

# Pope cancels visit after students threaten protests

VATICAN CITY - Following a letter of protest signed by 67 professors and threats of a demonstration by students, Pope Benedict XVI has canceled his planned visit to Rome's Sapienza University.

"After the well-known events of these days in relation to the visit of the Holy Father," who was invited by the university rector to speak Jan. 17, "it was deemed opportune to defer the visit," said a Jan. 15 statement from the Vatican press office.

"Nevertheless, the Holy Father will send the speech foreseen" for the opening of the academic year, the press office said.

The university, which claims to be the largest in Europe, was founded in 1303 by Pope Boniface VIII and became independent in 1870.

Andrea Frova, a professor of physics and one of the organizers of the professors' letter of protest, told the Italian newspaper *Il Giornale* that he and his colleagues were "offended by the fact that a pope hostile to science" was invited to give a major lecture at a formal university event.

However, he said, the letter was written in November when there was still time to cancel the papal visit without fanfare and was meant to be an internal university communication.

Frova said he did not know how newspapers got a copy of the letter, but "I want to be very clear on one point: It was not our intention to unleash protests, hostile actions or violence of any kind."

The professor said it did not make sense "to entrust the inauguration of our academic year to a foreign head of state who also is the head of the Catholic Church."

In addition, he said, the fact that the pope was invited to speak last at the event

meant that there would be no opportunity for public questions, comments or debate.

But mostly, Frova said, the 67 professors – most of whom are scientists – objected to the invitation because “this pope has always had a closed, even hostile, attitude toward science.”

Frova said, “Even in his last encyclical, Ratzinger (the pope) sets science and faith in opposition: His argument is that if science arrives at conclusions that are in any way opposed to faith, science must retreat.”

In that encyclical, “*Spe Salvi*” (on Christian hope), Pope Benedict wrote, “Francis Bacon and those who followed in the intellectual current of modernity that he inspired were wrong to believe that man would be redeemed through science. Such an expectation asks too much of science; this kind of hope is deceptive. Science can contribute greatly to making the world and mankind more human. Yet it can also destroy mankind and the world unless it is steered by forces that lie outside it.”

The protesting Sapienza professors also objected to remarks that then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger made about the church’s 17th-century condemnation of Galileo Galilei. They quoted him quoting another author defending the church’s condemnation, although they did not point out that the future pope said he found the author’s remarks “drastic.”

In fact, in the speech, he had said, “Faith does not grow from a resentment and refusal of rationalism, but from its basic affirmation.”