

Al-Azhar suspends dialogue with Vatican, Holy See wants to maintain ties **Decision taken in response to the pope's criticism of the treatment of Copts in Egypt**

Yasmine Fathi and AFP, Thursday 20 Jan 2011

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(Photo: Reuters)

Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Sheikh Ahmed El-Tayeb, and members of the Islamic Research Academy have decided to suspend all dialogue with the Vatican due to Pope Benedict XVI's negative comments on the condition of Egyptian Christians.

The decision was announced today following an emergency meeting during which the academy's members voted unanimously on the suspension for an indefinite period.

The decision is a response to the pope's reference to the discrimination endured by Coptic Christians in Egypt. The pope's comments followed the Two Saints Church bombing in Alexandria on New Year's Eve.

Mohamed Tahtawi, the Azhar's official spokesperson, refused to comment on the decision to Ahram Online, saying it was self-explanatory.

The Vatican however said Thursday it wanted to continue its bi-annual meetings with Egypt's chief centre of Sunni Islamic learning, Al-Azhar, after it accused the pope of attacking Islam and suspended diplomatic ties.

"The pontifical council for inter-religious dialogue's line of openness and desire to dialogue is unchanged," said Vatican spokesman Federico Lombardi.

Lombardi added that the council was "in the process of gathering together the necessary information in order to understand the situation well."

An advisor to Sheikh Ahmed criticised remarks by the pontiff as interference in internal affairs.

"The pope has repeatedly alleged that non-Muslims are being persecuted in Muslim countries in the Middle East region, which is far from the truth and is an unacceptable interference in the internal affairs of Islamic countries," Sheikh Mahmoud Azab said in remarks carried by the official Mena news agency.

The sheikh has been involved in a war of words with the pope over his comments since the attack three weeks ago.

During his New Year's Mass in the Vatican, the pope had called for the "concrete and constant engagement of leaders of nations" to protect Christians in the Middle East, in what he termed a "difficult mission."

In the wake of rising tension and "especially discrimination, abuse and religious intolerance which are today striking Christians in particular, I once again launch a pressing appeal not to give in to discouragement and resignation," the pope added.

Pope Benedict said the attack was "yet another sign of the urgent need for the governments of the region to adopt ... effective measures for the protection of religious minorities".

The remarks prompted Cairo to recall its envoy to the Vatican on 11 January.

"Egypt will not allow any non-Egyptian faction to interfere in its internal affairs under any pretext," the foreign ministry said. "The Coptic question is specifically an internal Egyptian affair."

El-Tayeb described the pope's statements as an "unacceptable interference in Egypt's affairs."

"I disagree with the pope's view, and I ask why did the pope not call for the protection of Muslims when they were subjected to killings in Iraq?" he asked at the time.

Al-Azhar's Center of Dialogue, established in July 2010, has entered into accords with the Vatican and other churches.