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Muslim leader says pope is model of what religious leader should be

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Pope Francis, like Islam's Sufi mystic theologians and poets, "is trying to do good for the sake of the Good One, motivated by love and compassion," said the president of the Islamic Affairs Council of Maryland.

Mohamad Bashar Arafat, a Syrian who has lived in the United States for more than 20 years, was visiting the Vatican and speaking to groups in Rome in early October as a guest of the U.S. Embassy to the Holy See as part of the U.S. State Department's international speakers program.

In an interview with Catholic News Service, Arafat said he sees Pope Francis acting as all truly religious leaders should: reaching out with respect for the human person and open to dialogue.

Arafat said the pope's love and openness were clear not only in his choice of being named after St. Francis of Assisi, but particularly in his decision in July to visit the Italian island of Lampedusa, praying for migrants lost at sea and calling the world's attention to the need for immigration reform, and in calling on people around the world to fast and pray for peace in Syria in early September when a military strike seemed imminent.

"From my perspective, Pope Francis is really doing a wonderful job in terms of outreach, in terms of contributing to world peace, in terms of contributing to stopping wars and conflicts, praying for better understanding," Arafat said. "This was the message of St. Francis Assisi and this is the message of Ibn Arabi, the great Muslim scholar and theologian and poet, and this is the spirit of all the Muslim saints and Sufis around the world."

"St. Francis resonates with the Muslim world," he said, particularly because he is credited as the first Catholic leader to dialogue with a Muslim leader; in the midst of the Crusades, St. Francis met with Egyptian Sultan Malik al-Kamil in 1219, hoping to bring peace.

Just as in medieval times, Arafat said, the world today needs dialogue and an encounter between peoples, which Pope Francis is doing.

"I see Pope Francis saying the right things and setting the right tone, and also appearing in the right places at the right time," he said.

Arafat, who runs religious and cultural training programs for foreign students visiting the United States as part of the State Department's Youth Exchange Study Program, said seminaries and programs that train priests and Muslim clerics need to be more serious and more systematic about preparing future religious leaders for dialogue and promoting respect. He said such education is particularly lacking on the Muslim side.

As for Syria, where he still has family, Arafat said, "I myself am puzzled with what is happening over there, and the only solution I see is a political solution and reconciliation."

Since March 2011, when fighting began between government forces and those trying to oust Syrian President Bashar Assad, more than 100,000 people are estimated to have died and close to 2 million have been displaced or are refugees.

News reports frequently mention that the opposition to Assad is split between groups committed to democracy and fundamentalist Islamic parties.

"Islam is not part of the problem at all. It's national and international interests that are part of the problem," Arafat said. "Islam is about wisdom and Islam is about cutting your loses; Islam is about how you manage to survive in coexistence with others -- that is Islam."

The Quran, Islam's holy book, does not teach Muslims to espouse the attitude "I am the only one who is right and all of you are wrong," he said, nor does it insist that every nation must be governed by Shariah, Islam law.

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