

Cardinal hopes forum opens new chapter in Catholic-Muslim relations

VATICAN CITY - On the eve of the first meeting of the Catholic-Muslim Forum, the cardinal responsible for the dialogue said he hoped it would open “a new chapter” in a long history of Catholic-Muslim relations.

French Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran, president of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, gave interviews in early November to Vatican Radio and to the French Catholic newspaper La Croix.

He told Vatican Radio that the Nov. 4-6 meeting with representatives of the 138 Muslim scholars who began the Common Word initiative in 2007 would give participants an opportunity to explain their faiths through their understanding of the commandments to love God and to love one’s neighbor.

While theological points underlie the discussion, “properly speaking, one cannot say that we have a theological dialogue,” he said in the Nov. 3 interview with Vatican Radio.

Rather, he said, the Vatican’s dialogues with Muslims have focused on ethical questions, spirituality and joint action on behalf of the suffering.

He told La Croix Nov. 2: “At the moment theological dialogue has not really begun. We will see with the Forum, when we will speak of the love of God, how far we can go together. What is important is to know the theological thinking of the other” and to share the riches that come from our respective religious traditions.

The second day of the meeting is expected to focus on human dignity and mutual respect, and Cardinal Tauran said he hoped that would be an opportunity for the Vatican to voice its concerns about the limits on freedom of conscience and religious practice Catholics face in some Muslim countries.

Cardinal Tauran said it is natural to want reciprocity and to believe that the freedom that is good for Muslims in Europe, for example, would be good for Christians in the Middle East.

“But beware,” he said, “the principle of reciprocity is not a prerequisite for dialogue; this is not the logic of ‘Do ut des’ (I give so that you will give). That would be anti-Christian.”

Instead, he said, ensuring respect for each other’s beliefs and rights is something that results from gradually changing attitudes.

While several high-level initiatives give hope that changes will take place, the cardinal said, “the problem is that these initiatives of dialogue seem very hit-and-miss compared to the daily stories of anti-Christian violence in several countries. The question is how do we get these real openings we have with the elite to filter down to the masses.”