

Inauguration of the 2024/2025 Academic Year

On Tuesday, 4th March 4, the Sophia University Institute in Loppiano (Figline e Incisa Valdarno – FI) inaugurated its 17th academic year. The ceremony was held in the Aula Magna of the Institute, in the presence of the entire academic community and representatives from the vast network of relationships and collaborations that the Institute has established over its first 17 years of existence with institutions, other universities, and third-sector organizations.

The event featured speeches by the following distinguished guests: the Rector, Declan O’Byrne; the Grand Chancellor of the Institute, H.E. Mons. Gherardo Gambelli, Archbishop of Florence; the Vice Grand Chancellor, Dr. Margaret Karram, President of the Focolare Movement; the Bishop of Fiesole, H.E. Mons. Stefano Manetti; the Mayor of Figline e Incisa Valdarno, Valerio Pianigiani; Paolo Cancelli, Director of the Development Office at the Pontifical Antonianum University; and Marco Salvatori, President of the Giorgio La Pira International Student Center.

At the heart of the ceremony was the keynote address “*Dialogue, Religions, Geopolitics*” by Fabio Petito, Professor of International Relations and Director of the *Freedom of Religion or Belief & Foreign Policy Initiative* at the University of Sussex. He is also the scientific coordinator of the *Religions and International Relations Program* for the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and ISPI (*Institute for International Political Studies*). Petito highlighted how, today, “religion seems to be part of—and sometimes at the center of—the current landscape of instability and international crises.” However, he also pointed out that, although less visible on a global scale, “over the past quarter-century, there has been a significant increase in the efforts of religious community leaders to respond to violence and political tensions through initiatives of dialogue and interreligious collaboration.” He emphasized the vital role that institutions like the Sophia University Institute can play in deepening and creatively promoting a culture of encounter, helping to cultivate “small seeds of hope and bear fruits of unity and human fraternity.”

True to Sophia’s distinctive style as an international academic community and a laboratory of life, education, study, and research, the keynote was followed by a moment of dialogue, moderated by journalist and Vatican expert Andrea Gagliarducci (Eternal Word Television Network and ACI Stampa). This discussion featured Grand Chancellor Mons. Gherardo Gambelli, making his first visit to the Institute, Vice Grand Chancellor Dr. Margaret Karram, and six students from the university.

The conversation, drawing from the personal stories of young people from the Holy Land, the Philippines, Argentina, Kosovo, Sierra Leone, and Peru, touched on globally significant and pressing topics: the value of grassroots diplomacy in conflict resolution and peacebuilding; the pursuit of a fairer and more equitable economy, inspired by *The Economy of Francesco*; the role of Mediterranean youth in fostering a culture of encounter; the importance of reconciliation and interreligious dialogue—especially between Christians and Muslims—through the *Wings of Unity* experience; the hopes of young Africans engaged in the *Together for a New Africa* project for social change and the common good of their continent; and the struggles and vulnerabilities of young people seeking purpose and fulfillment in an increasingly globalized world.

The inauguration of the 2024/2025 academic year once again demonstrated the ability of this still-small academic institution to equip young people with the tools to navigate the complexities of the modern world from a transdisciplinary perspective. It also highlighted its commitment to working in synergy with experts from various fields and institutions to foster dialogue between cultures in concrete social settings, nurturing the personal, intellectual, and social growth of individuals through a dynamic of reciprocity.

Translate

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