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Audience with participants in the International Congress on the future of Theology promoted by the Dicastery for Culture and Education

This morning, in the Vatican Apostolic Palace, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the participants in the International Congress on the future of Theology, “Legacy and Imagination”, promoted by the Dicastery for Culture and Education (9 to 10 December 2024, Pontifical Lateran University).

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

Address of the Holy Father

Dear sisters and brothers, good morning!

I am pleased to see you and to know that such a large number of professors, researchers and deans from all over the world have assembled to reflect on how to appropriate the great theological patrimony of generations past and to imagine its future. I thank the Dicastery for Culture and Education for this initiative. I also thank you, dear theologians, for your work, which is often hidden but necessary indeed. It is my hope that this Congress will mark the first step of a fruitful common venture. I have learned that some academic institutions, theological associations and some of you as individuals have contributed to the travel expenses of others with lesser means. This is very good! Keep moving forward together! When faith and love make us reach down into our pockets, that is not a bad thing! [*laughter*] When they stop first, something is missing.

Let me begin by saying that when I think of theology, *light* comes to mind. Thanks to light, objects emerge from darkness, faces reveal their contours, the shapes and colours of the world finally become visible. Light is beautiful because it makes things appear but without showing itself. Has any of us seen light? No, but we see what light does: it makes things visible. Now, here, we admire this room, we see each other, but we do not see the light, because it is discreet, gentle, humble and, therefore, remains unseen. Light is “kindly”. Theology too is like that: it works quietly and humbly so that the light of Christ and his Gospel can emerge. This observation can point the way for you. Seek God’s grace and persevere in the grace of friendship with Christ, the true light that

came into this world. All theology is born of friendship with Christ and love for his brothers, his sisters and his world: this world, at once magnificent and tragic, filled with overwhelming beauty but also great suffering.

I understand that these days you will be working together on the “where”, the “how” and the “why” of theology. We may wonder: Theology, where are you? With whom are you going? What are you doing for humanity? These days will prove important for addressing these issues and questioning whether the theological heritage of the past can still speak to today’s challenges and help us imagine the future. This is a journey you are called to undertake together as theologians of both sexes. Here I think of an episode in the Second Book of Kings. During the restoration of the Temple in Jerusalem, a text came to light; perhaps it was the first edition of Deuteronomy, which had been lost. A priest and several scholars read it, as did the king. They sensed its importance but did not understand it. So the king decided to give it to a woman, Huldah, who immediately understood its meaning and helped the group of scholars – all men – to grasp it (Cf. *2 Kings* 22:14-20). There are things that only women understand and theology needs their contribution. An all-male theology is an incomplete theology. We still have a long way to go in this direction.

And now let me leave you with a desire and an invitation.

The desire is this: that *theology help to rethink how to think*. Our way of thinking, as we know, also shapes our feelings, our will and our decisions. A wide heart is accompanied by a wide-ranging imagination and thinking, whereas a shriveled, closed and mediocre way of thinking is hardly capable of generating creativity and courage. I think of the manuals of theology we studied, all closed, all “museum pieces”, all “bookish”, without making you think.

The first thing to do, in rethinking how to think, is to move beyond simplification. Reality is complex; challenges are varied; history is full of beauty and at the same time marred by evil. When someone cannot or does not want to deal with its dramatic complexity, then he or she easily tends to simplify. Simplification, however, mutilates reality; it gives rise to empty and unilateral thinking and it generates polarization and fragmentation. That, for example, is precisely what ideologies do. Ideology is a simplification that kills: it kills reality, it kills thought, it kills community. Ideologies flatten reality to a single, shallow idea, which – like parrots – they then repeat obsessively and manipulate.

One antidote to simplification is indicated by the Apostolic Constitution *Veritatis Gaudium*: inter-disciplinary and cross-disciplinary approaches (*Foreward*, 4c). This involves letting theological reflection “ferment” in combination with other disciplines: philosophy, literature, the arts, mathematics, physics, history, law, politics and economics. These disciplines ought to ferment, because, like the senses of the body, each has its own specific function, yet they need each other, for, as the Apostle Paul points out, “If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be?” (*1 Cor* 12:17). This year we celebrate the 750th anniversary of the death of two great theologians: Saint Thomas Aquinas and Saint Bonaventure. Thomas tells us that we do not have a single sense, but multiple and different senses, so that reality does not escape us (*De Anima*, lib. 2, lect. 25). And Bonaventure states that to the extent that one “believes, hopes and loves Jesus Christ” one “regains hearing and sight..., smell..., taste and touch” (*Itinerarium Mentis in Deum*, IV, 3). By helping to rethink how to think, theology will once again shine forth as it deserves, in the Church and in the various cultures, helping each and all in the pursuit of truth.

That is the desire. I would like now to leave you with an invitation, namely, that *theology be accessible to all*. For some time now, in many parts of the world there has been an interest among adults to resume their education, including their academic training. Men and women, especially in middle age and perhaps already holding a degree, desire to deepen their faith, to try something new; often they enroll in university courses. This is a growing phenomenon and it merits interest on the part of society and the Church. Middle age is a special time in life. It is a time when one usually enjoys a certain professional security and emotional stability, but also a time when failures are painfully felt and new questions arise as youthful dreams fade. When this happens, people can feel abandoned or even at an impasse – a mid-life crisis. Then they sense a need to renew their quest, however tentatively, perhaps even with a helping hand. Theology can be that guide on the journey! Please, if any of these people knock at the door of theology, of the schools of theology, may they find it open. Make sure that these

women and men find in theology an open house, a place where they can resume their journey, a place where they can seek, find and seek again. Be prepared for this. Make imaginative adjustments to your programmes of study so that theology can be accessible to all.

Dear sisters and brothers, I have been told that this will not be just another conference where a few people speak and the others listen (or fall asleep!), but that everyone will have a chance to speak and be listened to. Good! Everyone has something to teach us. Even little old ladies, who are wise. I would ask the Dicastery for Culture and Education to let me know the results of your deliberations, for which I already thank you. I bless you from my heart. And I ask you, please, to not to forget to pray for me. This work is enjoyable, but difficult!
