



In sign of respect to Muslims, Pope prays in Istanbul's Blue Mosque

By John Thavis
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ISTANBUL, Turkey (CNS) -- In a gesture of respect to Muslims in Turkey and around the world, Pope Benedict XVI prayed in Istanbul's famed Blue Mosque, his first papal visit to an Islamic place of worship. As the pope walked with Mustafa Cagrici, the grand mufti of Istanbul, to the "mihrab" niche that points the way toward Mecca, the mufti said he was going to pray. The pope stood alongside him, bowed his head and moved his lips in silence for about a minute.

The Nov. 30 encounter was warm and cordial and contrasted sharply with recent controversies and tensions between the pope and the Muslim world. The 20-minute stop was a last-minute addition to the papal program. The pope accepted the gift of a ceramic tile inscribed with the word "Allah" in the form of a dove.

Placing his hand on the tile, the pope said: "Thank you for this gift. Let us pray for brotherhood and for all humanity." "Your Holiness, please remember us," the mufti replied.

Built by Sultan Ahmet I in the early 1600s, the Blue Mosque, with six minarets and cascading domes, is one of the most famous religious buildings in the world. The pope entered its carpeted prayer hall after taking off his shoes and donned a pair of white slippers, listening carefully as his guides explained the architectural history of the mosque and the religious significance of its spaces.

He looked up to admire the arabesque designs of the domes and the intricate blue tiles that give the mosque its name and its distinctive atmosphere. Then, as they drew close to the carved marble "mihrab," the grand mufti told the pontiff: "In this space everyone stops to pray for 30 seconds, to gain serenity."

The mufti told the pope he was going to pray. The pope, his arms folded over his pectoral cross, stood next to the mufti and moved his lips, a moment shown in close-up on Turkish TV. When they turned away, according to a reporter on the scene, the pope told the mufti, "Thank you for this moment of prayer."

Asked to elaborate afterward, the Vatican spokesman, Jesuit Father Federico Lombardi, said: "The pope paused in meditation, and certainly he turned his thoughts to God." This could be called a moment of personal prayer, the spokesman said, but did not include any of the exterior signs of Christian prayer. In this way, he said, the pope underlined what unites Christians and Muslims, rather than any differences.

"In this sense it was a personal, intimate prayer to God," Father Lombardi said, which "can easily be expressed

with his mind and with his thoughts also in a mosque, where many people cultivate the same spiritual attitude." Later, the pope presented the mufti with a framed mosaic of doves. "This picture is a message of brotherhood in the memory of a visit that I will surely never forget," Pope Benedict said.

The pope smiled and looked relaxed throughout the visit, which was conducted with the aid of a young Turkish interpreter. It was the second time a pope had entered a Muslim place of worship; Pope John Paul II visited a mosque in Damascus, Syria, in 2001. Moments before entering the Blue Mosque, Pope Benedict visited the Hagia Sophia Museum, an architectural masterpiece once regarded as the finest church of the Christian Byzantine Empire.

The two stops in the Sultanahmet district of old Istanbul touched on Turkey's rich cultural heritage and its troubled history as a crossroads of East and West. The Hagia Sophia, originally the Church of Holy Wisdom, was converted to a mosque in the 15th century after the conquest of Constantinople by the Islamic-dominated Ottoman Empire. It was turned into a museum in the 1930s, after Turkey became a secular state.

A week before the pope arrived, police detained 39 Muslim fundamentalists who entered the Hagia Sophia and shouted slogans against the papal visit. **Some Muslims feared the pope wanted to reclaim the monument as a church by praying there.** Protesters were kept far away from the site during the pope's visit, although three demonstrators were dragged from the Hagia Sophia a few hours before the pontiff arrived. Heavily armed police officers ringed the area around the museum and shut down all traffic in the neighborhood.

When he made his 25-minute stop in the Hagia Sophia, the pope was following in the footsteps of his predecessor, Pope John Paul, who visited the site in 1979. Escorted by the museum president, the pope walked beneath the massive dome of the sixth-century building, **pausing to look up at Byzantine mosaics of Christ, Mary and Byzantine emperors** and, next to them, the characteristic wooden ceiling medallions with the calligraphic names of Allah and Mohammed.

When his guide explained that the dome was 184 feet tall and 102 feet wide, the pope asked if it was bigger than that of St. Peter's Basilica. St. Peter's was bigger, he was told.

The pope asked a few questions but mostly listened during his tour. He was surrounded by a phalanx of Vatican aides and security personnel.

Before leaving, he stopped to write in the museum's guest book.

"In our diversity, we find ourselves before faith in the one God. May God enlighten us and help us find the path of love and peace," he wrote.