

## Vatican, Al-Azhar to officially resume dialogue



*Pope Francis meets with the grand imam Sheik Ahmed Muhammad Al-Tayyib at the Vatican May 23, 2016. Credit: L'Osservatore Romano.*

**Elise Harris, CNA/EWTN News, 21 October 2016**

On Friday, **the Vatican announced it will be sending a representative to Egypt to set plans for the official re-launching of dialogue between the Holy See and the Al-Azhar Mosque and adjunct University, marking a seismic step in Catholic-Muslim relations.**

In an Oct. 21 communique, the Vatican said the secretary of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, Bishop Miguel Ángel Ayuso Guixot, will be heading back to Cairo for an Oct. 23 meeting with a delegation from Al-Azhar.

He will be accompanied by Msgr. Khaled Akasheh, head of the council's Office for Islam; Bishop Emmanuel Ayad Bishop of Luxor, Egypt; Professor Joseph Maila, an expert in Islamic Studies and **Fr. Jean Druel, O.P., Director of the Dominican Institute of Oriental Studies.**

According to the communique, **the meeting in Cairo is to prepare for an encounter that will take place in Rome, "probably toward the end of April 2017, and which marks the official resumption of dialogue between the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and Al-Azhar."**

The visit to Cairo will also serve as an opportunity to evaluate, together with Archbishop Bruno Musarò, nuncio to Egypt, and the Deputy of the Great Imam of Al-Azhar, Sheik Abbas Shouman, "the possibility to promote concrete initiatives for peace."

**Bishop Ayuso made a similar visit to Al-Azhar in July**, where he met with Sunni academic and politician Mahmoud Hamdi Zakzouk that **to discuss the formal resumption of dialogue between the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and Al-Azhar University.** The current Oct. 23 meeting, then, can be seen as a fruit of that encounter.

**The Imam of al Azhar, currently Ahmed al Tayyeb, is considered by some Muslims to be the highest authority the 1.5-billion strong Sunni Muslim world** and oversees Egypt's al-Azhar Mosque and the prestigious al-Azhar University attached to it.

**Founded in the Fatimid dynasty in the late 10th century** together with the adjoining mosque, the university is one of the most renowned study centers for the legal principals of Sunni Islam.

**Al Tayyeb paid a visit to the Vatican May 23 for a meeting with Pope Francis, which marked a major step in thawing relations between the al-Azhar institution and the Holy See, which were strained in 2011 with claims that Pope Benedict XVI had “interfered” in Egypt’s internal affairs by condemning a bomb attack on a church in Alexandria during the time of Coptic Christmas.**

**In an interview with Vatican Radio published May 24, Al Tayyeb spoke out harshly against terrorism carried out by extremist Islamic groups such as ISIS, saying that “those who kill Muslims, and who also kill Christians, have misunderstood the texts of Islam either intentionally or by negligence.”**

“We must not blame religions because of the deviations of some of their followers,” he said, and issued a global appeal asking that the entire world to “close ranks to confront and put an end to terrorism.”

If the growing problem of terrorism is neglected, it’s not just the east that will pay the price, but “both east and west could suffer together, as we have seen.”