

Pope believes interreligious dialogue must consider cultural concerns

VATICAN CITY - Interreligious dialogue can and must be about the cultural consequences of one's faith, not about the basic fundamentals of one's religious convictions, Pope Benedict XVI said.

True interreligious dialogue "is not possible without putting one's own faith in parentheses," he said in a forward to an upcoming book by an Italian politician.

Instead, dialogue that discusses "the cultural consequences" of one's religious beliefs and allows for "mutual correction and reciprocal enrichment" is "possible and necessary," the pope wrote.

The pope's comments were part of a private letter to Marcello Pera, a philosophy professor, politician and former president of the Italian senate.

Mr. Pera has now published the letter as a foreword to his forthcoming book, "Why We Must Call Ourselves Christians." The undated letter detailed the pope's positive appraisal of and reaction to Mr. Pera's new book.

"You explain with great clarity that interreligious dialogue in the strict sense of the word is not possible, while you urge greater intercultural dialogue" in order to discuss the cultural consequences of one's own basic religious beliefs, the pope wrote.

The Vatican spokesman, Jesuit Father Federico Lombardi, told the New York Times Nov. 24 that the pope's comments were not meant to call into question the Vatican's dedication to interreligious dialogue.

"He has a papacy known for religious dialogue; he went to a mosque, he's been to synagogues," Father Lombardi told the paper. "This means that he thinks we can meet and talk to the others and have a positive relationship."

Recently Pope Benedict met at the Vatican members of a new Catholic-Muslim Forum.

The pope told them in an audience Nov. 6 that the commandments of love of God and love of neighbor are at “the heart of Islam and Christianity alike.”

Therefore, professing faith in one God obliges Catholics and Muslims to respect one another and to work together to defend human rights and help those who are suffering, he said.