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Audience with participants in the Conference organized by “La Civiltà Cattolica” with Georgetown University

This morning, in the Vatican Apostolic Palace, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the participants in the conference organized by “La Civiltà Cattolica” with Georgetown University on the theme: “The Global Aesthetics of the Catholic Imagination”.

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

Address of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters, welcome!

I greet and thank Father Antonio Spadaro, the director of *La Civiltà Cattolica*, and Professor John DeGioia, the president of Georgetown University. I am happy to meet you in the course of this Conference that has assembled poets, writers, scriptwriters and directors from various parts of the world to discuss the topic of poetic imagination and Catholic inspiration. In these days you have reflected on the ways that faith challenges contemporary life and in this way seeks to respond to the thirst for meaning. “Meaning” cannot be reduced to a concept, no. It is a total meaning that encompasses poetry, symbol, feelings. True meaning does not come from a dictionary, for that merely tells us the meaning of words, which are instruments for communicating everything that is within us.

I have loved many poets and writers in my life, among whom I think especially of Dante, Dostoevsky and others still. I must also thank my students of the *Colegio de la Inmaculada Concepción* of Santa Fe (Argentina), with whom I shared my reading when I was a young teacher of literature. The words of those authors helped me to understand myself, the world and my people, but also to understand more profoundly the human heart, my personal life of faith, and my pastoral work, even now in my present ministry. Literature is like a thorn in the heart; it moves us to contemplation and sets us on a journey. Poetry is open, it takes you somewhere else. On the basis of this personal experience, I would like to share some considerations on the importance of your

service.

First, let me put it this way: *You are eyes that see and dream*. Not only see, but also dream. We human beings yearn for a new world that we will probably never see fully with our eyes, yet we desire it, we seek it, we dream of it. A Latin American writer once said that we have two eyes: one of flesh and the other of glass. With the eye of flesh, we see what is in front of us; with the eye of glass, we see our dreams. Woe to us if we ever stop dreaming, woe to us!

Artists are those who with their eyes both see and dream. They see in greater depth, they prophesy, they show us a different way of seeing and understanding what is before our eyes. Indeed, poetry does not speak about reality beginning with abstract principles, but by first listening to reality: work, love, death and all the little big things that fill our lives. In this sense, it helps us to “pluck the voice of God even from the voice of time”.^[1] Yours is – to cite Paul Claudel – an “eye that hears”. Art is an antidote to the mindset of calculation and standardization; it is a challenge to our imagination, our way of seeing and understanding reality. The Gospel itself represents a challenge to art; it has a revolutionary “energy” that you are called to express, thanks to your talent, with a word that protests, appeals and cries out. Today the Church has need of your gifts, because she needs to protest, call out and shout.

Let me say something else: *You are also the voice of the “restlessness” of the human spirit*. Indeed, how often we are restless deep within our hearts. You know quite well that artistic inspiration is not only consoling but also disquieting, since it presents both the beautiful and the tragic realities of life. Art is the fertile terrain where the “polar oppositions” of reality^[2] can be expressed with a language that must be creative, flexible and capable of serving as a vehicle for powerful messages and visions. For example, Dostoevsky in the *Brothers Karamazov* tells how a little child, the son of a maidservant, throws a rock and hits the foot of one of the dogs of the master of the estate. The master then sets a pack of dogs on the child, who runs and tries to save himself from their fury, but ends up by being torn to pieces under the satisfied gaze of the master and the frantic eyes of the mother. That image has tremendous artistic and political force; it speaks to us of reality, past and present: of wars, conflicts within society, the selfishness within each of us, to quote just one poetic passage that challenges us.

I am referring not only to social criticism, which we see in that extract, but also to the deep struggles of the soul, the complexity of decision-making, the contradictions of our human existence. There are things in life which at times we can barely grasp, or find adequate words to express. This is your own fertile terrain, your proper field of activity. It is often the place too where we encounter God, in an experience which is always “superabundant”: we cannot force it, instead we sense it and it moves us on; the experience of God is always superabundant, like a continuously overflowing basin. That is the challenge I would like to present to you today: to go beyond set bounds, to be creative without downplaying your own spiritual restlessness and that of humanity. I fear any domestication process, for it takes away creativity, it takes away poetry. Always embrace, poetically, the anxious yearnings present in the human heart, lest they grow cold and fade away. Doing so enables the Spirit to act, to create harmony within the tensions and contradictions of life, to nurture our passion for goodness and to foster the growth of beauty in all its forms, that beauty which finds privileged expression in the arts.

This, then, is your task as poets, storytellers, filmmakers and artists: to give life, flesh and verbal expression to all that humanity experiences, feels, dreams and endures, thus creating harmony and beauty. This “evangelical” task also helps us come to a deeper understanding of God, as the great poet of humanity. Will they criticize you? Fine, bear the burden of criticism, but also strive to learn something from it. Yet never stop being original and creative. Never lose the wonder of being alive.

So, as eyes that dream, as the voice of human disquiet, you have a great responsibility. What is that? It is the third thing that I would like to tell you: *You are among those who shape our imagination*. This is vital. Your work has an impact on the spiritual imagination of the people of our time, especially regarding the figure of Christ. In our day, as I have had occasion to say – “we need the genius of new language, powerful stories and images, writers, poets and artists capable of proclaiming to the world the message of the Gospel, of allowing us to see Jesus”.^[3]

Your work helps us to see Jesus, to heal our imagination of everything that disfigures his face or, worse, attempts to domesticate it. To domesticate the face of Christ, in the sense of trying to define it and enclose it within our preconceptions, is to destroy his image. Yet the Lord always surprises us: Christ is always greater; he is always a mystery that in some way escapes us whenever we try to fit him into a frame and hang him on a wall. He always surprises us; and when we do not sense that the Lord surprises us, something is wrong: our hearts are diminished and closed.

This, then, is the challenge facing the Catholic imagination in our time. It is a challenge entrusted to you: not to “explain” the mystery of Christ, which is ultimately unfathomable, but to enable us to touch him, to feel his closeness, to let us see him as alive and to open our eyes to the beauty of his promises. Because his promises appeal to our imagination: they help us to imagine in a new way our lives, our history and the future of humanity. And here I return to another of Dostoevsky’s masterpieces, short but with all these things inside: the *Notes from the Underground*. Therein is all the greatness of humanity and all the sorrows of humanity, all the sufferings, together. That is the way.

Dear friends, I thank you for your service. Continue to dream, to be restless, to conjure up words and visions that can help us interpret the mystery of human life and guide our societies towards beauty and universal fraternity. Keep helping us to open wide our imagination so that it can transcend our narrow perspectives and be open to the holy mystery of God. Persevere, then, tirelessly and with creativity and courage. I bless you and I pray for you, and I ask you, please, to pray for me. Thank you.

[1] K. RAHNER, *La libertà di parola nella Chiesa. Le proposte del cristianesimo*, Torino, Borla, 1964, 37.

[English: *Free Speech in the Church*, London, Sheed and Ward, 1959.]

[2] R. GUARDINI, *L’opposizione polare. Saggio per una filosofia del concreto vivente*, Brescia, Morcelliana, 1977.

[3] Preface to A. SPADARO, *Una trama divina. Gesù in controcampo*, Venezia, Marsilio, 2023, p. 10.
