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Audience with the Members of the International Theological Commission

This morning, in the Vatican Apostolic Palace, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the members of the International Theological Commission on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of its founding.

The following is the Holy Father's address to those present:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

I am pleased to meet you and I thank your president, Cardinal Ladaria, for the words he addressed to me on your behalf. You have reached the end of your ninth five-year period of work, but above all to an important anniversary, the fiftieth anniversary of the Commission: fifty years of service to the Church. I congratulate you on this Jubilee, which allows you to make grateful memory of your history.

As Benedict XVI recalled in his message, the Commission was inaugurated by Saint Paul VI as a fruit of the Second Vatican Council, to create a new bridge between theology and the Magisterium. From the beginning, eminent theologians have been members, contributing effectively to this end. This is borne out by the voluminous body of documents published: twenty-nine texts, points of reference for formation and theological reflection. In the last five years you have produced two relevant texts. The first offers a theological clarification on synodality in the life and mission of the Church. You have shown how the practice of synodality, traditional but always to be renewed, is the implementation, in the history of the People of God on their journey, of the Church as a mystery of communion, in the image of Trinitarian communion. As you know, this theme is very close to my heart: synodality is a style, it is walking together, and it is what the Lord expects of the Church in the third millennium. And for this I thank you for your document, because today one thinks that synodality is taking each other by the hand and setting out on a journey, celebrating with the young, or carrying out an opinion poll: "what do you think about the priesthood for women?". That is mostly what is done, isn't it? Synodality is an ecclesial journey that has a soul, which is the Holy Spirit. Without the Holy Spirit there is no synodality. And you

have done a good job to help in this. Thank you.

The second document proposes a discernment on the different interpretations of *religious freedom* today. If on the one hand there are those who still prevent it or openly oppose it, depriving the human being of an incomparable right, on the other hand, as you have stressed, the idea of an “ethically neutral” State circulates, which, in an ambiguous fluidity, also risks leading to an unjust marginalization of religions from civil life to the detriment of the common good. This is again the Enlightenment legacy in its new edition. Sincere respect for religious freedom, cultivated in a fruitful dialogue between the State and religions, and between the religions themselves, is instead a great contribution to the good of all and to peace. In addition to these two areas, you have reflected on *sacramentality* as the constitutive structure of the encounter between God and man, highlighting the need to overcome various forms of dissociation between faith and sacramental life.

The work and the way in which it was carried out correspond to the intention that fifty years ago presided over the creation of the Commission. At the suggestion of the first assembly of the Synod of Bishops, Saint Paul VI wanted to extend the fruitful collaboration between the Magisterium and theologians that had marked the Council meetings. He also wanted the diversity of cultures and ecclesial experiences to enrich the mission entrusted by the Holy See to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Indeed, as theologians from various backgrounds and latitudes, you are mediators between faith and cultures, and in this way you take part in the essential mission of the Church: evangelization. You have a mission to generate the Gospel: you are called to bring the Gospel to light. Indeed, you are listening to what the Spirit is saying today to the Churches in different cultures in order to bring to light ever new aspects of the inexhaustible mystery of Christ, “in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (*Col 2: 3*). And then help the first steps of the Gospel: prepare its ways, translating the faith for the man of today, so that each one can feel closer to and embraced by the Church, taken by the hand where he is, and accompanied to taste the sweetness of *kerygma* and its timeless novelty. Theology is called to this: it is not a professorial disquisition on life, but the incarnation of faith in life.

After fifty years of intense work there is still a long way to go, but in doing so the Commission will fulfil its vocation of also being a model and stimulus for those – laity and clergy, men and women – who wish to devote themselves to theology. Because only a beautiful theology, which has the breath of the Gospel and is not content to be merely functional, attracts. And to do theology well one must never forget its two constitutive dimensions. The first is *spiritual life*: only in humble and constant prayer, in openness to the Spirit, can one understand and translate the Word and do the will of the Father. Theology is born and grows on its knees! The second dimension is *ecclesial life*: to feel that one is in the Church and with the Church, in accordance with the formula of Saint Albert the Great: “*In dulcedine societatis, quaerere veritatem*” (in the sweetness of fraternity, seek the truth). Theology is not done as individuals, but in the community, at the service of all, to spread the good flavour of the Gospel to the brothers and sisters of our time, always with gentleness and respect.

And I would like to reaffirm, finally, something that I have said to you: the theologian must go ahead, must study what goes beyond; he must also face things that are not clear and risk in discussion. Among theologians, though. But he must give to the People of God the solid substance of faith, not feed the People of God with disputed questions. May the dimension of relativism, let’s say, which will always be in discussion, remain between theologians – it is your vocation – but never take this to the people, because then the people lose their way and lose their faith. To the people, always the solid substance that feeds faith.

Fifty years: I reiterate my gratitude for what you do and for how you do it, and I hope that, with the help of Our Lady, Seat of Wisdom, you will continue your mission with joy. I give you my blessing and ask you to continue to pray for me. Thank you.
