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Pope Francis greets newly elevated Cardinal Miguel Ayuso Guixot, during a consistory inside St. Peter's Basilica, at the Vatican, Saturday, Oct. 5, 2019. (AP/Andrew Medichini)

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Cardinal Miguel Ayuso Guixot, a leading Vatican expert on Islam, died on Monday (Nov. 25) at the Gemelli Hospital in Rome, according to official Catholic Church news outlets. The cardinal was credited for rekindling the relationship between Sunni Islam and the Catholic Church. He was 72.

The cause of death remains unknown. Though Vatican sources reported he had been ill for some time, many in the church and the Vatican have expressed surprise on hearing of the news of Ayuso Guixot's death.

Pope Francis appointed Ayuso Guixot to lead the Vatican's Dicastery for Interreligious Dialogue in May 2019, rewarding his efforts to restore the Catholic Church's relations with the Grand Imam of the al-Azhar, Ahmed el-Tayeb, considered the highest authority in Sunni Islam.

The 2019 Declaration on Human Fraternity, cosigned by Francis and the Grand Imam in Abu Dhabi, crowned his campaign to promote dialogue between Catholicism and Islam.

At an audience with representatives of the Jain religion on Monday morning, Francis asked for prayers for the cardinal.

"I have some unpleasant news to tell you: the head of the dicastery, Cardinal Ayuso, is seriously ill, he is dying. A prayer for him!" the pope said.

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Born in Seville, Spain, on June 2, 1952, Ayuso joined the Comboni Missionaries of the Heart of Jesus and was ordained a priest in 1982. After earning a degree in Arabic and Islamic studies in Rome, he became a missionary in Egypt and in Sudan in 1982 and remained in Africa until 2022.

Recognizing his ability to connect with Muslim leaders, Pope Benedict XVI selected him to become a consultant and, eventually, secretary of the then-Vatican Council for Interreligious Dialogue. Francis personally ordained him as bishop of Luperciana, Tunisia, in 2016 and appointed him to lead the Vatican's interreligious cooperation efforts in 2019, succeeding Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran as president of

the department.

Ayuso was given a red hat at the May 2019 consistory, joining Francis's increasingly multiethnic and diverse cast of cardinals. He could often be seen by Francis's side during numerous papal visits around the world.

Due to his illness, Ayuso was not able to accompany Francis on his two-week trip to Asia and Oceania in September.