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Pope Francis, center, flanked by the grand imam of Istiqlal Mosque Nasaruddin Umar, second right, and Archbishop of Jakarta Cardinal Ignatius Suharyo, left, signs a plate as he arrives at the Istiqlal Mosque for an interreligious meeting in Jakarta Thursday, Sept. 5. (Mast Irham/Pool photo via AP)



by Christopher White

Former Vatican Correspondent (2021-2025)

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Jakarta, Indonesia — September 5, 2024
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In a historic encounter at Asia's largest mosque, Pope Francis and Indonesian grand imam Nasaruddin Umar signed a joint declaration on Sept. 5 calling on religious leaders to deepen their cooperation in order to defend human dignity and fight climate change.

The document, "Joint Declaration of Istiqlal 2024: Fostering Religious Harmony for the Sake of Humanity," identifies climate change and dehumanization as two serious crises facing the world today and states that interreligious dialogue is an effective tool for solving both local and global conflicts.

"The values shared by our religious traditions should be effectively promoted in order to defeat the culture of violence and indifference afflicting our world," the declaration states. "Indeed, religious values should be directed towards promoting a culture of respect, dignity, compassion, reconciliation and fraternal solidarity in order to overcome both dehumanization and environmental destruction."

Clocking in at under 400 words, the succinct declaration clearly identifies "human exploitation of creation" as a contributor to "climate change" and laments that the "ongoing environmental crisis has become an obstacle to the harmonious coexistence of peoples."

Over the last five years, Francis has continually deepened his relationship with the Islamic world, particularly through joint declarations that have gone on to serve as the basis for further collaboration.

The 2019 document on "Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together," which was signed together during a papal visit to the United Arab Emirates with the grand imam of Al-Azhar, Sheikh Ahmed al-Tayeb, has been widely heralded as a major advancement in the Catholic Church's relationship with the Muslim world. It has since received the backing of the United Nations and several countries and served as the foundation for the pope's 2020 encyclical "*Fratelli Tutti* ("Brothers

All"), on Fraternity and Social Friendship."

But with this trip and new declaration — signed in the world's most populous Muslim-majority country — Francis now expands his outreach to the Islamic world beyond the Middle East and into the Asian world.



Pope Francis and Nasaruddin Umar, grand imam of the Istiqlal Mosque, pose for a photo with Muslim, Christian, Hindu, Buddhist and representatives of other religions at the conclusion of an interreligious meeting in Jakarta, Indonesia, on Sept. 5. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

While Christians and Muslims have historically lived harmoniously alongside one another here in this vast country, there has been a recent increase in clashes between the two faiths.

"It is particularly worrying that religion is often instrumentalized in this regard, causing suffering to many, especially women, children and the elderly," the declaration states. "The role of religion, however, should include promoting and

safeguarding the dignity of every human life."

The declaration signing took place during the 87-year-old pope's second full day here in the Indonesian capital as part of a nearly two-week swing through southeast Asia and Oceania on what is the longest trip of his papacy.

Despite the grueling journey, the pope has seemed reinvigorated by the trip and the opportunity to elevate some of the signature themes of his papacy, especially combating climate change and interreligious dialogue.

During his speech outside the Istiqlal Mosque — the third largest in the world, just behind Mecca and Medina — the pope stressed that interreligious dialogue does not mean forsaking one's beliefs or convictions, but rather through "creating a connection in the midst of diversity, cultivating bonds of friendship, care and reciprocity."



Pope Francis speaks to representatives of Muslim, Christian, Hindu, Buddhist and other religious communities during an interreligious meeting at the Istiqlal Mosque in Jakarta, Indonesia, on Sept. 5. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

"These relationships link us to others, allowing us to commit ourselves to seek the truth together, learning from the religious tradition of others, and coming together to meet our human and spiritual needs," he said. "They are also bonds that allow us to work together, to move forward together in pursuit of the same goals: defense of human dignity, the fight against poverty and the promotion of peace."

Both during his Sept. 4 address at Indonesia's presidential palace and again today at the mosque, Francis insisted that religion must contribute to the building of open societies and reject fundamentalism and extremism.

In his remarks, the grand imam echoed the pope's plea, noting that the Istiqlal Mosque was specifically built to encourage tolerance and moderation — and that it served as the perfect setting to illustrate both his and the pope's shared desire for friendship.

As the imam noted, the mosque, which can hold over 250,000 people, was designed by the architect Friedrich Silaban, a Christian, and sits directly across from Jakarta's Catholic Cathedral, Our Lady of the Assumption, which Francis visited on Sept. 4.

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Both the mosque and the cathedral, which share a parking lot, are connected underground through the "tunnel of friendship," which was officially inaugurated by the two men here today.

"We who belong to different religious traditions have a role to play in helping everyone pass through the tunnels of life with our eyes turned towards the light," said the pope. Then, at the end of the journey, we will be able to recognize in those who have walked beside us, a brother, a sister, with whom we can share life and support each other."

During the ceremony, which included both a Gospel reading and the chanting of a passage from the Quran, Francis was greeted by a number of religious leaders from other traditions and the pope and imam sat side by side throughout the encounter and shared a kiss of peace.

Later today, the pope is scheduled to celebrate a Mass for the country's Catholics, which is expected to draw more than 80,000 attendees.

Related: Pope receives exuberant welcome at Mass with 100K Catholics in Muslim-majority Indonesia

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