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Pope Benedict XVI meets Muslim envoys Monday at his summer residence in Castel Gandolfo, outside Rome.

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Pope calls for dialogue with Muslims

Updated 9/25/2006 9:21 PMET

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Enlarge L'Osservatore Romano via AFP/Getty Images

Pope Benedict XVI greets an unidentified Muslim envoy Monday during a meeting at his summer residence outside Rome.

By Eric J. Lyman, Special for USA TODAY

ROME — In a meeting the Vatican says was unprecedented in its scope, Pope Benedict XVI told 20 Muslim ambassadors Monday that he is committed to a positive dialogue with Islamic leaders and "our future" depends on the development of strong relations between the two faiths.

The meeting, held at the pope's summer residence just south of Rome, came nearly two weeks after Benedict sparked worldwide protests by quoting a 14th-century letter that said the prophet Mohammed "spread by the sword the faith he preached" and his teachings brought things "evil and inhuman."

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The pontiff had twice attempted to quell the controversy in public remarks before Monday's meeting. Each time, he stressed that the quote was not an expression of his personal opinion, but he stopped short of the full apology demanded by many Muslims.

In a statement, the Vatican called Monday's meeting at Castel Gandolfo with ambassadors of Muslim nations and the Arab League, plus representatives of Italy's Muslim community, unprecedented. The statement said the meeting was the largest between a sitting pope and Islamic leaders.

The pontiff spoke briefly in French before greeting and speaking to each representative. Benedict did not specifically mention his controversial statements Sept. 12 at Germany's Regensburg University.

He alluded to the speech when he began his remarks by saying, "The circumstances which have given rise to our gathering are well-known."

This time, Benedict quoted himself. He referred to a speech he gave last year at World Youth Day in Germany in which he told Muslim leaders that dialogue between the two faiths cannot be "reduced to an optional extra."

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That dialogue "is, in fact, a vital necessity on which in large measure our future depends," Benedict said.

In his call for "reciprocity in all fields," including religious freedom, Benedict was quoting his predecessor, John Paul II, who was

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known for his efforts to increase interfaith dialogue. Before the controversy surrounding Benedict's remarks erupted, that topic had been a plank of the Holy See's dialogue with some Muslim states such as Saudi Arabia, where non-Muslims cannot worship freely.

Saudi Arabia was not represented at Monday's meeting. Leaders from many other Muslim states were on hand. Among them: Egypt, Indonesia, Iraq, Lebanon, Sudan and Turkey.

Iraqi representative Albert Edward Ismail Yelda said the pope's new gesture would be enough to put the issue to rest. "The Holy Father indicated a profound respect for Islam," Ismail Yelda said in televised remarks after the 35-minute session with Benedict. "It is now the time to put what happened behind all of us and to begin building a bridge" between the two faiths.



Enlarge By Vincenzo Pinto, AFP/Getty Images

This photograph, taken Monday, shows the front page of Vatican's newspaper *L'Osservatore Romano*, which published the full text in Arabic of the pope's speech during his meeting with Muslim envoys.

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