

## Pope sends Vatican official to resume talks with Muslim university

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*Talks will resume after five years of silence between the two institutions*



Acting on Pope Francis' "express request", the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue is sending a top-level official to Cairo's Al-Azhar University in the coming days to resume formal dialogue after years of animosity.

The council said in a statement published today (12 July) that the Secretary of the pontifical council, Bishop Miguel Ayuso Guixot, along with the apostolic nuncio to Egypt, Archbishop Bruno Musaro, will attend a "preliminary meeting" on 13 July with Dr Mahmoud Hamdi Zakzouk, a member of the university's Council of Senior Scholars and director of the Al-Azhar Center for Dialogue. Al-Azhar is Sunni Islam's leading institution of higher learning in Egypt.

The meeting "will evaluate how to begin the resumption of dialogue between the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and Al-Azhar University," the statement said.

The encounter follows the landmark meeting at the Vatican in May of Pope Francis and the university's grand imam, Ahmad el-Tayeb (pictured). It was the first meeting between a pontiff and a grand imam since the Muslim university in Cairo suspended talks in 2011.

Established in 1998, the formal dialogue between Al-Azhar and the Vatican started to fray in 2006, after Pope Emeritus Benedict gave a speech in Regensburg, Germany. Al-Azhar officials and millions of Muslims around the world said the speech linked Islam to violence.

Al-Azhar halted the talks altogether in 2011 after the former pope said Christians in the Middle East were facing persecution. Al-Azhar claimed that Pope Benedict had offended Islam and Muslims once more by focusing only on the suffering of Christians when many Muslims were suffering as well.

After the papal meeting in May, el-Tayeb told Vatican Radio that his impression of Pope Francis was that of "a man of peace, a man who follows the teaching of Christianity, which is a religion of love and peace", and "a man who respects other religions and shows consideration for their followers".

Some hope a renewed relationship between Al-Azhar and the Vatican will lead to new cooperation in addressing urgent questions, including how to counter extremism. Al-Azhar is considered the most authoritative theological-academic institution of Sunni Islam.