SALA STAMPA DELLA SANTA SEDE
BOLLETTINO

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BIURO PRASOWE STOLICY APOSTOLSKIEJ دار الصحافة التابعة للكرسي الرسولي

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Audience with Members of the Italian Theological Association

At 11.50 this morning, in the Clementine Hall of the Vatican Apostolic Palace, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the members of the Italian Theological Association on the fiftieth anniversary of its founding.

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

Address of the Holy Father

I welcome you and thank your President for his words. In these days we are immersed in the joyful contemplation of the mystery of our God, who has become so involved with and committed to our poor humanity that He sent His Son to take in Him our fragile flesh. Christian theological thought cannot but begin, always and unceasingly, from here, in a reflection that will never exhaust the living source of divine Love, which allowed itself to be touched, looked at and savoured in the crib of Bethlehem.

In 2017 the Italian Theological Association celebrates half a century since its founding. I am pleased to join you in giving thanks to the Lord for those who had the courage, fifty years ago, to take the initiative to give life to the Italian Theological Association; for those who have joined in this time, offering their presence, their intelligence and the effort of a free and responsible reflection; and above all for the contribution that your Association has given to the theological development and to the life of the Church, with a research that has always sought – with the critical effort proper to it – to be in harmony with the fundamental stages and challenges of Italian ecclesial life.

It is noteworthy that the Italian Theological Association was born, as stated in the first article of your Statute, "in the spirit of service and communion indicated by the Vatican Ecumenical Council II". The Church must always refer to that event, with which it began "a new stage of evangelization" (Bull *Misericordiae vultus*, 4) and with which it assumed the responsibility of proclaiming the Gospel in a new way, more consonant with a deeply changed world and culture. It is evident that this effort requires the whole Church, and theologians in particular, to receive it the name of "creative fidelity": in the awareness that in these fifty years there have been further

changes, and in the confidence that the Gospel can continue to touch today's women and men too. Therefore I ask you to continue to remain faithful and anchored in your theological work, in the Council and in the capacity the Church has shown for being made fruitful by the perennial novelty of the Gospel of Christ; as you have done, however, throughout these decades, as evidenced by the themes you have chosen and discussed in the Congresses and refresher courses, as well as the recent powerful commentary work on all the Vatican II documents.

In particular, the fact that you have felt and continue to feel the need to "do theology together", as an association, which today includes more than 330 theologians, it is a clear fruit of the Council and a wealth not to be squandered. This aspect is a matter of style, which already expresses something essential to the Truth theology serves. In fact, we can not think of serving the Truth of a God Who is Love, eternal communion of the Father, of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and Whose salvific plan is that of the communion of men with Him and among them, if we do so in an individualistic or particularistic way, or worse, with a competitive logic. The research of theologians can only be personal; but by people immersed in the broadest theological community possible, of which they feel they are truly part, connected by bonds of solidarity and also of authentic friendship. This is not an ancillary aspect of the theological ministry!

It is a ministry of which today there continues to be a great need in the Church. It is indeed true that to be authentic believers it is not necessary to have pursued academic courses in theology. There is a sense of the reality of faith that belongs to all the people of God, even those who do not have particular intellectual means to express it, and who ask to be intercepted and listened to – I think of the famous infallible *in credendo*: we must go there often – and there are also very simple people who know how to sharpen the "eyes of faith". It is in this living faith of the holy faithful people of God that every theologian must feel immersed and by which he must also know how to be sustained, carried and embraced. This does not diminish, however, the need there always is for that specific theological work by which, as the holy doctor Bonaventura said, the *credibile ut intelligibile* can be reached, to what is believed as it is understood. It is a requirement of the full humanity of the believers themselves, first of all, because our belief is fully human and does not escape our thirst for knowledge and understanding, as deep and extensive as possible, of what we believe. And it is a requirement of the communication of faith, so that it always appears and everywhere that not only does it not mutilate what is human, but rather always presents itself as an appeal to the freedom of people.

It is above all the desire and the perspective of an outbound, missionary Church that the theological ministry appears, at this historic juncture, particularly important and urgent. Indeed, a Church that rethinks herself in this way is concerned, as I said in *Evangelii Gaudium*, with making evident to women and men what is the centre and fundamental nucleus of the Gospel, or rather "the beauty of the saving love of God made manifest in Jesus Christ Who died and rose from the dead" (36). Such an essential task – in the age of complexity and of an unprecedented scientific and technological development and in a culture permeated, in the past, by Christianity but in which today distorted visions of the very heart of the Gospel may spread – indeed renders major theological work indispensable. So that the Church may continue to make the centre of the Gospel heard by women and men today, so that the Gospel truly reach people in their singularity and permeate society in all its dimensions, the task of theology is essential today, with its effort to rethink the great themes of Christian faith within a profoundly changed culture.

There is a need for a theology that helps all Christians to announce and to demonstrate, above all, the saving face of God, the merciful God, especially in the presence of some unprecedented challenges that involve humanity today: such as the ecological crisis; the development of neurosciences and techniques that may modify man; growing social inequalities or the migrations of entire peoples; both theoretical and practical relativism. And there is a need, therefore, for a theology that, as in the best tradition of the Italian Theological Association, is made up of Christians who do not think and speak only among themselves, but who know how to be of service to the different Churches and to the Church; and who also take on the task of rethinking the Church in order that she conform to the Gospel she must announce.

I am happy to know that very often, in different ways, even recently, you have already done this: explicitly facing the theme of the proclamation of the Gospel and of the *forma Ecclesiae*, of synodality, of the ecclesial presence in the context of secularism and democracy, of the power of the Church. I therefore hope that your research can

be fruitful for and enrich the whole people of God. And I would like to add some thoughts that came to me while you were speaking. Do not lose the ability for wonder; to practise theology in wonder. The amazement that Christ brings us, the encounter with Christ. It is like the air in which our reflection will be more fruitful. And I repeat another thing I have said before: the theologian is one who studies, thinks and reflects, but does so on his knees. Practise theology on your knees, like the great Fathers. The great Fathers who thought, prayed, adored, praised: the strong theology that is the foundation of all Christian theological development. And I will also repeat a third thing I said here, but I want to repeat it because it is important: to practise theology in the Church, that is, within the holy faithful people of God, who have – I will say it with a non-theological term – that has the “nose” of faith. I remember once in a confession the dialogue I had with an elderly Portuguese woman who accused herself of sins that did not exist, but she was such a strong believer! And I asked her a few questions and she answered well; and at the end I felt like telling her: “But, tell me, madam: did you study at the Gregoriana?”. She was really a simple, simple woman, but she had the “nose”, she had the *sensus fidei*, which cannot be wrong in faith. This is what Vatican II resumes.

I bless you from the heart and, please, do not forget to pray for me.