints and sages of their traditions.

With the exception of officials of the dicastery who offered greetings at the start of the meeting, all of the speakers at the conference were women.

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Francis praised the conference's emphasis on "re-discovering the feminine aspects of your respective religious traditions and to showing how they contribute to a culture of encounter," which requires a willingness to listen to others and care about them.

"The fact that your conference is devoted to listening to the experiences and perspectives of women is all the more valuable, since 'our quest for peace must increasingly involve women. Because women bestow care and life upon the world: they are themselves a path toward peace,'" he said, quoting from the final declaration of the interreligious meeting he attended in Kazakhstan in September.

"The activity of encounter and the openness it requires is becoming rare," the pope said, "and its practice is one of the greatest gifts you can offer to your families, to your communities and to society as a whole."

Gathering women from around the world and from different traditions, he said, was an important way to share "the insights and practices that give you strength and creativity as you strive in your particular contexts to offer healing to many people who are seeking not only material relief from suffering, but above all, a sense of meaning and purpose for their lives."