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Video Message of the Holy Father for the Opening of the Academic Year 2024-2025 of the “Saint John the Evangelist” Pontifical Theological Faculty of Sicily in Palermo

The following is the text of the video message sent by the Holy Father Francis on the occasion of the opening of the Academic Year 2024-2025 of the “Saint John the Evangelist” Pontifical Theological Faculty of Sicily in Palermo:

Video Message of the Holy Father

I am pleased to speak at the opening of your new Academic Year 2024-2025. The full prolusion will be handed out later. I am ideally following in the footsteps of Saint John Paul II, who visited the Faculty of Sicily on 21 November 1982, on the occasion of his pastoral visit to Belice and Palermo.

Your Faculty, born with a strong ecclesiological vocation, is called *from within history* and to listen to the *intuition of faith* that the people of God possess, to be active in facing those challenges that the Mediterranean poses to theology: ecumenical dialogue with the East, interreligious dialogue with Islam and Judaism, the defence of human dignity in the *Mare nostrum*, often rendered *monstrum* by the logic of death, the cultural and social force of popular religiosity, or “popular piety”, as Saint Paul VI said, the resource of literature for the cultural redemption of the people, and above all, the challenges of liberation that come from the cry of the victims of the Mafia.

It is a matter of learning the *craft of theology* as a weaving of evangelical nets of salvation, right along the Sicilian shores of the Mediterranean; it is a patient task that tries to narrate the Master’s love, capable of inspiring the wonder of encounter and friendship. Wonder, which is precisely the nerve that gives rise to faith. Imagine, then, that moment when the Master stopped, along the Sea of Galilee, to contemplate those fishermen tidying up their nets (*Mt 4:18-22*): what prompted him to call them around him, to surround himself with their humanity, to send them out as fishers of men? And why do nets, in Jesus’ mind, in his way of thinking, become a sign and instrument of salvation? This is the task of theology from the Mediterranean: *to weave nets of salvation*, evangelical nets faithful to Jesus’ way of thinking and loving, built with the threads of grace and interwoven with

God's mercy, with which the Church can continue to be, also in the Mediterranean, a sign and instrument of salvation for the human race (cf. *Lumen gentium*, 2). And this is the way in which theology can love, can become charity.

It is a genuine *analogia crucis*: "From the height of the cross the theologian is provoked to look at human reality with the eyes of he who stooped to the point of becoming the smallest among men, renouncing his divine prerogative and assuming the condition of the servant".¹ I like to think, therefore, of a *leap of proximity*, that completes the leap of faith, so as not to be an observer of history, but a weaver of nets who knows how to tie the knots of Christ's humanity and his Gospel around himself.

Brothers, sisters, nets are woven and mended while sitting on the ground, often while kneeling. Let us not forget that this is the best position to love the Lord: on our knees. It means taking on the style of the washing of the feet, and that of the good Samaritan who bends down before the wounds of the victim who fell into the hands of robbers. We can imagine the hands of the theologians like this: hands that tell of God's embrace, hands that offer tenderness - let us not forget this word, tenderness, which is God's style - hands that lift up those who have fallen and guide them to hope. And let us not forget that only once is it permissible to look down on a person: only to help them rise up.

Theology thus requires and includes witness up to the sacrifice of life, the giving of self through martyrdom. This land knows great witnesses and martyrs, from Fr. Pino Puglisi to the judge Rosario Livatino, without forgetting the magistrates Paolo Borsellino and Giovanni Falcone, and many other servants of the State. They are the true teachers of justice, who invite theology to contribute, with the words of the Gospel, to the cultural redemption of a territory still dramatically marked by the scourge of the Mafia. Let us not forget this. To be a theologian in the Mediterranean therefore means remembering that the proclamation of the Gospel passes through commitment to the promotion of justice, the overcoming of inequalities and the defence of innocent victims, so that the Gospel of life may always shine and evil is rejected in all its forms.

There is a need for a theology of "compromise", which immerses itself in history and makes Christ's charity shine in it. In this regard, I would like the Faculty to undertake processes of theological and social research on forgiveness, at the crossroads of legality, resistance and holiness. Begin with creativity a genuine *theological and social laboratory of forgiveness*, for a true revolution of justice!

And this, I like to say, is the vocation of your island. However, it is also the place where cultures, histories, and different faces meet in harmony, and commit theology to fostering dialogue with the sister Churches of the East that also overlook the Mediterranean. The route of ecumenical and interreligious dialogue, difficult though it may be, is that of re-proposing and supporting, through experiences of encounter, experiences also of exchange and collaboration, listening jointly to the Holy Spirit. It is the legacy of many martyrs of dialogue in the Mediterranean. Therefore, you are entrusted with the mission of establishing yourselves as a *laboratory of a theology of ecumenical dialogue and a theology of religions, leading to a theology of interreligious dialogue*. Always the word dialogue, dialogue, openness.

Finally, in this context the exchange between theology and literature appears fruitful; it is a note that has characterized the research of your Theological Faculty in these years, especially in the choice to acknowledge that intuition of faith that belongs to the experience of the people. Literature often narrates this, and enables a reading of the Sicilian and Mediterranean reality, helping you all to rediscover your identity in dialogue and making you capable of removing your sandals "before the sacred ground of the other (cf. *Ex 3:5*)" (*Evangelii gaudium*, 169). On the other hand, how could one understand multifaceted Sicilian thought without Pirandello, Verga, Sciascia, and without the existential themes on which they wrote memorable pages?

Dear brothers and sisters, the Mediterranean needs a living theology, one that cultivates its contextual dimension to the full, becoming an appeal to all. Cultivate this theology compromised with history, just as God in the flesh of the Son compromised with our tears and hopes. Cultivate a theology that, from the height of the cross and on its knees before its neighbour, uses humble, sober and radical words, to help everyone arrive at compassion; and words that teach us to make networks of salvation and love, to generate a new history, rooted

in the history of the people.

I embrace you and I ask you, please, to pray for me. Thank you.

[1] M. Naro, *Protagonista è l'abbraccio. La piccola teologia di Francesco*.
