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Letter of the Holy Father Francis to the Grand Chancellor of the Pontifical Lateran University for the institution of the study cycle on “Care of our Common Home and the protection of Creation”, and of the UNESCO Chair “On Futures of Education for Sustainability”

The following is the Letter instituting the study cycle on “Care of our Common Home and the protection of Creation”, and of the UNESCO Chair “On Futures of Education for Sustainability”, handed by the Holy Father to His Eminence Cardinal Angelo De Donatis, Grand Chancellor of the Pontifical Lateran University:

Letter of the Holy Father

To the Venerable Brother

Cardinal Angelo De Donatis

Grand Chancellor of the Pontifical Lateran University

1. Called to educate in responsibility towards the gifts of creation, the Church also fulfils her commitment in educating in the true meaning of every action aimed at preserving, protecting and guaranteeing life on and of the earth, well aware that this is an obligation to which everyone is called, in the different roles and tasks they fulfil. Believers and non-believers alike, we have a duty not only to ensure an abstract sustainability or to proclaim the good of future generations, but to provide the means to safeguard the various ecosystems and their components, knowing that we cannot dispose of them without measure. It is also required because of the serious repercussions that a lack of ecological awareness has not only on the environment, but also on human relations and social life, fuelling a culture of waste that primarily means exclusion, poverty, inequality, forced displacement of populations and failure to satisfy basic needs.

Every day, the entire human family sees that care for creation is linked to scientific progress, to the relationship between different cultures, to the processes of building peace and cooperation, and that it also requires a

rethinking of the fundamental principles of social living. Faced with the degradation that threatens the planet, expressions such as freedom, justice, mutual respect, solidarity, equity, common good, are deprived of all meaning and used to “justify any action” (*Fratelli tutti*, 14). That is why education and training remain the ways to move from a commitment to the environment to a correct ecological responsibility.

2. In the Catholic Church, concern for the protection of creation is rooted in the heritage of reflections, ideas and tools for action contained in her social doctrine. This is summarised well by principles such as the universal destination of goods, the rational use of resources, ecological conversion, the indivisibility of the book of nature, together with some essential operational indicators such as integral ecology, listening to nature, preventing damage to the environment, stabilising the climate, conserving biodiversity, water and land.

However, we cannot forget that it is thanks to the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople that concern for the ecological issue, for preserving the gifts of creation and of natural heritage, has matured among Christians, also with numerous initiatives to raise awareness and to urge believers and other religious communities to respect the environment. A reflection that in the face of the extinction of species, the destruction of biological diversity, climate change caused by the destruction of the forests, the contamination of water, air and life, did not hesitate to say: “These are sins” (Bartholomew I, *Address to the Symposium on the Environment*, Santa Barbara, United States of America, 8 November 1997).

This common feeling has helped to deepen the dialogue between our Churches, leading her also to grasp the wisdom that is realised in the educational action and in the central role of the *Universitas*, a place symbolic of that integral humanism that needs to be continuously renewed and enriched through the intertwining of knowledge, arts and sciences. Indeed, university education must be able to respond to the many challenges currently posed to the whole of humanity and to communities of believers, by proposing a courageous and coherent cultural impulse and a scientifically valid project. These elements are more necessary than ever to face the environmental crisis, knowing that rules and structures are not enough, nor enthusiasm and idealism alone; rather, a solid preparation is required.

3. For this reason, I thought of including *Studies in Ecology and the Environment* in the system of ecclesiastical studies among the “other sciences, first of all the humanities, which have a close connection with the theological disciplines or with the work of evangelisation” (Apostolic Constitution *Veritatis Gaudium*, Art. 85, a) and, in unity with the Venerable Brother, Bartholomew I, of establishing in the University of the Bishop of Rome a study cycle in *Ecology and the Environment. Care of our Common Home and Protection of Creation*. A course of higher education in which the Sees of the Apostles Peter and Andrew will be able to work in synergy to continue, also in this area, their mission of proclaiming the Good News to all peoples.

The study cycle (cf. PUL, *Statutes*, Art. 1 §4, and *Ordinances*, Art. 3 §1), which I entrust to the direction of the Magnificent Rector, will be structured with the educational resources present in the University, appropriately integrated, alongside the academic realities connected in various ways to the two Churches. It will be structured in the disciplinary fields of theology, philosophy, law and all the sciences of the economic, social, ecological and environmental spheres, so as to generate that “unity in difference of knowledge and respect for its multiple, correlated and convergent expressions” (Apostolic Constitution *Veritatis Gaudium*, Proemio, 4). The University will confer, by the authority of the Holy See, the academic degrees envisaged for the three cycles of university education (cf. Apostolic Constitution *Veritatis Gaudium*, Art. 2 §1; Title VII), also in the form of joint degrees, double degrees and equivalent degrees. Other degrees will be defined together with the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople or other Christian Churches and communities of believers who wish to join the new academic path.

Furthermore, in order to promote an “open system” of research and training, the study cycle will include a UNESCO Chair on the future of education for sustainability, as an instrument inspired by and linked to the Organisation’s aims of raising awareness and fostering, on a global scale, the education of the younger generations in ecological responsibility, environmental guarantees and the desired sustainability.

4. I am certain, Your Eminence, of the commitment of all those, teachers, students and non-teaching staff, who

will work together to ensure the sound preparation of priests, consecrated persons and lay people, always working with humility, sobriety and a spirit of sacrifice, essential qualities for building, also through study and research, that social friendship which is the foundation of fraternity.

Faced with current and future scenarios, studies in *Ecology and the Environment. Care of our Common Home and Protection of Creation* are for the benefit of ecclesial structures, forms of consecrated life, associations and movements, and all those who wish to acquire the ecological awareness, knowledge and competence required for a commitment inspired by a just and sustainable model of human beings, life, society and relationship with nature.

May the merciful God shower His light on our steps, so that our service and concern for the planet may always be inspired by the joy of being aware that we are responsible custodians of God the Creator's work.

Rome, Saint John Lateran, 7 October 2021

On the joint memorial of the Great Martyrs, Saints Sergius and Bacchus

FRANCIS
