

Pope discusses peace with Saudi Arabia's king

VATICAN CITY – Interreligious dialogue, peace in the Middle East and the life of Christians living in Saudi Arabia were on the agenda when Pope Benedict XVI met King Abdullah Aziz of Saudi Arabia.

After his audience with the pope Nov. 6, the king also had a separate meeting with Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, Vatican secretary of state.

In the context of expressing hope for “the prosperity of all the country’s inhabitants,” the Vatican said it also raised the issue of the “positive and hardworking presence of Christians” in Saudi Arabia, which prohibits the public expression of any faith other than Islam.

As king, the Saudi Arabian ruler also is the guardian of Islam’s sacred mosque in Mecca, where the founder of Islam, Mohammed, was born, and of Medina, where Mohammed’s tomb is located.

Pope Benedict greeted the king by extending both hands for a double handshake and then led the king into his library. The pope and the king spent about 30 minutes behind closed doors, speaking with the help of two translators.

In keeping with normal protocol, Pope Benedict and King Abdullah exchanged gifts. The pope gave the king a large etching of the Vatican made in 1550 and a gold medal. The king gave the pope a small silver and gold sculpture of a camel rider under a palm tree and a long gold sword with a gem-encrusted handle.

The Vatican said the meetings with the pope and with Cardinal Bertone “were held in a cordial climate and allowed for the discussion of heartfelt themes.”

“In particular,” the Vatican said, “they reaffirmed their commitment on behalf of intercultural and interreligious dialogue aimed at the peaceful and fruitful coexistence of peoples, and of the value of collaboration among Christians, Muslims and Jews for the promotion of peace, justice and spiritual and moral values,

especially in support of the family.”

Even before becoming Saudi Arabia’s ruler, King Abdullah began working on a process to convince Arab leaders to recognize Israel’s right to exist in exchange for an Israeli promise to withdraw from the Palestinian territories seized in the 1967 war.

The Vatican said that in the king’s meetings with the pope and Cardinal Bertone there was “an exchange of ideas about the Middle East and the need to find a just solution to the conflicts that trouble the region, particularly the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.”

In a front-page article the Vatican newspaper, L’Osservatore Romano, placed the king’s visit in the context of new efforts to promote interreligious dialogue in general and Christian-Muslim dialogue in particular.

Calling the visit one of “great importance” in its Nov. 5-6 edition, the newspaper noted that it came less than a month after 138 Muslim scholars, including several Saudis, wrote a letter to Pope Benedict and other Christian leaders “reaffirming the importance of dialogue between Christians and Muslims.”

The newspaper said, “In a world where borders are becoming more open each day, dialogue seems to be more of a necessity than a choice.”

It also said that in Saudi Arabia the number of Catholics, mainly workers coming from the Philippines, has grown beyond 1.5 million.

However, the Vatican newspaper did not mention the fact that there are no churches in Saudi Arabia and that non-Muslims in the country are not allowed to publicly practice their faith.

Quoting Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran, president of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, the newspaper said the key to Christian-Muslim dialogue is “to know each other, know each other, know each other. Each of us always has something to learn from the other.”