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SECULAR SCIENCES AND THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

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Abstract

Ecclesiastical and secular studies help priests, consecrated men and women, and committed lay people to develop intellectual tools that can serve as paradigms for action and thought. These studies bear in mind that a person's identity is fully revealed to her/him only through the lens of faith. Differing currents of thought in philosophy, theology and pastoral practice can enable the Church to grow and express more clearly the immense riches of God's word. Various approaches are vital to understanding the unity and differences of knowledge today. This demands a highly productive effort to rethink and update ecclesiastical studies in various disciplines within specific frameworks. Today's studies and research must be interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary. Therefore, teachers and scholars from different religious universities and from different scientific fields should interact with responsible freedom and mutual transparency, creating networks of specialized centres to facilitate the understanding of faith from various perspectives.

Keywords: Ecclesiastical Studies, Cross-disciplinary Approach, Interdisciplinary Approach, Secular Science, Teaching Theology, *Veritatis Gaudium*

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Ecclesiastical studies are of importance for clergy and religious. Ecclesiastical studies take up the urgent task of developing intellectual tools that can serve as paradigms for action and thought. There is a vast multidisciplinary system of ecclesiastical studies that the Catholic Church advocates for the suitable formation of priests, consecrated men and women, and committed lay people.¹ This system of studies fosters the interaction of different levels of human knowledge; theological and philosophical, social and scientific. They cannot only be limited to passing on knowledge, professional competence and experience to the men and women of our time who desire to grow as Christians, but also should serve as tools for a deeper understanding of God, and faith. These tools should be marked by ethical and religious pluralism.

The human sciences and philosophy are helpful in interpreting man's central place within society and for enabling him/her to understand himself/herself better in society. There is an increased call for quality scientific research and a gradual improvement in the level of theological studies and related sciences. Before beginning the study of specific ecclesiastical subjects, seminarians should be equipped with humanistic and scientific training as a foundation for ecclesiastical studies. Also, religion always needs to be purified by reason to show its authentically human face. Any breach in this dialogue comes only at an enormous price to human development.²

However, a person's identity is only fully revealed to him/her through faith, and it is precisely from faith that the Church's teaching begins. Differing currents of thought in philosophy, theology and pastoral practice, if open to being reconciled by the Spirit in respect and love, can enable the Church to grow, since all of them help to express more clearly the immense riches of God's word. This task has grown enormously today because of the advance of human learning, its methodology, and the achievements in the knowledge of the world and of human beings. This includes the pure sciences, the human sciences, as well as philosophy, and theology.³

¹ Francis, *Veritatis Gaudium*, apostolic constitution, January 29, 2018, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/es/apost_constitutions/documents/papa-francesco_costituzione-ap_20171208_veritatis-gaudium.html, 3.

² Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, encyclical letter, June 29, 2009, http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate.html, 37.

³ John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*, Encyclical Letter, March 4, 1979, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_04031979_redemptor-hominis.html, 28.

The encyclical *Fides et Ratio* reaffirmed and developed the dialogue between philosophy and divinity, of culture in various regions of the globe and in response to present-day challenges. It emphasizes the positive value of an authentic theology and philosophy for integral human liberation.⁴ Reason always stands in need of being purified by faith and should not consider itself omnipotent. No student of theology or philosophy can be satisfied with the reading and knowledge available, it would make one mediocre, as the field is always open and developing. Being bold in the interpretation of God's action in the world calls the professor to look beyond the time and tried, the material taught in class, to analyses and interpretations that arise from God's action in the world.

Need for Bold Approaches

Ecclesiastical faculties are called to take bold approaches in the education of clergy, religious and committed lay persons today. It necessitates a cultural revolution that considers the various disciplines of education in the world today, and their interaction with theology and philosophy at various levels of understanding and practice. The interactions essentially are between theology, philosophy and the pure sciences, social sciences and biological sciences. Of special importance are the interaction of the pure sciences, social sciences and biological sciences with moral theology. This is because the fields of the pure sciences and bioethics are developing very fast and therefore demand fast responses.

An Ecclesiastical faculty of philosophy must investigate philosophical problems, according to scientific methodology, and search for solutions in the light of natural reason. It must demonstrate consistency with the Christian view of the world, of man, and of God, placing in a proper light the relationship between philosophy and theology.⁵ There cannot be any understanding of theology and philosophy, without clear methodological research studies. Also, moral evaluation and scientific research must go hand in hand. Faith, theology, metaphysics and science should converge in a collaborative effort in the service of humanity. This is because human costs always include economic costs, and economic dysfunctions always involve human costs. "The social sciences and the direction taken by the

⁴John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, encyclical letter, May 1, 1991, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_01051991_centesimus-annus.html, 21.

⁵John Paul II, *Sapientia Christiana*, Apostolic Constitution, April 15, 1979, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_constitutions/documents/hf_jp-ii_apc_15041979_sapientia-christiana.html, 20.

contemporary economy points to the same conclusion.”⁶ Therefore, social sciences and biological sciences must be incorporated into the study of theology and philosophy. These sciences too help the Church derive concrete indications for the mission.

Role of Theologians

Theology, which is rooted and grounded in sacred Scripture and in the living tradition, must accompany cultural and social processes, and particularly difficult transitions.⁷ Therefore, theologians must dedicate their studies and labours to the ever deeper understanding of the interaction between various disciplines with theology, without losing sight of the meaning of theology which is for service in the Church. The Church, in her commitment to evangelization, appreciates and encourages the charism of theologians and their scholarly efforts to advance dialogue with the world of cultures and sciences.⁸ The considerable body of resources and potential at human’s disposal should be guided by a moral understanding and an orientation towards the good of humanity, so that it does not turn against humankind to subjugate him. Special care must be given to the perfecting of moral theology whose obligation is the bearing of fruit in charity for the life of the world.⁹ Theologians today are called to examine truths, faith, doctrine, dogma, and scripture through the lens of the various disciplines available today.

Interdisciplinary Approaches

An academic, formative and research approach in ecclesiastical studies, on the level of both content and method, is vital to understand the unity and differences of knowledge and to respect multiple, correlated and convergent expressions. Today’s research must be interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary. Such approaches are positive and promising when carried out with wisdom and creativity in the light of Revelation. This would require a demanding but highly productive effort to rethink and update the teaching imparted in ecclesiastical studies to integrate various disciplines within specific frameworks.

⁶ Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, encyclical letter, June 29, 2009, http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate.html, 23.

⁷*Veritatis Gaudium*, 59.

⁸John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, 144.

⁹Vatican II, *Optatam Totius*, Decree on Priestly Training, October 28, 1965, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651028_optatam-totius_en.html, 8.

The field of activity is vast and can include politics, society and economics, culture, the sciences and the arts, international life, and the mass media. It also includes other realities such as human love, family, education of children and adolescents, professional work, and suffering.¹⁰ Just as *Optatam Totius* called for a faithful and creative review of ecclesiastical studies and the Apostolic Constitution *Sapientia Christiana* consolidated the progress made in this crucial area of the Church's mission in continuity with the past. *Veritatis Gaudium* states that what is essential is to restore the unity of content, perspective, and aim of the science/s being taught, based on the Word of God and its culmination in Christ Jesus. These interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary approaches to understand the Church should necessarily come out of the various specializations in Catholic universities.¹¹

The Task of the University Professor

The university professor should be one who is proven in the field of sciences and religion, and who demonstrates to learners a continuous intellectual humility and a strong spirit of charity.¹² Scholars from different ecclesiastical universities and from different scientific fields should interact with responsible freedom and mutual transparency, creating networks of specialized centres to facilitate the understanding of faith from various perspectives.

The many professors who teach the sciences like anthropology, palaeontology, history, sociology, psychology, technology, medicine, chemistry, biology, bioethics, philosophy and so on need to bear witness to how various disciplines address integration in an irrefutable way.¹³ These sciences have remedied countless evils which used to harm and limit human beings and at the same time have added new evils. The advances and progress in the fields of medicine, engineering, and communications need to be appreciated. The work of the many scientists and engineers who have provided alternatives to make development sustainable also needs to be

¹⁰ Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, apostolic exhortation, December 8, 1975, http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi.html, 29.

¹¹ Vatican II, *Gravissimum Educationis*, conciliar declaration, October 28, 1965, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_gravissimum-educationis_en.html, 5.

¹² Vatican II, *Gravissimum Educationis*, p. 6

¹³ John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens*, September 14, 1981, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_14091981_laborem-exercens.html, 5.

appreciated greatly.¹⁴ With all these developments in the sciences which offer solutions to the great issues and knowledge, what also needs to move forward in a comparable manner are genuine ethical horizons to which one can appeal.

If care is not taken, life will gradually become “a surrender to situations conditioned by technology, itself viewed as the principal key to the meaning of existence. In the concrete situation confronting us, there are several symptoms which point to what is wrong, such as environmental degradation, anxiety, a loss of the purpose of life and of community living.”¹⁵ The respect owed by faith to reason calls for close attention to what the biological sciences, through research uninfluenced by economic interests, can teach us about biological structures, their possibilities, and their mutations. Science and religion, with their distinctive approaches to understanding reality, needs to enter an intense dialogue fruitful for both.¹⁶

Account should also be taken of the more recent progress of the sciences. The net result should be that the students, correctly understanding the characteristics of the contemporary mind, be duly prepared for dialogue with men of their time.¹⁷ The world of the new age, the world of space flights, the world of the previously unattained conquests of science and technology still awaits with eager longing the revealing of the sons of God.¹⁸ The specialists in the various disciplines, those who represent the natural sciences and letters, doctors, jurists, artists and technicians, teachers at various levels and with different specializations, have their own part to play in Christ’s prophetic mission and service of divine truth. There needs to be an honest attitude towards truth, whatever field it may belong to, while at the same time educating those who do not understand what truth is and teaching them to mature in love and justice.

The New and the Old

Vatican II has affirmed the legitimacy of culture and of the sciences. The danger is resulting secularism where there is no need for recourse to God, who thus becomes superfluous and an

¹⁴Francis, *Laudato Si*, encyclical letter, 24 May 2015, <https://www.google.com/search?q=laudato%20si>, 30.

¹⁵Francis, *Laudato Si*, 33.

¹⁶Francis, *Laudato Si*, 18.

¹⁷ Vatican II, *Optatam Totius*, 7.

¹⁸John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*, encyclical letter, March 4, 1979, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_04031979_redemptor-hominis.html, 9.

encumbrance. Humans, therefore end up by doing without God and even by denying Him.¹⁹ The new sciences and new discoveries pose new problems that involve the sacred disciplines and demand answers.

While carrying out their primary duty of attaining through theological research a deeper grasp of revealed truth, those engaged in the sacred sciences should therefore maintain contact with scholars of other disciplines, whether these are believers or not, and should try to evaluate and interpret the latter's affirmations and judge them in the light of revealed truth.²⁰

The theologian who is satisfied with his/her complete and conclusive thought is mediocre. The good theologian and philosopher addresses truth in ways that are open. These truths may not be complete from a particular discipline, but always open to the inspiration of God.²¹

Conclusion

In all countries, universities constitute the main centres of scientific research for the advancement of knowledge and of society. They play a decisive role in economic, social and cultural development, especially in a time like our own, marked by rapid, constant and far-reaching changes in the fields of science and technology. Universities support the Church's mission of proclaiming the good news of Christ to all, in dialogue with the different sciences and in the service of a deeper understanding and application of truth in the life of individuals and society.²² The scientific method is used which corresponds to the needs of the individual sciences and up-to-date didactic and teaching methods should be applied in an appropriate way, to bring about the personal involvement of the students and their active participation in their studies. The promotion of the humanities, which has a close connection with the theological disciplines or with the work of evangelization, is necessary and important.

¹⁹Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 21.

²⁰John Paul II, *Sapientia Christiana*, 3.

²¹Francis, *Veritatis Gaudium*, 4.

²²Francis, *Veritatis Gaudium*, 7.