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The Grand Imam of Al-Azhar expresses hope that Muslims and Christians cooperate to save humanity from wars, poverty and ignorance

Vatican City, 24 May 2016 – After yesterday's audience in the Apostolic Palace, the Grand Imam of al-Azhar, Professor Ahmad Al-Tayyib, granted an exclusive interview to the Vatican media, in the residence of the Egyptian ambassador to the Holy See. The interview was recorded by Vatican Radio and the Vatican Television Centre, and took place entirely in Arabic.

In the interview the Imam affirmed that his visit, the first paid to the Vatican by the highest representative of Al-Azhar, was the result of an Al-Azhar initiative and an agreement between Al-Azhar and the Vatican to continue the holy mission of religions, which consists of "making human beings joyful everywhere". He added that Al-Azhar has a commission for interreligious dialogue with the Vatican, which was suspended in specific circumstances, but now those circumstances no longer exist, the path of dialogue has been resumed in the hope that it will be better than before.

"I am happy to be the first Sheikh of Al-Azhar to visit the Vatican and to sit alongside the Pope in an encounter of discussion and understanding", emphasised Professor Ahmad Al-Tayyib, revealing that his first impression of the Holy Father was that "he is a man of peace, a man who follows the teaching of Christianity, which is a religion of love and peace, and following His Holiness we have seen that he is a man who respects other religions and shows consideration for their followers; he is man who also consecrates his life to serve the poor and the destitute, and who takes responsibility for people in general; he is an ascetic man, who has renounced the ephemeral pleasures of worldly life. All these are qualities that we share with him, and therefore we wish to encounter this man in order to work together for humanity in this vast field we have in common."

With reference to the duties of the great religious authorities and religious leaders in today's world, he affirmed that these responsibilities are heavy and grave at the same time, "because we are aware, as we said also to His Holiness, that all the philosophies and modern social ideologies that have taken the lead of humanity, far from religion and far from heaven, have failed to make man happy or to take him far from wars and bloodshed." He remarked that the moment has arrived for the representatives of the divine religions to participate strongly and in a concrete way to give humanity a new direction, towards mercy and peace, so that humanity can avoid the great crisis we are suffering now. "Man without religion constitutes a danger to his fellow man, and I believe that people now, in the twenty-first century, have started to look around and to seek out wise guides to lead them in

the right direction. All this has led us to this meeting and this discussion, and to the agreement to begin to take a step in the right direction."

He also commented on the importance of renewing scholastic texts, a task that is being carried out by the Al-Azhar University, and remarked that they are renewed in the sense of clarifying the Muslim concepts that have been distorted by those who use violence and terrorism, and by armed movements that claim to work for peace. Erroneous concepts have been identified, and have been offered as part of a curriculum to students in middle and high schools, to show them the deviant side and distorted understanding, while demonstrating to students the correct concepts, from which extremists and terrorists have deviated. Likewise, a world observatory has been established to monitor in eight languages the material disseminated by these extremist movements, and the distorted ideas that mislead youth. This material is corrected and then translated into other languages. Through the "Home of the Egyptian Family" – which reunites Muslims with all the Christian confessions in Egypt, and is a joint project between Al-Azhar and the Churches – an attempt is made to offer a response to those who seize opportunities or wait in ambush to sow disorder, divisions and conflicts between Christians and Muslims. There is also the Muslim Council of Elders, chaired by the Sheikh of Al-Azhar, and this Council sends peace delegations to the various world capitals and carries out important activity in favour of peace and to promote genuine Islam. Around a year ago, a conference was held in Florence, Italy, on the theme "East and West", or rather "The Collaboration between East and West". In addition, Al-Azhar receives imams from mosques in Europe, as part of a two-month programme offering formation in dialogue, exposing erroneous concepts and dealing with the integration of Muslims in European societies and nations, so that they may be a resource for the security, prosperity and strength of those countries.

With regard to the current situation in the Middle East, Sheikh Ahmad Al-Tayyib remarked that he suffered, along with others, the consequences of the "rivers of blood and cadavers", and that "there is no logical reason for this catastrophe that we are living day and night". Certainly, he added, "there are internal and external motivations, whose convergence has inflamed these wars". He affirmed that, in the heart of Europe, he wished to make the most of his presence in this institution, so great for Catholics – the Vatican – to launch an appeal to the entire world so that it can unite and close ranks to confront and put an end to terrorism, emphasising that if terrorism is neglected, the price will be paid not only in the East; both East and West could suffer the consequences together.

Therefore his appeal to the world and to the free men of the world is to come to an agreement immediately and to intervene to put an end to these rivers of blood. He added that while terrorism exists, Islam has nothing to do with it, and this applies to Ulama Muslims and to Christians and Muslims in the East. And those who kill Muslims, and who also kill Christians, have misunderstood the texts of Islam either intentionally or by negligence.

A year ago Al-Azhar held a General Conference for Ulama Muslims, Sunni and Shiite, and invited the leaders of the Eastern Churches, of various religions and confessions; even the Yazidi sent a representative to this conference under the aegis of Al-Azhar. Among the most salient points of the joint declaration, it was said that Islam and Christianity have nothing to do with those who kill, and the West was urged not to confuse this deviant and misled group with Muslims. It was said with one voice that Muslims and Christians are the masters of this land and partners, and each one has a right to this land. Forced emigration, slavery and the trade in women in the name of Islam were rejected. The Imam reiterated that the issue must not be presented as persecution of Christians in the East, commenting that there are more Muslim than Christian victims, and we all suffer this catastrophe together. He concluded by saying that religions must not be blamed because of the distortions of some of their followers, because "in every religion there exists a deviant faction that raises the flag of religion to kill in its name".

At the end of the interview, the Imam repeated his heartfelt thanks and appreciation, and his hope that Muslims and Christians, Al-Azhar and the Vatican, may work together to raise up human beings wherever they are, regardless of their religion and belief, and to save them from destructive wars, poverty, ignorance and disease.
