

# Balancing act: Juggling demands of dialogue, proclaiming Catholic faith

VATICAN CITY – Since the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church and other Christian communities have been seeking the right balance between a truly respectful dialogue with other religions and an obligation to share their conviction that the fullness of salvation is found in Christ.

Pope Benedict XVI has been at the center of the Catholic Church's search for that balance during his six years as pope and, before that, as prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

For the pope, for promoters of interreligious dialogue and for those absolutely opposed to it, the question involves much more than the practicalities of dialogue with other religions – it goes to the heart of what it means to be Christian and Catholic.

Just as the former Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger tried to give direction, so has his successor as prefect of the doctrinal congregation, U.S. Cardinal William J. Levada.

The seriousness with which the Vatican takes the subject – particularly in light of Pope Benedict's call for another interreligious gathering for peace in Assisi in October – was demonstrated by an article Cardinal Levada published July 6 in the Vatican newspaper and the articles published the next day by Cardinals Jean-Louis Tauran and Kurt Koch, respectively heads of the pontifical councils for interreligious dialogue and for ecumenism.

Cardinal Levada acknowledged that after Pope John Paul II invited religious leaders to Assisi in 1986 and 2002 to pray for peace, then-Cardinal Ratzinger raised questions about the danger that people would misread the gatherings as some kind of Vatican statement that all religions are equal.

“Why, if he was so attentive to the possible misunderstandings of the gesture of his blessed predecessor, does Benedict XVI believe it is opportune to make a pilgrimage to Assisi on the occasion of a new meeting for peace and justice in the world?”

Cardinal Levada asked in his article for L'Osservatore Romano.

The cardinal said the pope's convocation of another Assisi meeting is a sign that "religious experience in various forms is an object of the church's attention" and that the church wants to help modern people discover or preserve their connection with the Almighty.

While the Catholic Church is convinced that the Holy Spirit works in a full and particular way within the church, it recognizes that the Spirit also is present and active outside the church, he said.

And, the cardinal wrote, the church believes that far from being destructive forces in society, religions - when they represent a sincere search for the divine - motivate people to commit themselves to building up the common good.

For Christians prayer is the first step, he said, and the second is to invite people of good will to join in the effort.

In his article, Cardinal Tauran also responded to the question of why the Catholic Church is committed to dialogue with members of other religions.

"A first reason is that we are all God's creatures and, therefore, brothers and sisters," he said. Second, "God is at work in every human person" and has given each the ability to sense God's presence and recognize universal moral values, such as peace.

But dialogue isn't simply a practical effort to reduce tensions in the world, it's a religious obligation to continue the dialogue that God initiated with humanity at creation and brought to its culmination when he sent Jesus Christ into the world, Cardinal Tauran wrote.

As for the fact that people from different religions will be praying in Assisi at the same time - although there will be no formal "interreligious prayer" service - the cardinal said, "It goes without saying that prayer always accompanies the start, the unfolding and the conclusion of every Christian action."

"There is a natural relation between dialogue with God - prayer - and dialogue with

others,” he said.

Cardinal Koch said Pope Benedict has invited representatives of other Christian communities and other religions to make a pilgrimage to Assisi because he “believes it is crucial” that they give the world “a credible and convincing witness in favor of peace and justice.”

“Peace is possible only when people, as authentic seekers of God, set off on a journey toward truth,” he said.

Explaining one’s beliefs and sincerely trying to understand the beliefs of others obviously are at the heart of ecumenical and interreligious dialogue, he said, but it does not end there.

“For believers, it is natural that a ‘day of reflection and dialogue’ is also a ‘day of prayer’ for peace” since prayer draws each person closer to God, the ultimate source of peace, he said.