

Vatican, Saudis both gain from deal on interfaith center

John L. Allen Jr. | Nov. 26, 2012 NCR Today

One way to gauge how important the Vatican considers something to be is the number of languages in which they present it. If it's only in Italian, that's generally a sign of routine business; if they employ other major world languages, that's often a hint they think it's a big deal.

By that standard, the recent announcement that the Holy See will become a "Founding Observer" of the Saudi-financed King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue in Vienna, Austria, must strike Vatican folk as momentous indeed.

The Vatican spokesperson, Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, released a statement about the Vatican's new role in the project Friday in six languages -- Italian, French, German, Spanish, English and Arabic, a sure sign he wanted it to be picked up everywhere, perhaps especially in the Arab world.

Lombardi said the Vatican "looks with favor" on the center's aim, which is to promote dialogue among religions and cultures.

Officially, the center is not affiliated with the Saudi government but is co-sponsored by three different states: Saudi Arabia, Austria and Spain. It's also officially recognized by the United Nations.

Nonetheless, it's named for the Saudi king and was founded by him in October 2011, supposedly inspired by a Nov. 6, 2007, meeting with Benedict XVI. It's controversial, largely because Saudi Arabia itself is hardly seen as a paragon of religious tolerance and pluralism. It's a country governed by *shariah* law, where a burgeoning Christian population, composed mostly of ex-pats from places such as the Philippines, Lebanon, India, Nigeria and other points of the compass, suffers various forms of *de jure* and *de facto* discrimination. Other religious minorities, including important cohorts of Shi'ites and Sikhs, don't have it any better.

Bishop Camillo Ballin, the Apostolic Vicar of Northern Arabia, recently told me there are now 1.5 million Catholics alone inside Saudi Arabia, 1.2 million of who are Filipinos.

Given that background, some critics have styled the center in Vienna as a PR exercise designed to clean up Saudi Arabia's image internationally without undertaking any significant reforms internally.

In fact, Lombardi's statement Friday was, to some extent, an attempt to short-circuit charges that the Vatican is allowing itself to be used by signing on to the Saudi initiative.

While saying that the center provides an important "opportunity and space for dialogue" and that any effort to promote peaceful co-existence is "a basic and urgent need for the humanity of today and tomorrow," Lombardi also suggested the Vatican will use its platform to press issues of religious freedom.

"Naturally, the Holy See ... shall not fail to bring to light her concerns for the effective respect of the fundamental rights of Christians who live in countries with a Muslim majority," he said, "in order to promote

authentic and integral religious liberty."

"In this way, the new center at Vienna shall offer a space capable of receiving the expressions and manifestations of the church's concerns in these regards, and for working efficaciously toward viable solutions to related problems as they arise."

Of course, it's not the Saudis that stand to score some PR points from bringing the Vatican on board. The Vatican, too, has something to gain.

In Rome, the feeling is that after a rough start with Muslims at the beginning of his papacy -- most famously, his lecture in Regensburg, which set off a firestorm of protest by appearing to link Muhammad with violence -- Benedict XVI has made up a lot of ground. The pope has been well received by Muslim leaders during his four voyages to the Middle East and has proposed an "Alliance of Civilizations" with Christians and Muslims standing shoulder-to-shoulder against radical secularism.

Yet Vatican officials often complain that this message has not yet really reached the Muslim "street," where Benedict XVI is still sometimes seen with ambivalence and suspicion. The Vatican's willingness to lend its support to a Saudi initiative, therefore, may also be part of an effort to rehabilitate the pope's image in Muslim circles.

Certainly the fact that the Vatican went out of its way to release Friday's statement in Arabic suggests fairly clearly who they're hoping will get the message.

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