

President's Address at the Inauguration of the Benedict XVI Endowed Chair of Religious, Cultural, and Philosophical Studies

October 9, 2015

As Archbishop Gabriele Giordano Caccia, Apostolic Nuncio to Lebanon pointed out here at NDU on February 27, 2013, Lebanon was the last country that Pope Benedict XVI visited before retiring—signing the last official magisterial document of his pontificate. The convergence of this announcement with two other important announcements made during the same event was timely and auspicious: (1) the naming of the Faculty of Humanities Building after Pope Benedict and (2) the establishment of a Benedict XVI Chair at NDU's Faculty of Humanities.

Today I am happy to inaugurate the Benedict XVI Endowed Chair of Religious, Cultural, and Philosophical Studies. The establishment of this particular Chair is exceedingly momentous. In the light of the rich intellectual heritage of Pope Benedict who was distinguished Professor at four prominent German Universities, the activities of the Chair shall engage the disciplines of Philosophy, Theology, and Religious Studies, and shall be pursued in such a way as to include serious engagement with the Social Sciences. This engagement shall encourage a concrete application of Catholic Social Teaching in a spirit of interreligious openness, especially between Christians and Muslims. The activities of this Chair shall be open, supple, and receptive to a variety of theological approaches that complement the original genius and unique Catholicity of Benedict's worldview.

The General Activities of the Chair shall be to organize international and local seminars, conferences, lecture series, symposia, workshops, and roundtables, revolving around Pope Benedict XVI's intellectual legacy as it relates to NDU's mission and vision. These activities shall require cooperation with many diverse academic, religious, and cultural institutions in Lebanon and around the world, in particular with the Council for Research in Values and Philosophy (CRVP); in addition to a number of other important international institutes in the U.S., Romania, India, and Iran, to mention a few.

The immediate planned events for the coming year include:

- An International Symposium that will bring together prominent international thinkers from Iran next month in November to discuss the theme “Philosophy and Religion as a Way of Life”.
- A Relational Needs Course will be offered in February free of charge to NDU students and faculty wishing to deepen their knowledge of relational needs with an emphasis on the philosophical and psychological meaning of dialogue.
- An International Conference in cooperation with the Faculty of Law and Political Science scheduled for this coming May titled “Thomas More’s UTOPIA: 500 Years ON”.
- A Local Workshop devoted to Father Afif Osseiran’s landmark essay on the deep meaning and significance of Dialogue scheduled for the Fall of 2016. This workshop will bring together Christian and Muslim thinkers and practitioners in Lebanon in order to benefit from one another’s experience and expertise.

Presently, the Benedict Chair has already been cooperating with local NGO’s (The Lebanon Dialogue Initiative and the Cedars Institute) in running the Study Abroad in Lebanon (SAIL) Program, which has brought students and faculty from Brazil to participate in a course on world history in the context of Lebanon. This important cooperation shall continue and be developed internationally.

- Other activities and events will take place in collaboration with each of NDU’s seven Faculties through the newly formed Benedict XVI Society of professors from each of NDU’s 7 faculties. This society will meet monthly to read and discuss academic articles devoted to showing the link between the category of faith and their own disciplines.
- NDU professors and local thinkers will meet monthly to read and reflect upon the magnum opus of one of the most important theologians of the 20th century, Hans Urs von Balthasar, whose work was so important for the theological vision of Pope Benedict XVI.

Summaries of these meetings shall be published by the International Catholic Review, *Communio*.

- Finally, I am pleased to announce that Pope Benedict himself is aware of the establishment of this chair and has promised to pray for its success. He was personally informed of this initiative by Father Stephan Horn, who is head of the “Circle of Benedict Disciples” comprised of the 50 students who wrote Ph.D dissertations under Ratzinger during his tenure of Professorships at 4 prominent German universities.

I would like to thank the Vice-President for Academic Affairs, Dr. Elie Badr, the Dean of the Faculty of Humanities, Dr. Kamal Abouchedid, and the Chairholder of the Benedict XVI Endowed Chair of Religious, Cultural, and Philosophical Studies, Dr. Edward J. Alam. We congratulate Dr. Alam who was nominated by Pope Benedict XVI in 2012 to be a Consultor on the Pontifical Council for Culture and appointed to this position by Pope Francis in July 2014, adding to his credentials to hold this newly established Chair.

In conclusion, allow me to thank His Excellency Archbishop Gabriele Caccia, Apostolic Nuncio to Lebanon, for all the efforts he has been spending for the well being of Lebanon. We, as Lebanese community, extend our thankfulness and gratitude to His Holiness Pope Francis for His prayers and concern for Lebanon. Your Excellency, we are grateful at NDU for your presence among us today in this Opening Ceremony of the Academic Year. We ask the Lord to always guide you in your future endeavors.

Thank you and God bless you.