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FINAL DECLARATION OF THE ANNUAL MEETING OF THE JOINT COMMITTEE FOR DIALOGUE OF THE PERMANENT COMMITTEE OF AL-AZHAR FOR DIALOGUE AMONG THE MONOTHEISTIC RELIGIONS AND THE PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE (VATICAN) (CAIRO, 25-26 FEBRUARY 2008)

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- Believing in the role of monotheistic religions in providing a firm foundation for the values of peace, truth, justice, right behaviour and cooperation in the development and use of the earth's resources for the benefit of the whole of humanity, thus realising fraternity, peace and happiness for all peoples;
- Affirming that it is important that these noble principles and exemplary values guide human behaviour, especially at the present time when boundaries and distinctions between peoples are decreasing and the phenomenon of violence, extremism, terrorism is increasing, together with contempt for religions, religious values and everything that is considered sacred;
- Taking into consideration the place of al-Azhar al-Sharif, its history and its distinguished role within the Islamic world;
- Taking into consideration also the specific task of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue within the Catholic Church;
- Recognizing on both sides the importance of mutual knowledge and of the search for common ground between the two religions as a basis for wider cooperation and improved relations;
- The Joint Committee held its annual Meeting at al-Azhar headquarters on Monday 25 February and Tuesday 26 February 2008 under the joint presidency of Professor Sheikh Abd al-Fattah Alaam, *Wakil* of al-Azhar, and President of the Permanent Committee of al-Azhar for Dialogue with Monotheistic Religions, and His Eminence Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran, President of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue.

The Committee, with the help of papers presented by Reverend Father René-Vincent de Grandlaunay and Professor Abdallah Mabrouk al-Naggar, examined the theme of *Faith in God and Love of Neighbour as the Foundations for Interreligious Dialogue*.

During its exchanges the Committee underlined common principles and emphasised shared spiritual and moral values. These help to form the conscience and enlighten reason, providing guidance to thought and behaviour, in particular as regards relations with brothers and sisters of the other religion. The Committee also discussed the question of freedom of expression, noting that it can never justify harming people's feelings in religious matters, thus creating strained relations and destroying brotherly love.

The Committee strongly condemned the republication of offensive cartoons and the rising number of attacks against Islam and its Prophet, as also other attacks against religion. Note was taken of the words of Pope Benedict XVI, in a speech to the Ambassador of Morocco to the Holy See, in which he expressed his conviction that: "in order to favour peace and understanding between peoples and human beings, it is necessary that their religions and symbols be respected, and that believers not be the object of provocations which cause harm to their religious commitment and feelings." (20 February 2006).

The members of the Committee expressed their satisfaction at the agreement reached, seeing this as an encouragement to continue to engage in dialogue.

At the end of the meeting the participants agreed upon the following recommendations:

1. to affirm that all religions respect the dignity and honour of the human person without consideration of race, colour, religion or conviction, and condemn any offence against personal integrity, property and honour;
2. to foster true respect for religions, beliefs, religious symbols, holy Books and whatever is considered sacred: religious leaders, both Muslim and Christian, as well as intellectuals and educators, should make every effort to inculcate these values in their activities in places of learning and in all levels of society;
3. to appeal to those responsible for the mass media, whether written or broadcast, in all countries, to be vigilant that freedom of expression not be taken as a pretext for offending religions, convictions, religious symbols and everything that is considered sacred, but rather to oppose extremism, to encourage mutual acceptance, love and respect for all, regardless of their religion;
4. to encourage exchange of views on matters of common concern which may arise;
5. to assess the application of these recommendations during the coming meetings of the Committee.

The Committee agreed that its next meeting would be held in Rome, 24-25 February 2009.

His Eminence Cardinal
Jean-Louis TAURAN
President of the Pontifical Council
for Interreligious Dialogue

Professor Sheikh
Abd al-Fattah Muhammad ALAAM
President of the Committee for Dialogue
Al-Azhar

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