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Audience with formators of the Archiepiscopal Seminary of Milan on the 150th anniversary of the journal “La Scuola Cattolica”

Today, in the Vatican Apostolic Palace, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the formators of the Archiepiscopal Seminary of Milan on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of the journal “La Scuola Cattolica”.

The following is the discourse the Pope handed to them during the course of the audience:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning and welcome!

I welcome you on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of the journal *La Scuola Cattolica*, published by the Archiepiscopal Seminary of Milan. I greet you, superiors and formators, and, through you, also the students and employees of the Seminary, as well as the editors and collaborators of the magazine. I thank the rector for his words to me.

This anniversary invites us to question the task to which a school of theology is called today and, in particular, the role of a journal such as yours. I like to imagine that this journal is a bit like a shop window, where a craftsman displays his work and one can admire his creativity. What has matured in the workshops of academic classrooms, in the patient exercise of research and reflection, of confrontation and dialogue, deserves to be shared and made accessible to others. With this in mind, I would like to say three things that I consider important.

1. *Theology is service to the living faith of the Church.* Many people think that the only use of the theological sciences is related to the formation of future priests, men and women religious and, at most, pastoral workers and teachers of religion. Perhaps also in the ecclesial community, not much is expected of theology and the ecclesiastical sciences; at times it seems that even those who are responsible, ministers and pastoral workers

do not consider necessary that lively exercise of the intelligence of the believer, which is instead a valuable service to the living faith of the Church.

Indeed, the community needs the work of those who attempt to interpret the faith, to translate and retranslate it, to make it comprehensible, to expound it in new words: a work that needs to be carried out over and over again, in every generation. The Church encourages and supports this commitment, the effort to redefine the content of the faith in every age, in the dynamism of tradition. And that is why theological language must always be alive, dynamic; it cannot help but evolve and must take care to make itself understood. Sometimes the sermons or catecheses we listen to are largely made up of moralisms, not “theological” enough, that is, not sufficiently capable of speaking to us about God and of answering the questions on meaning that accompany people's lives, and that we often do not have the courage to formulate openly.

One of the greatest ills of our time is in fact the loss of meaning, and theology, today more than ever, has a great responsibility to stimulate and guide the search, to illuminate the path. Let us always ask ourselves how it is possible to communicate the truths of faith today, taking into account linguistic, social and cultural changes, competently using the means of communication, without ever watering down, weakening or “virtualizing” the content to be transmitted. When we speak or write, let us always keep in mind the link between faith and life, and be careful not to slip into self-referentiality. You in particular, trainers and teachers, in your service to the truth, are required to cherish and communicate the joy of faith in the Lord Jesus, and also a healthy restlessness, that tremor of the heart before the mystery of God. And we will know how to accompany others in their search the more we experience this joy and this restlessness. That is, the more we are “disciples”.

2. *A theology capable of forming experts in humanity and proximity.* The renewal and the future of vocations is possible only if there are *well formed* priests, deacons, consecrated persons and laypersons. Each particular vocation is born, grows and develops in the heart of the Church, and those who are “called” are not mushrooms that sprout up suddenly. The hands of the Lord, which model these “clay pots”, work through the patient care of formators and accompaniers; they are entrusted with the delicate, expert and competent service of looking after the birth, accompaniment and discernment of vocations, in a process that requires great docility and confidence.

Every person is an immense mystery and carries within their own family, personal, human and spiritual history. Sexuality, affections and relations are dimensions of the person to be considered and understood, both by the Church and by science, also in relation to socio-cultural challenges and changes. An open attitude and good witness permit the educator to “encounter” all the personality of the one who is called, involving their intelligence, feelings, heart, dreams and aspirations.

When one discerns whether or not a person may undertake a vocational journey, it is necessary to scrutinize and evaluate them integrally: to consider their way of living affections, relationships, spaces, roles, and responsibilities, as well as their frailties, their fears and their imbalances. The entire process should activate processes aimed at forming mature priests and consecrated persons, *experts in humanity and proximity*, and not officials of the sacred. The superiors and seminary formators, accompaniers and the people in formation are called upon to grow daily towards fullness in Christ (cf. *Eph* 4: 13), so that, through the witness of each one, the charity of Christ and the same care of the Church for all, especially the least and the excluded, are made manifest.

A good formator expresses his own service in an attitude we can call “*diakonia of truth*”, because at play is the very existence of people, who often live without sure certainties, without shared guidance, under the relentless conditioning of information, news and messages that are very often contradictory, which modify the perception of reality, leading towards individualism and indifferentism.

Seminarians and young people in formation must be able to learn more from your life than from your words; they must be able to learn docility from your obedience, industriousness from your devotion, generosity with the poor from your sobriety and availability, paternity from your chaste and non-possessive affection. We are consecrated to serve the People of God, to tend to the wounds of others, starting from the poorest. Suitability for the ministry is linked to availability, joyful and freely given, to others. The world needs priests who are able to communicate

the goodness of the Lord to those who have experienced sin and failure, priests who are experts in humanity, pastors willing to share in the joys and hardships of their brothers, men who know how to listen to the cry of those who suffer (cf. *Address to the Community of the Pontifical Pius XI Regional Seminary of Le Marche*, 10 June 2021).

3. *Theology at the service of evangelization.* Dear brothers, at the heart of your ecclesial service is evangelization, which is never proselytism, but attraction to Christ, favouring the encounter with he who changes your life, who makes you happy and who every day makes you a new creature and a new visible sign of his love. All men and women have the right to receive the Gospel, and Christians have the duty to announce it without excluding anyone. All the People of God, pilgrim and evangelizer, announce the Gospel because, first of all, they are people journeying towards God (cf. Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, 14; 111). And in this journey, one cannot avoid *dialogue* with the world, with cultures and religions. Dialogue is a form of welcome, and the theology that evangelizes is a theology that is nourished by dialogue and welcome. Dialogue and the living memory of the witness of love and peace of Jesus Christ are the ways to travel to build together a future of justice, fraternity, and peace for the entire human family.

Let us remember always that it is the *Holy Spirit* who introduces us to the Mystery and gives impetus to the mission of the Church. Therefore, the “robe” of the theologian is that of the *spiritual man*, humble of heart, open to the infinite novelties of the Spirit and close to the wounds of poor, rejected and suffering humanity. Without humility the Spirit flees, without humility there is no compassion, and a theology without compassion and mercy is reduced to a sterile discourse on God; beautiful perhaps, but empty, soulless, unable to serve his wish to be incarnated, to be present, to speak to the heart. Because the fullness of truth – to which the Spirit leads – is not such if it is not incarnate.

Indeed, teaching and studying theology means living on a frontier, the frontier where the Gospel meets the real needs of people. Good theologians, like good pastors, have the odour of the people and the street and, by their reflection, pour oil and wine on the wounds of many. Neither the Church nor the world needs an abstract theology, but rather a reflection capable of accompanying cultural and social processes, especially difficult transitions, while also taking charge of conflicts. We must guard against a theology that is spent in academic dispute or that looks at humanity from its ivory tower (cf. *Letter to the Grand Chancellor of the Pontificia Universidad Católica Argentina*, 3 March 2015).

The Gospel does not fail to remind us that salt can lose its taste. And if we live more or less quietly in the midst of the world, without a healthy restlessness, this can mean that we have become numb (cf. H. de Lubac, *Meditation on the Church: Opera Omnia*, vol. 8, Milan 1993, 166). This is why we need a living theology, which gives “flavour” as well as “knowledge”, which is the basis of a serious ecclesial dialogue, of a synodal discernment, to be organized and practiced in local communities, for a re-launch of the faith in today's cultural transformations. Let a theology that serves the good life be the high road of your ecclesial commitment, worthy of being showcased among the beautiful things in your journal. A theology capable of dialogue with the world, with culture, attentive to the problems of the times and faithful to the Church's evangelizing mission and faithful also to its roots in the Seminary of Milan, called to be a place of life, discernment and formation.

Dear brothers, I hope that these reflections may help you to cultivate your vocation of service to the faith, to the Church, to the world. I thank you and wish you every success in your work. I heartily bless you and the entire community; and I ask you, please, to pray for me.
