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Major Islamic university in Egypt suspends ties with Vatican

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NCR Today

Al-Azhar University in Cairo, a prestigious institution sometimes called "the Vatican of the Islamic world," today announced it is suspending its long-standing dialogue with the Vatican in protest over Pope Benedict XVI's recent demand for protection of Egypt's Coptic Christians.

The decision by the university's Islamic Research Academy was reported this morning by the Catholic media agency "Asia News."

The move by Al-Azhar, a state-sponsored institution widely seen as close to the Egyptian government, comes after Egypt also recalled its ambassador to the Holy See in protest over what it called "interference" by Benedict XVI in the country's internal affairs.

The chill in relations between Egypt and the Vatican could have broad implications for Catholic/Muslim relations. As recently as late November, for example, the country's state-appointed Grand Mufti, Sheikh Ali Gomaa, was a featured speaker at the New York launch of a major research project at Notre Dame titled "Contending Modernities."

In a statement released this morning, Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, the Vatican spokesperson, said the Vatican's attitude "remains the same as always, and that is an attitude of openness and readiness for dialogue."

Lombardi said the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue is studying the decision by Al-Azhar.

Benedict XVI's comments on the threats to Coptic Christians in Egypt came in an early January speech to the diplomatic corps accredited to the Holy See. They followed a New Year's bombing of a Coptic church in Alexandria which left 21 people dead.

The explosion also injured 79 people just after midnight Saturday as worshipers were leaving the Saints Church in east Alexandria. The bombing sparked street clashes between police and angry Copts, who hurled stones, stormed a nearby mosque and threw some of its books into the street.

"This succession of attacks is yet another sign of the urgent need for the governments of the region to adopt, in spite of difficulties and dangers, effective measures for the protection of religious minorities," Benedict said on January 10. That line was widely interpreted as a call for the Egyptian government under President Hosni Mubarak to do a better job of protecting the country's Christian minority.

The estimated eight million Copts in Egypt represent roughly ten percent of the national population. The Copts have long complained of persecution and a perceived second-class citizenship, such as government rules which make it difficult to erect new churches and informal social discrimination in housing and employment.

Recently, however, mounting attacks on churches and Christian homes and businesses in Egypt have stirred fears of wider sectarian conflict.

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In explaining the decision to suspend dialogue this morning, a member of the Islamic Research Academy at Al-Azhar cited not only Benedict XVI's recent comments on the Copts, but also his September 2006 speech at Regensburg in which the pontiff appeared to link Muhammad, the founder of Islam, with violence.

"We are still waiting for an apology over these two questions," said member Abdel Muti al-Bayoumi, as quoted by "Asia News."

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