

An ayatollah to walk the corridors of the Pope's university

The Pontifical Lateran University opens its doors to its first ever visiting professor, the director of the Institute of Shiite Studies in Qom. The visit is a result of an agreement that was signed in the sacred Persian city



The Pontifical Lateran University.

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The studious, turban-clad, serious yet tranquil-looking man with the grizzly beard and glasses is soon to walk the lecture theatres and corridors of the papal university par excellence. The Ayatollah Mahmood Taghizadeh Davari will be the first visiting professor to tread the grounds of the Pontifical Lateran University, where he will be working on a comparative research project on social Shiite and Catholic theology.

Professor Davari, who is director of the Institute of Shiite Studies in Qom, a sacred Shiite city south of Teheran, is expected to arrive at the university soon and to stay there two whole years, the minimum duration of an academic research project.

His presence among the teaching staff and his relations with the students attending the pontifical institution will undoubtedly be culturally enriching: an expert on Islamic Studies and a sociologist, Davari has a long career as a professor and scholar of social Islamic theology in general, with a special focus on the cultural and social aspects of Shiite communities.

Iranian by birth, he speaks fluent Arabic and English thanks to specialist studies completed in England. He has taught at the University of Teheran, in the faculties of Social Science and Law as well as Philosophy and Communication given the links between social studies and mass media studies.

During the course of his career he has published dozens of essays and texts, as well as 30 or so articles published in prestigious academic journals. He has also taken part in important assemblies and international conferences. He expressed an interest in comparative Muslim-Christian studies as early as 2003, when he contributed to an essay collection published in London, titled "Catholics and Shia in dialogue".

Davari is a prominent figure on an institutional level (he was a permanent member of the Committee of Islamic culture and civilisation in the Supreme Cultural Revolution Council) as

well as an important media figure – he is accustomed to giving interviews and has directed some scientific magazines.

The Shiite professor's visit to the Pontifical Lateran University is one of the latest fruits of the agreement signed last April by the Rector, Enrico dal Covolo and Seyed Abolhassan Navvab, Chancellor of the University of Religions and Denominations (URD) in Qom.

The first initiative following the signing of the agreement, was a joint academic event celebrated at the start of the Jubilee of Mercy in Rome: professors from the Lateran University and the University of Qom met and reflected together on the theology of mercy in Christianity and in Islam.

The agreement stipulates that there is to be an exchange of professors and students between the two universities. For Dal Covolo, the understanding represents “a fundamental step along the path of interreligious dialogue on an academic level”. Hence, in support of this cultural exchange, the pontifical university is opening its doors to representatives of Shia Islam, to make this Jubilee year a year of “reciprocal collaboration”.

Cooperation on an academic level is part of a positive framework and “constructive dialogue” between the Holy See and Iran, explained the Apostolic Nuncio to Iran, Leo Boccardi, who facilitated relations between the Catholic and Shiite universities.

The high level scientific discussion between Catholic and Islamic thought, philosophy and theology is seen as a “mutually enriching venture that can foster an exchange of knowledge among professors and students as well as in published texts,” Boccardi said.

In this context, there is already a remarkable interest in Christian culture and tradition: research centre and Shiite university libraries are full to the brim with Catholic theology texts translated into Farsi. Starting with big works such as those of St. Thomas Aquinas and St. Augustine.

Notably, thanks to a team of researchers at the University of Religions and Denominations in Qom, one very important project was completed: the translation of the entire Catechism of the Catholic Church into Farsi.

The project went ahead with the approval of the Nunciature Teheran and following consultation with the Salesian priest Franco Pirisi who has been working in Iran for over 40 years. The text includes an introductory note by Cardinal Jean Louis Tauran, President of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue.

There are many among the more than 2,000 students enrolled at Qom's modern university who are keen to learn about the Catholic faith, culture and theology. Now Rome and the Vatican is opening its doors to these committed individuals.