

Top Muslim scholars in Egypt announce boycott of dialogue with Vatican

VATICAN CITY - Top Muslim academics in Egypt have announced they are suspending all dialogue with the Vatican to protest Pope Benedict XVI's remarks about anti-Christian violence in Egypt.

The decision of Sheik Ahmad el-Tayeb, president of al-Azhar University in Cairo, and members of the Islamic Research Academy was reported Jan. 20 by the website Ahram Online, a site devoted to covering news of interest to Muslims in the Middle East.

Shortly after the news was reported in Cairo, Jesuit Father Federico Lombardi, Vatican spokesman, told reporters that the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue "is collecting the information needed to adequately understand the situation."

"In any case," he said, "the line of openness and the desire for dialogue on the part of the pontifical council remain unchanged."

The news of the dialogue boycott came about a month before the scheduled annual meeting of the Joint Committee for Dialogue of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and the Permanent Committee of al-Azhar for Dialogue among the Monotheistic Religions. The committee, established in 1998, meets in late February each year.

Ahram Online reported that the decision to suspend the dialogue was made unanimously in response to the pope's reference Jan. 1 "to the discrimination endured by Coptic Christians in Egypt" after a bombing at a Coptic Orthodox church left 23 people dead.

Sheik el-Tayeb already had criticized the pope's remarks as "unacceptable interference in Egypt's affairs."

In an address to diplomats Jan. 10, Pope Benedict recalled the Dec. 31 bomb attack on the Coptic church in Alexandria and said the bombing was a 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.”

The day after the pope’s speech, the Egyptian government recalled its ambassador to the Vatican, bringing her back to Cairo “for consultation.”