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Vatican to launch dialogue with atheists

by Francis X. Rocca by Religion News Service

VATICAN CITY -- The Vatican announced a new initiative aimed at promoting dialogue between theists and atheists to be launched with a two-day event this March in Paris.

The Vatican's Pontifical Council for Culture will sponsor a series of seminars on the theme of "Religion, Light and Common Reason," at various locations in the city, including Paris-Sorbonne University.

The events will conclude with a party for youth in the courtyard of the Cathedral of Notre Dame, followed by prayer and meditation inside the cathedral.

The initiative, called "Courtyard of the Gentiles," takes its name from a section of the ancient Temple of Jerusalem accessible to non-Jews, which Pope Benedict XVI has used as a metaphor for dialogue between Catholics and non-believers.

"I believe that the church should also today open a sort of 'courtyard of the gentiles' where men can in some way hook on to God, without knowing him and before having gained access to his mystery," Benedict said in Dec. 2009.

The pope has made turning back the tide of Western secularism one of the major campaigns of his papacy. The Vatican last year established the Pontifical Council for the New Evangelization to focus especially on promoting Christianity in Europe.

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