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"Intolerance and violence are incompatible with religion."

On February 19, Pope Benedict XVI said that "intolerance and violence can never be justified in response to provocation because they are incompatible with the sacred principles of religion."

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"In the present international situation," the Holy Father told the

new ambassador of Morocco to the Holy See, "the Catholic Church is convinced that peace and understanding among peoples urgently requires respect for religions and their symbols so that the sensibilities of believers not be wounded by provocations."

"Intolerance and violence can never be justified in response to provocations because they are incompatible with the sacred principles of religion. Therefore, we can only deplore the acts of those who take deliberate advantage of offenses to religious sensibilities to incite acts of violence, for those ends are foreign to religion."

The Pope concluded by recalling that for believers and all men of good will the only path to peace and fraternity lies in "respecting the religious convictions and practices of others," for in a "manner that is the same in

all societies, all must be accorded the right to exercise the religion they have freely chosen."

The free exercise of religion.

In his audience with prelates of the west African Episcopal Conference of Senegal, Mauritania, Cape Verde, and Guinea Bissau, Pope Benedict brought out the importance for their local Church of "showing in a very visible way love for neighbor and a commitment to social development" through the numerous ecclesial structures set up to serve the poorest. Non-Christians (especially Muslims) are helping to provide these services. "Efforts that provide opportunities for believers of different religious traditions to meet in truth will contribute to the concrete realization of the authentic good of persons and society."

"It is indispensable," he added, "to go ever deeper into fraternal relations

among communities in order to foster the harmonious development of society by recognizing the dignity of each person and allowing everyone to exercise their religion freely."

He also urged the prelates "to use the word enlightened by faith in giving constant witness of fidelity to the Gospel and generous pastoral service, thus continuing to be "sound reference points that provide orientation for all of their fellow citizens."