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Audience with participants in the first Plenary Assembly of the Dicastery for Culture and Education

This morning, in the Vatican Apostolic Palace, Pope Francis received in audience the participants in the first Plenary Assembly of the Dicastery for Culture and Education, on the theme: “Passing to the other shore” (19 to 21 November 2024).

The following is the address delivered by the Holy Father to those present during the meeting:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear Cardinal Prefect,

Dear Superiors of the Dicastery,

Your Eminences, Your Excellencies,

Dear brothers and sisters!

Our meeting takes place as you celebrate the first Plenary Assembly of the Dicastery for Culture and Education. I take this opportunity to reaffirm the importance of the risk involved in combining the spheres of *culture* and *education*. When, in the Apostolic Constitution *Praedicate Evangelium*, I decided to amalgamate the offices of the Holy See concerned respectively with education and with culture, it was not so much for the sake of achieving greater economic efficiency as much as to exploit the potential for dialogue, interaction and innovation in a way that could enhance the effectiveness of both.

Our world does not need automatons that simply repeat what has already been said and done; it needs new choreographers, new interpreters of our rich human resources, new social poets. Educational models that aim merely to produce “results” are useless in the absence of a cultural vision capable of forming persons prepared

to help the world change gears by eliminating inequality, endemic poverty and exclusion. The pathologies of today's world must not be regarded with resignation, much less complacency, as being inevitable. Schools, universities and cultural centres should instead be places that teach how to yearn, desire and dream, since, as the Second Letter of Peter reminds us, "we await new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells" (3:13).

What "we await" should be the primary guide to our discernment in developing our cultural and educational programmes. The key question for our institutions is this: What are we really "awaiting"? Perhaps, if we are honest, our answer may prove lacking: success in the eyes of the world, the prestige of a higher ranking or simply self-preservation. If those are our goals, they are surely not enough!

Brothers and sisters, God is allowing us the chance to do something quite different. I am reminded of one of Emily Dickinson's poems:

As if I asked a common Alms,
And in my wondering hand
A Stranger pressed a Kingdom,
And I, bewildered, stand -
As if I asked the Orient
Had it for me a Morn -
And it should lift its purple Dikes,
And shatter Me with Dawn![1]

"Shatter me with Dawn": an eloquent image to describe what I am saying.

In this sense, I would urge you to see your mission in the areas of education and culture as calling upon others to broaden their horizons, to overflow with inner vitality, to make space for new possibilities and, in sharing the gifts they have received, to make them abound all the more. Our task as educators and artists is to tell others: "Be fruitful! Take risks!"

We have no reason for fear. First, because Christ is our guide and travelling companion. Secondly, because we are guardians of a cultural and educational heritage that is greater than ourselves. We are heirs to the profound thought of Augustine. We are heirs to the poetry of Ephraim the Syrian. We are heirs to the medieval cathedral schools and the founders of the first universities. Heirs to Thomas Aquinas and Edith Stein, and to those who commissioned the works of Fra Angelico and Mozart, and more recently of Mark Rothko and Olivier Messiaen. We are heirs to the innumerable artists inspired by the mysteries of Christ. Heirs to great scientists and thinkers like Blaise Pascal. In a word, heirs to the passion for education and culture of countless saints and holy men and women.

Surrounded by this multitude of witnesses, let us cast off the burden of pessimism – which is not the mark of a Christian – and work together to set humanity free from the encircling gloom of nihilism, which is perhaps the most dangerous malady of contemporary culture, since it threatens to "cancel" hope. Let us not forget that hope does not disappoint, it is a source of strength. Think of its image, the anchor. Hope does not disappoint.

If I may share a secret, at times I feel the need to cry out to the people of our time: "Don't forget about hope!" Not as in the story of Turandot: thinking that hope always disappoints. I am counting on you to spread this plea during the Jubilee Year that is almost upon us. So much needs to be done! It is time to roll up our sleeves and get started.

Today, the world has the highest number of students in history. The figures are encouraging, with some 110 million children who complete primary education. Yet troubling inequalities continue to exist. Indeed, some 250 million children and adolescents do not attend school. We are morally obliged to change this situation. For cultural genocide is not only about the destruction of a people's heritage; cultural genocide also takes place when children are robbed of their future by our failure to provide the conditions necessary for them to become all

that they can be. As when we see in so many places children rummaging through refuse for things to sell so as to have something to eat. Let us think of the future of humanity when we look at these children.

In his book *Wind, Sand and Stars*, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry walks through the third class carriages of a train full of refugee families. He stops to look at them. And he writes that he is tormented by an open wound: “It is the sight, a little bit in all these people, of Mozart murdered”. Ours is an immense, immense responsibility! To educate is to dare to support the growth of others, as if to say, with Augustine: *Volo ut sis*, “I want you to be”. That is education.

A particularly important element in this time of epochal change is that of scientific development and technological innovation. We can hardly ignore the rapid advances made in such areas as the digital transition and artificial intelligence, with all their implications and the crucial questions they raise. I would ask the research centres of our universities to study the present “technological revolution” in order to shed light on its benefits and dangers.

This being said, I repeat: rather than yielding to fear, we should keep in mind that complex cultural transitions often prove to be highly fruitful and creative moments for the advancement of knowledge. Our contemplation of the risen Christ gives us the courage to face the future with confidence, trusting in his challenging invitation: “Let us go across to the farther shore” (*Mk* 4:35). Please, do not be retired teachers! Teachers always keep going, always.

I thank you for your commitment and I ask the Holy Spirit to enlighten you in all that you do. May Mary, Seat of Wisdom, always accompany you. I bless you and I ask you, please, to continue to pray for me. Thank you!

[1] *The Complete Poems*, J323 (1858).
