Opinion
Guest Voices



Pope Francis shakes hands with Sheik Ahmed al-Tayeb, grand imam of Egypt's Al-Azhar Mosque and University, during a document signing at an interreligious meeting at the Founder's Memorial in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, in this Feb. 4, 2019, file photo. Pope Francis, died April 21, 2025, at age 88. (CNS/Paul Haring)

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Just a week into his papacy, Pope Leo XIV had a phone call with one of the late Pope Francis' dear friends: Ahmed al-Tayeb, a Muslim leader who serves as the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, an important institution of Islamic learning in Egypt. Together, Francis and al-Tayeb met several times and issued the groundbreaking "Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together" in 2019.

The same day, the new Holy Father met with Mohamed Abdelsalam, the person largely responsible for the collaboration between Francis and al-Tayeb. In a post on Instagram, Abdelsalam wrote that it was an "inspiring meeting" during which they discussed "the legacy of the late Pope Francis." According to Abdelsalam, Leo "expressed his eagerness towards cooperation with [the grand imam] in pursuit of a more compassionate, tolerant, just, and peaceful world."

The following week, on May 19, Pope Leo welcomed various faith leaders to the Vatican. Reflecting back on what he called the "remarkable efforts" made by Francis in the realm of interfaith relations, he said, "Now is the time for dialogue and building bridges." In speaking directly to the Muslim attendees, he noted the "solid foundation" of dialogue already built.

Leo's remarks, and his reported conversations with his predecessor's main Muslim dialogue partners, signal that the new pope plans to continue down the path Francis trod: of forging bonds with Muslims (not to mention people of other faiths) and prioritizing interreligious dialogue. So what were the main hallmarks of Pope Francis' dialogue with Muslims? What is the legacy of Catholic-Muslim dialogue that Francis leaves?



Pope Francis greets then-Cardinal Robert Prevost during a consistory in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican Sept. 30, 2023. Prevost became the first U.S.-born pope in history when he was elected at the Vatican May 8, 2025, choosing the papal name Leo XIV. Early indications show Pope Leo will continue to build on Pope Francis-era advances in the church's interfaith relations. (CNS/Vatican Media)

Friendships first

For Francis, interreligious dialogue was most fundamentally about "sharing their joys and sorrows" — what the Vatican often refers to as "the dialogue of life." Francis sought not to make surface-level connections with his Muslim counterparts, but to forge authentic relationships. He and the grand imam developed a personal friendship, often cracking lighthearted jokes, yet also supporting one another in deeper ways. After the grand imam's sister passed away, the first person who telephoned him to express condolences was the pope.

Francis was also a friend to Abdelsalam, who he wrote of as his "dear son," and his wife and kids. He hosted them at the Vatican multiple times and, as Abdelsalam told

me in an interview last year, even got together with them on Francis' birthday. When Abdelsalam's daughter fell ill, Francis would call to check in on her and buoy her parents.



Judge Mohamed Abdelsalam, secretary general of the Higher Committee of Human Fraternity, Sheikh Ahmed al-Tayeb, grand imam of Egypt's al-Azhar mosque and university, and Pope Francis are pictured in this screen capture from a Feb. 4, 2021, virtual meeting marking the International Day of Human Fraternity, a new effort to promote dialogue between cultures and religions. (CNS photo)

Promoting peace and standing against scapegoating

Francis' dialogues with Muslims spilled over into action. He and al-Tayeb jointly wrote the "Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together," drawing on their shared religious convictions to speak up for the rights of the poor, children, women and elderly and against the arms trade, environmental degradation, terrorism and forced displacement, among other issues. Francis issued a similar declaration alongside Indonesia's Grand Imam Nasaruddin Umar in 2024.



Pope Francis and Nasaruddin Umar, grand imam of the Istiqlal, fold their hands in a gesture of gratitude at the conclusion of an interreligious meeting at the Istiqlal Mosque in Jakarta, Indonesia, on Sept. 5, 2024. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

Francis was also an advocate for refugees and those facing violence, including Muslims. He famously helped resettle Muslim families fleeing Syria in Rome, and spoke up for the plight of persecuted Rohingya Muslims during a visit to Bangladesh. He challenged his fellow Christians in places like Europe and the U.S. to resist the anti-Muslim scapegoating that was so common in the mid-2010s, reminding the world in 2016 "that it's not fair to identify Islam with violence."

During the last year of his life, Francis frequently raised his voice for a ceasefire in Gaza, something that Muslims globally took notice of and appreciated.

Appreciating together 'the one and merciful God'

Pope Francis was also attuned to the spiritual riches in the Islamic tradition, and he was keenly aware that Muslims have a deep and meaningful connection to God. This is evidenced by the fact that he would frequently ask his Muslim friends (and strangers) to pray for him. He took for granted the Catholic teaching, first expressed at the Second Vatican Council, that Catholics and Muslims together "adore the one and merciful God."

Francis also toured — and sometimes prayed in — numerous mosques around the world, from Turkey to the Central African Republic. In his writing and speaking, he would occasionally quote Muslim thinkers and stories, including in his encyclical "*Laudato Si*', on Care for Our Common Home" which was the first time a non-Christian religious text was cited in a papal encyclical.

Real reciprocity

While Francis was personally dedicated to strengthening Catholic-Muslim bonds, his efforts would not have been nearly as successful had it not been for the Muslims who took initiative to connect with him in the first place. After he was elected pope in 2013, al-Tayeb and Abdelsalam made a point to reach out to the Vatican to mend what had become a fractured relationship under Benedict XVI. And it was Abdelsalam's idea to harness the Holy Father and grand imam's friendship and have them write the human fraternity document.

In these early days of the new pontificate, Leo — and indeed many Catholics and Muslims — seem eager to live out the legacy Francis left. Together with the new pope, we can echo the words of Leo's first address: "Help us, one and all, to build bridges through dialogue and encounter, joining together as one people, always at peace. Thank you, Pope Francis!"

This story appears in the **Pope Leo XIV** feature series. View the full series.