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Vatican opens dialogue with atheists

by Francis X. Rocca by Religion News Service

VATICAN CITY -- A new Vatican initiative to promote dialogue between believers and atheists debuted with a two-day event on Thursday and Friday in Paris.

"Religion, Light and Common Reason" was the theme of seminars sponsored by the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Culture at various locations in the French capital, including Paris-Sorbonne University and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

"The church does not see itself as an island cut off from the world. ... Dialogue is thus a question of principle for her," Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi told the French newspaper *La Croix*. "We are aware that the great challenge is not atheism but indifference, which is much more dangerous."

The events were scheduled to conclude with a party for youth in the courtyard of the Cathedral of Notre Dame on Friday evening, featuring an appearance via video by Pope Benedict XVI, 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 Benedict has used as a metaphor for dialogue between Catholics and non-believers.

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