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Audience with members of the International Theological Commission

This morning, the Holy Father Francis received in audience, in the Vatican Apostolic Palace, the members of the International Theological Commission.

The following is the Pope's address to those present at the meeting:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

I thank Cardinal Ladaria for his kind words, and I express to all of you my gratitude for the generosity, skill and passion with which you have undertaken your service in this tenth five-year term of the International Theological Commission.

Thanks to the tools available to us today, you have been able to start work at a distance, overcoming the difficulties still caused by the pandemic. And I also rejoice at the welcome you have given to the three themes to be explored: the first is the indispensable and always fruitful relevance of the Christological faith professed by the Council of Nicaea, 1700 years on from its celebration (325-2025); the second is the examination of some anthropological issues emerging today, of crucial significance for the journey of the human family in the light of the divine plan of salvation; and the third is the investigation – today ever more urgent and decisive – of the theology of creation from a trinitarian perspective, listening to the cry of the poor and of the earth.

In addressing these themes, the International Theological Commission continues its service with renewed commitment. You are required to carry it following the path carved by Vatican Council II, which, sixty years after its initiation, constitutes the sure compass for the journey of the Church, “in Christ like a sacrament or as a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race” (Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen gentium*, 1).

I would like to indicate to you three directions to take, in this historic moment: an arduous moment but one that, through the eyes of faith, is charged with the promise and hope that spring from the Pasch of the crucified and risen Lord.

The first guideline is *creative fidelity to Tradition*. It means taking on with faith and love, and applying with rigour and openness the commitment to exercising the ministry of theology – listening to the Word of God, the *sensus fidei* of the People of God, the Magisterium and the charisms, and in the discernment of the signs of the times – for the progress of the apostolic Tradition, with the assistance of the Holy Spirit, as taught by *Dei Verbum* (cf. no. 8). Indeed, Benedict XVI describes Tradition as the “living river in which the origins are ever present” (*Catechesis*, 26 April 2006); so that it “irrigates various lands, feeds various geographical places, germinating the best of that land, the best of that culture. In this way, the Gospel continues to be incarnated in every corner of the world, in an ever new way” (Apostolic Constitution *Veritatis Gaudium*, 4d).

Tradition, the origin of faith, either grows or dies out. Because, someone used to say – I think it was a musician – that tradition is the guarantee of the future, not a museum piece. It is what makes the Church grow from the ground upwards, like a tree: the roots. Instead, it has also been said that traditionalism is the “dead faith of the living”: when you close yourself off. Tradition – I want to emphasize this – makes us move in this direction – from the ground upwards, vertically. Today there is a great danger, that it will go in another direction – “backwardism”. Going backward. “It has always been done this way”: it is better to go backward, which is safer, rather than going forward with tradition. This horizontal dimension, we have seen, has caused some movements, ecclesial movements, to remain fixed in time, in a backward direction. These are backward-looking. I think – to make a historical reference – of some movements born around the end of the First Vatican Council, seeking to be faithful to tradition, and so today they develop in such a way as to ordain women and other things outside this vertical direction, where it grows, where moral conscience grows, the awareness of faith grows, with that good rule of Vincenzo de Lérins: “ut annis consolidetur, dilatetur tempore, sublimetur aetate”. This is the rule of growth. Instead, “backwardism” leads you to say that “it has always been done this way, it is better to continue like this”, and it does not enable you to grow. On this issue, you theologians, think a little about how to help.

The second guideline concerns the appropriateness, in order to carry out the work of exploring and inculturating the Gospel with relevance and incisiveness, of prudently opening up to the contribution of the various disciplines through consultation with experts, including non-Catholics, as envisaged by the Commission's Statutes (cf. no. 10). It is a matter - I called for this in the Apostolic Constitution *Veritatis gaudium* - of treasuring the “interdisciplinary approach ... even in its ‘weak’ form as a simple multidisciplinary approach that favours a better understanding from several points of view of an object of study” and “all the more so in its ‘strong’ form, as cross-disciplinary, situating and stimulating all disciplines against the backdrop of the Light and Life offered by the Wisdom streaming from God’s Revelation” (no. 4c).

The third guideline, finally, is *collegiality*. This assumes particular relevance and can offer a specific contribution in the context of the synodal path, in which the entire People of God is convoked. This is emphasized in the document drafted in this regard in the previous five-year term, on *Synodality in the life and mission of the Church*. “As is the case with all Christian vocations, the ministry of theologians, as well as being personal, is also both communal and collegial. Ecclesial synodality therefore needs theologians to do theology in a synodal way, developing their capacity to listen to each other, to dialogue, to discern and to harmonize their many and varied approaches and contributions” (no. 75).

Theologians must go further, seeking to go beyond. But I want to distinguish this from the catechist: the catechist must give the correct doctrine, the solid doctrine; not possible novelties, of which some are good, but what is solid: the catechist transmits the solid doctrine. Theologians risk to go further, and it will be the Magisterium that stops them. But the vocation of the theologian is always to venture to go further, because he or she is seeking, and is trying to make theology more explicit. But never give catechesis to children and to the people with new doctrines that are not sure. This distinction is not mine, it is Saint Ignatius of Loyola’s, who I think understood something better than I do!

Therefore, I wish you serene and fruitful work, in this spirit of mutual listening, dialogue and community

discernment, in openness to the voice of the Holy Spirit. The themes entrusted to your attention and expertise are of great importance in this new phase of the proclamation of the Gospel that the Lord calls on us to live as Church in the service of universal fraternity in Christ. Indeed, they invite us to take on fully the outlook of the disciple, who, with ever-new wonder, recognizes that Christ, “by the revelation of the mystery of the Father and His love, fully reveals man to man himself and makes his supreme calling clear” (Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes*, 22); and in this way he teaches that “the new command of love was the basic law of human perfection and hence of the world’s transformation” (*Ibid.*, 38). And I used the word “wonder”. I think it is important, perhaps not so much for researchers, but certainly for theology teachers, to ask oneself if theology lessons inspire wonder in those who attend them. This is a good criterion, it may help.

Dear brothers and sisters, thank you for your valuable service, truly valuable. I bless every one of you, and your collaborators, from my heart. And I ask you, please, to pray for me.

I think it would perhaps be important to increase the number of women, not to follow fashion, but because their thought is different to that of men, and they make theology deeper and also more “flavoursome”. Thank you.
