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Benedict is guided through the Blue Mosque in Istanbul. He is only the second pope in history — after John Paul II in Damascus in 2001 — to set foot in a Muslim house of worship.

By Salih Zeki Fazlioglu, AP

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Pope prays with cleric at mosque in Turkey

Updated 11/30/2006 1:19 PM ET

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By Burak Kara, Getty Image

ISTANBUL, Turkey (AP) — Pope Benedict XVI prayed alongside an Islamic cleric in one of Turkey's most famous mosques Thursday in a dramatic gesture of outreach to Muslims after outrage from the pontiff's remarks linking violence and the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad.

The pope bowed his head and closed his eyes for nearly a minute inside the 17th century Blue Mosque after Mustafa Cagrici, the head cleric of Istanbul, said: "Now I'm going to pray."

As the pope left the mosque, Benedict turned to Cagrici and thanked him "for this moment of prayer," the Italian news agency ANSA reported.

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"This visit will help us find together the way of peace for the good of all humanity," the pope said during only the second papal visit to a Muslim place of worship. Benedict's predecessor, John Paul II, visited a mosque in Syria in 2001.

The mosque visit was added to Benedict's schedule as a "sign of respect" during his first papal trip to a Muslim nation, the Rev. Federico Lombardi, the Vatican spokesman, said last week.

The pope removed his shoes before entering the carpeted expanse of the mosque, which is officially known as the Sultan Ahmet Mosque after the Ottoman sultan Ahmet I, who ordered its construction. But it's widely called the Blue Mosque after its elaborate blue tiles.

The pope received a gift of a glazed tile decorated with a dove and a painting showing a view of the Sea of Marmara off Istanbul. The pope gave the imam a mosaic showing four doves.

"Let us pray for brotherhood and for all humanity," the pope said in Italian.

Lombardi said the pope "paused in meditation" inside the mosque and "certainly his thoughts turned to God."

The pope has offered wide-ranging messages of reconciliation to Muslims since arriving in Turkey on Tuesday, including appeals for greater understanding and support for Turkey's steps to become the first Muslim nation in the European Union.

But Benedict also has set down his own demands.

After a deeply symbolic display of unity with Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I, the spiritual leader of the world's Christian Orthodox, the pope again repeated his calls for greater freedoms for religious minorities and described the divisions among Christians — including the nearly 1,000-year rift between Catholics and Orthodox — as a "scandal to the world."

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Benedict has made outreach to the world's more than 250 million Orthodox a centerpiece of his young papacy and has set the difficult goal of full unity between the two ancient branches of Christianity.

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