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Vatican withdraws recognition of Peru university as 'Catholic'

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Cardinal Juan Cipriani Thorne of Lima, Peru (CNS/Paul Haring)

VATICAN CITY -- The Vatican has withdrawn the titles "Catholic" and "Pontifical" from a university in Peru after decades of discussions over the school's Catholic identity and after tensions between university officials and the local cardinal over control of the school's assets.

In a communique published Saturday, the Vatican said Lima's Pontifical Catholic University of Peru, founded in 1917 and given Vatican recognition in 1942, could no longer call itself a pontifical Catholic university.

A decree formally stating the decision was issued by Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, Vatican secretary of state, "on the basis of a specific papal mandate," the communique said.

In an interview published on the university website, Marcial Rubio, the school's rector, said the decree was "not the best example of tolerance and respect" and, he said, it was likely to end up "doing harm to the church, especially in its relationship with young people."

Rubio said the university has registered the name Pontifical Catholic University of Peru. "This is our official name and through it we are recognized nationally and internationally. We have a full right to continue using it as we see fit."

The Vatican said that since 1967, the university's governing body repeatedly has "unilaterally modified its statutes with serious prejudice to the interests of the church."

Beginning in 1990, the Vatican said, it repeatedly asked the university to rewrite its statutes in accordance with the principles outlined in "Ex Corde Ecclesiae," the 1990 apostolic constitution on guaranteeing the identity and mission of Catholic colleges. The Vatican said the university had a "legal obligation" to adopt the norms called for in the constitution.

In December, Cardinal Peter Erdo of Esztergom-Budapest, Hungary, carried out an apostolic visitation of the university at the request of the Vatican. Rubio and Bertone discussed the results during a meeting at the Vatican in February.

Since then, the Vatican said, Rubio has sent the cardinal two letters asserting "the impossibility of enacting what was requested" and stating that the university would not modify its statutes unless the Archdiocese of Lima "renounced control" over the university's assets, the Vatican said.

The university has been mired in a long-standing dispute with the archdiocese over property willed to the university more than half a century ago. Lima Cardinal Juan Cipriani Thorne has publicly questioned the way the university manages the inheritance and has insisted on more transparency and accountability to the archdiocese.

The Vatican said it would continue to monitor the situation, hoping that the university's governing body would reconsider its position and take steps that would allow the Vatican to recognize it once again as a pontifical Catholic university.

The pontifical designation allows certain Catholic universities to grant special ecclesiastical degrees in addition to the normal civil degrees. Some universities and seminaries require, for instance, that those teaching theology or canon law hold pontifical degrees in those subjects.

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