



## A theology of welcoming and dialogue

Pope Francis | 01.07.2019

Address of His Holiness at the meeting on the theme "Theology after Veritatis Gaudium in the context of the Mediterranean", Naples, 21 June 2019.

**Dear Students and Professors,  
Dear Brother Bishops and Priests,  
Your Eminences,**

I am pleased to meet with you today and to take part in this Congress. I reciprocate most heartily the greeting of my dear Brother Patriarch Bartholomew, by many years a great precursor of [Laudato Si'](#), who wished to contribute to the reflection with a personal message. I thank you Bartholomew, my beloved brother.

The Mediterranean has always been a place of transit, of exchanges, and sometimes even of conflicts. We are all too familiar with many of them. This place today raises a number of questions, often dramatic ones. They can be expressed in some of the questions that we asked ourselves [at the inter-religious meeting in Abu Dhabi](#): how can we take care of each other within the one human family? How can we foster a tolerant and peaceful coexistence that translates into authentic fraternity? How can we make it so that the welcoming of the other person and of those who are different from us because they belong to a different religious and cultural tradition prevails in our communities? How can religions be paths of brotherhood instead of walls of separation? These and other issues need to be discussed at various levels, and require a generous commitment to listening, studying and dialogue in order to promote processes of liberation, peace, brotherhood and justice. We must be convinced: it is about starting processes, not of defining or occupying spaces. Starting processes...

### A theology of welcoming and dialogue

In this Congress, you have first analyzed contradictions and difficulties found in the Mediterranean, and then you have asked yourselves about what the best solutions might be. In this regard, you are wondering which theology is appropriate to the context in which you live and work. I would say that theology, particularly in this context, is called to be a welcoming theology and to develop a sincere dialogue with social and civil institutions, with university and research centers, with religious leaders and with all women and men of good will, for the construction in peace of an inclusive and fraternal society, and also for the care of creation.

When in the Foreword of [Veritatis Gaudium](#) the contemplation and presentation of the heart of the kerygma is mentioned together with dialogue as criteria for renewing studies, it means that they are at the service of the path of a Church that increasingly puts evangelization at the center. Not apologetics, not manuals, as we heard, but evangelizing. At the center is evangelizing, which is not the same thing as proselytizing. In dialogue with cultures and religions, the Church announces the Good News of Jesus and the practice of evangelical love which He preached as a synthesis of the whole teaching of the Law, the message of the Prophets and the will of the Father. Dialogue is above all a method of discernment and proclamation of the Word of love which is addressed to each person and which wants to take up residence in the heart of each person. Only in listening to this Word and in the experience of love that it communicates can one discern the relevance of kerygma. Dialogue, understood in this way, is a form of welcoming.

I would like to reiterate that “spiritual discernment does not exclude existential, psychological, sociological or moral insights drawn from the human sciences. At the same time, it transcends them. Nor are the Church’s sound norms sufficient. We should always remember that discernment is a grace, a gift. Ultimately, discernment leads to the wellspring of undying life: “to know the Father, the only true God, and the one whom he has sent, Jesus Christ (cf. Jn 17:3)” (Ap. Exhort. [Gaudete et Exsultate](#), 170).

The renewal of schools of theology comes about through the practice of discernment and through a *dialogical way of proceeding* capable of creating a corresponding spiritual environment and intellectual practice. It is a dialogue both in the understanding of the problems and in the search for ways to resolve them. A dialogue capable of integrating the living criterion of Jesus’ Paschal Mystery with that of analogy, which discovers connections, signs, and theological references in reality, in creation and in history. This involves the hermeneutical integration of the mystery of the path of Jesus which led him to the cross and to the resurrection and gift of the Spirit. Integrating this Jesuit and Paschal logic is indispensable for understanding how historical and created reality is challenged by the revelation of the mystery of God’s love. Of that God who manifests himself in the history of Jesus – in every circumstance and difficulty – as greater in love and in his capacity to rectify evil.

Both movements are necessary and complementary: a *bottom-up* movement that can dialogue, with an attitude of listening and discernment, with every human and historical instance, taking into account the breadth of what it means to be human; and a top-down movement where “the top” is that of Jesus lifted up on the cross that allows, at the same time, to discern the signs of the Kingdom of God in history and to understand prophetically the signs of the anti-Kingdom that disfigure the soul and human history. It is a method that allows us in a dynamic that is ongoing to confront ourselves with every human condition and to grasp what Christian light can illuminate the folds of reality and what efforts the Spirit of the Risen Crucified One is arousing, from time to time, here and now.

The dialogical way of proceeding is the path to arrive where paradigms, ways of feeling, symbols, and representations of individuals and of peoples are formed. To arrive there as “spiritual ethnographers”, so to speak, of the souls of peoples to be able to dialogue in depth and, if possible, to contribute to their development with the proclamation of the Gospel of the Kingdom of God, the fruit of which is the maturation of a fraternity that is ever more expanded and inclusive. Dialogue and proclamation of the Gospel that can take place in the ways outlined by Francis of Assisi in the *Regula non bullata*, just the day after his trip to the Mediterranean East. For Francis there is a first way in which, simply, one lives as a Christian: “One way is that they do not make quarrels or disputes, but are subject to every human creature for the love of God and confess to being Christians” (XVI: FF 43). Then there is a second way in which, always docile to the signs and actions of the Risen Lord and his Spirit of peace, the Christian faith is proclaimed as a manifestation in Jesus of God’s love for all men. I am very struck by the advice given by Francis to his friars: “Preach the Gospel: if necessary, also with words”. That is witness!

This docility to the Spirit implies a style of life and proclamation that is without a spirit of conquest, without a desire to proselytize – which is baneful! – and without an aggressive intent to disprove the other. An approach that enters into dialogue with others “from within”, with their cultures, their histories, their different religious traditions; an approach that, in keeping with the Gospel, also includes witnessing to the point of sacrificing one’s own life, as shown by the luminous examples of Charles de Foucauld, the monks of Tibhirine, the bishop of Oran Pierre Claverie and so many brothers and sisters who, with the grace of Christ, have been faithful with meekness and humility and have died with the name of Jesus on their lips and mercy in their hearts. And here I think of nonviolence as a perspective and way of understanding the world, to which theology must look as one of its constitutive elements. The writings and practices of Martin Luther King and Lanza del Vasto and other peacemakers help us here. The memory of Blessed Justin Russolillo, who was a student of this Faculty, and of Fr Peppino Diana, who also studied here and was a young parish priest killed by

the Camorra, help and encourage us. Here I would mention a dangerous syndrome: the “Babel syndrome”. We think that the “Babel syndrome” is the confusion that arises when we don’t know what the other person is saying. That is the first stage. But the real “Babel syndrome” is when I do not listen to what the other person is saying and think that I know what the other is thinking and is about to say. That is the bane!

## **Examples of dialogue for a theology of welcoming**

While “dialogue” is not a magic formula, theology is certainly helped in its renewal when it takes it seriously, when it is encouraged and favored among teachers and students, as well as with other forms of knowledge and with other religions, especially Judaism and Islam. Students of theology should be educated in dialogue with Judaism and Islam to understand the common roots and differences of our religious identities, and thus contribute more effectively to the building of a society that values diversity and fosters respect, brotherhood and peaceful coexistence.

To educate students in this. I studied in the period of decadent theology, decadent scholasticism, the age of the manuals. We used to joke that all the theses in theology could be proved by the following syllogism. First, things appear this way. Second, Catholicism is always right. Third, Ergo... In other words, a defensive, apologetic theology shut in a manual. We used to joke about it, but that was what we were presented with in that period of decadent scholasticism.

To seek a peaceful and dialogical coexistence. We are called to dialogue with Muslims to build the future of our societies and cities; we are called upon to see them as partners in the building of a peaceful coexistence, even when there are disturbing episodes by fanatical groups who are enemies of dialogue, such as the tragedy of last Easter in Sri Lanka. Yesterday, the Cardinal Archbishop of Colombo told me: “After doing everything I could do, I realized that a group of people, Christians, wanted to go to the Muslim quarter and kill them. I asked the Imam to come with me in the car, and together we went there to convince Christians that we are friends, that those people were extremists, that they are not ‘ours’”. This is an attitude of closeness and dialogue. Forming students to dialogue with Jews means educating them to understand their culture, their way of thinking, their language, in order to better understand and live our relationship on the religious level. In the theological faculties and ecclesiastical universities, courses in the Arabic and Hebrew languages and culture, as well as mutual knowledge between Christian, Jewish and Muslim students are to be encouraged.

I would like to give two concrete examples of how the dialogue that characterizes a theology of welcoming can be applied to ecclesiastical studies. First of all, dialogue can be a *method of study*, as well as of teaching. When we read a text, we dialogue with it and with the “world” of which it is an expression; and this also applies to sacred texts, such as the Bible, the Talmud and the Koran. Often, then, we interpret a particular text in dialogue with others from the same period or from different eras. The texts of the great monotheistic traditions are in some cases the result of a dialogue. There are cases of texts that are written to offer answers to some of life’s deeper questions posed by texts that preceded them. This is also a form of dialogue.

The second example is that dialogue can be lived as a theological hermeneutic in a *specific time and place*. In our case: the Mediterranean at the beginning of the third millennium. It is not possible to realistically read this space except in dialogue and as a bridge?historical, geographical, human?between Europe, Africa and Asia. This is a place where the absence of peace has led to multiple regional and global imbalances, and whose pacification, through the practice of dialogue, could instead greatly contribute to initiating processes of reconciliation and peace. Giorgio La Pira would tell us that, for theology, it is a matter of contributing to the construction of a “large tent of peace” throughout the Mediterranean basin, where the different sons of the common father Abraham can live together in mutual respect. Do not forget our common father.

## **A theology of welcoming is a theology of listening**

Dialogue as a theological hermeneutic presupposes and involves *conscious listening*. This also means listening to the history and experience of the peoples who inhabit the Mediterranean region to be able to decipher the events that connect the past to the present and to be able to understand the wounds along with the potential that exists. In particular, it is a question of understanding the way in which Christian communities and individual prophetic lives have been able?even recently?to incarnate the Christian faith in contexts sometimes of conflict, minority and coexistence with a plurality of other religious traditions.

This listening must be deeply connected with cultures and peoples for another reason as well. The Mediterranean is precisely a sea that is also a crossroads. If we fail to understand that crossroads, we will never understand the Mediterranean. It is a sea geographically closed to the oceans, but culturally always open to encounter, dialogue and mutual inculturation. Nonetheless, there is a need for renewed and shared narratives which?based on listening to the past and to the present?speak to the hearts of people, narratives in which it is possible to see oneself in a constructive, peaceful and hope-generating way.

The multicultural and multi-religious reality of the new Mediterranean is formed by these narratives, in the dialogue that arises from listening to people and texts of the great monotheistic religions, and especially from listening to young people. I am thinking of the students of our faculties of theology, of those from “secular” universities or from other religious inspirations. “When the Church?and, we can add, theology?abandons the rigid schemes and opens itself to an open and attentive listening of young people, this empathy enriches it, because it allows young people to make their own contribution to the community, helping it to appreciate new sensitivities and to consider new questions” (Ap. Exhort. [Christus Vivit](#), 65). To appreciate new sensitivities: this is the challenge.

Entering more deeply into the *kerygma* comes from the experience of dialogue that arises from listening and that generates communion. Jesus himself announced the kingdom of God in dialogue with all kinds and categories of people of the Judaism of his time: with the scribes, the Pharisees, the doctors of the law, the publicans, the learned, the simple, sinners. To a Samaritan woman he revealed, in listening and dialogue, the gift of God and her own identity: he opened to her the mystery of his communion with the Father and of the superabundant fullness that flows from this communion. His divine listening to her human heart opened that heart to accept in turn the fullness of Love and the joy of life. We lose nothing by engaging in dialogue. We always gain something. In a monologue, we all lose, all of us.

## **An interdisciplinary theology**

A theology of welcoming which, as a method of interpreting reality, adopts discernment and sincere dialogue requires *theologians who know how to work together and in an interdisciplinary way*, overcoming individualism in intellectual work. We need theologians?men and women, priests, lay people and religious?who, in a historical and ecclesial rootedness and, at the same time, open to the inexhaustible novelties of the Spirit, know how to escape the self-referential, competitive and, in fact, blinding logics that often exist even in our own academic institutions and concealed, many times, among our theological schools.

In this continuous journey of going out of oneself and meeting others, it is important that theologians be men and women of compassion – I emphasize this: that they be men and women of compassion – inwardly touched by the oppressed life many live, by the forms of slavery present today, by the social wounds, the violence, the wars and the enormous injustices suffered by so many poor people who live on the shores of this “common sea”. Without communion and without compassion constantly nourished by prayer – this is important: theology can only be done “on one’s knees” – theology not only loses its soul, but also its intelligence and ability to interpret reality in a Christian

way. Without compassion, drawn from the Heart of Christ, theologians risk being swallowed up in the condition of privilege of those who prudently place themselves outside the world and share nothing risky with the majority of humanity. A laboratory theology, a pure theology, “distilled” like water, which understands nothing.

I would like to give an example of how the *interdisciplinarity* that interprets history can involve an entering more deeply into the *kerygma* and, if animated by mercy, can be open to *trans-disciplinarity*. I am referring in particular to all the aggressive and warlike attitudes that have marked the way in which Mediterranean peoples who called themselves Christians have lived. This includes both the colonial attitudes and practices that have shaped the imagination and policies of these peoples so much, and the justifications for all sorts of wars, as well as all the persecutions carried out in the name of a religion or alleged racial or doctrinal purity. We too carried out these persecutions. I remember, in the *Chanson de Roland*, that after the battle was won, all the Muslims were lined up in front of the baptismal font. There was someone with a sword. And they were given a choice: either be baptized or be killed, sent to the next world. Baptism or death. We did this. With respect to this complex and painful history, the method of dialogue and listening, guided by the evangelical criterion of mercy, can greatly enrich interdisciplinary knowledge and rereading, also bringing out, by contrast, the prophecies of peace that the Spirit has never failed to arouse.

Interdisciplinarity as a criterion for the renewal of theology and ecclesiastical studies involves the commitment to *continually revisit and reconsider tradition*. Reconsider tradition! And keep asking questions. In fact, for Christian theologians, listening does not happen in a vacuum, but is done from a theological heritage that precisely within the Mediterranean space has its roots in the communities of the New Testament, in the rich reflection of the Fathers and in many generations of thinkers and witnesses. It is that living tradition that has come down to us that can help to enlighten and decipher many contemporary issues. Provided, however, that it is reread with a sincere will to purify memory, that is, discerning that which was in accord with God’s original intention, revealed in the Spirit of Jesus Christ, and that which was unfaithful to this merciful and saving intention. Let us not forget that tradition is a root that gives life: it transmits life so that we can grow, flourish and bear fruit. So often we think of tradition as a kind of museum. No! Last week or the week before, I read a quote of Gustav Mahler, who said: “Tradition is the guarantee of the future, not the guardian of ashes!” Nice! We live tradition like a tree that lives and grows. In the fifth century Vincent of Lérins understood this well. He described the growth of faith, the tradition, using these three criteria: *annis consolidetur, dilatetur tempore, sublimetur aetate*. That is tradition! Without tradition you cannot grow! Tradition serves growth, as the root serves the tree.

## Networked theology

Theology after [Veritatis Gaudium](#) is a networked theology and, in the context of the Mediterranean, *in solidarity with all the “shipwrecked” of history*. In the theological task ahead, we recall St. Paul and the journey of early Christianity that connects the East with the West. Here, very close to where Paul landed, one cannot help but remember that the Apostle’s journeys were marked by evident problems, such as the shipwreck in the middle of the Mediterranean (Acts 27:9ff). A shipwreck that makes one think of Jonah’s. But Paul does not flee and may even think that Rome is his Nineveh. He could be seeking to correct Jonah’s defeatist attitude and to redeem his attempted escape. Now that Western Christianity has learned from many mistakes and critical moments of the past, it can return to its sources hoping to be able to bear witness to the Good News to the peoples of the East and West, North and South. Theology keeping its mind and heart fixed on the “gracious and merciful God” (cf. Jon 4:2) can help the Church and civil society to set out again in the company of so many shipwrecked people, encouraging the people of the Mediterranean to reject any temptation toward reconquest or toward an identity that is closed in on itself. Both arise, are nurtured and grow from fear. Theology cannot be done in a setting of fear.

The work of theological faculties and ecclesiastical universities contributes to the building of a just

and fraternal society, in which the care of creation and the building of peace are the result of collaboration between civil, ecclesial and interreligious institutions. It is first of all a work within the “evangelical network”, that is, in communion with the Spirit of Jesus who is the Spirit of peace, the Spirit of love at work in creation and in the hearts of men and women of good will of every race, culture and religion. In an analogous way to the language used by Jesus to speak of the Kingdom of God, interdisciplinarity and networking are intended to encourage the discernment of the presence of the Spirit of the Risen One in reality. By understanding the Word of God in its original Mediterranean context, it is possible to discern the signs of the times in new contexts.

## Theology after “[Veritatis Gaudium](#)” in the context of the Mediterranean

I have spoken a great deal about [Veritatis Gaudium](#). I would like to thank publically, since he is here, Archbishop Zani, who helped craft this document. Thank you! What, then, is the task of theology after *Veritatis Gaudium* in the context of the Mediterranean? To go straight to the point, what is its task? It must be in tune with the Spirit of the Risen Jesus, with his freedom to travel the world and reach the peripheries, even those of thought. Theologians have the task of encouraging ever anew the encounter of cultures with the sources of Revelation and Tradition. The ancient edifices of thought, the great theological syntheses of the past are mines of theological wisdom, but they cannot be applied mechanically to current questions. One should treasure them to look for new paths. Thanks be to God, the first sources of theology, that is, the Word of God and the Holy Spirit, are inexhaustible and always fruitful; therefore one can and must work towards a “theological Pentecost”, which allows the women and men of our time to hear “in their own native language” a Christian message that responds to their search for meaning and for a full life. For this to happen, a number of preconditions are necessary.

First of all, it is necessary to *start from the Gospel of mercy*, from the proclamation made by Jesus himself and from the original contexts of evangelization. Theology is born amidst specific human beings, who have encountered the gaze and heart of God who seeks them with merciful love. Doing theology is also an act of mercy. I would like to repeat here, from this city where there are not only episodes of violence, but which preserves many traditions and many examples of holiness?in addition to a masterpiece by Caravaggio on the works of mercy and the testimony of the holy doctor Giuseppe Moscati?I would like to repeat what [I wrote to the Faculty of Theology of the Catholic University of Argentina](#): “Even good theologians, like good shepherds, have the odor of the people and of the street and, by their reflection, pour oil and wine onto the wounds of mankind. Theology is an expression of a Church which is a “field hospital”, which lives her mission of salvation and healing in the world. Mercy is not just a pastoral attitude but it is the very substance of the Gospel of Jesus. I encourage you to study how the various disciplines — dogma, morality, spirituality, law, and so on — may reflect the centrality of mercy. Without mercy our theology, our law, our pastoral care run the risk of collapsing into bureaucratic narrow-mindedness or ideology, which by their nature seeks to domesticate the mystery”.<sup>[1]</sup> Theology, by following the path of mercy, prevents the mystery from being domesticated.

Secondly, a serious *integration of history* within theology is necessary, as a space open to the encounter with the Lord. “The ability to discover the presence of Christ and the Church’s journey through history makes us humble, and removes us from the temptation to seek refuge in the past in order to avoid the present. And this has been the experience of many scholars, who have begun, I wouldn’t say as atheists, but rather as agnostics, and have found Christ. Because history could not be understood without this force”.<sup>[2]</sup>

*Theological freedom is necessary.* Without the possibility of experimenting with new paths, nothing new is created, and there is no room for the newness of the Spirit of the Risen One: “For those who long for a monolithic body of doctrine guarded by all and leaving no room for nuance, this might appear as undesirable and leading to confusion. But in fact such variety serves to bring out and develop different facets of the inexhaustible riches of the Gospel” (Ap. Exhort. [Evangelii Gaudium](#),

40). This also implies an adequate updating of the *ratio studiorum*. On the freedom of theological thought, I would make a distinction. Among scholars, it is necessary to move ahead with freedom; then, in the final instance, it will be the magisterium to decide, but theology cannot be done without this freedom. But in preaching to the People of God, please, do not harm the faith of God's people with disputed questions! Let disputed questions remain among theologians. That is your task. But God's people need to be given substantial food that can nourish their faith and not relativize it.

Finally, it is essential to have *light and flexible structures* that express the priority given to welcoming and dialogue, to inter- and trans-disciplinary work and networking. The statutes, the internal organization, the method of teaching, the program of studies should reflect the physiognomy of the Church "which goes forth". The class schedules and other aspects of university life should be designed to encourage as much as possible the participation of those who wish to study theology: in addition to seminarians and religious, even lay people and women both lay and religious. In particular, the contribution that women are making and can make to theology is indispensable and their participation should therefore be supported, as you do in this Faculty, where there is ample participation of women as teachers and as students.

May this beautiful place, home of the Theological Faculty dedicated to St. Aloysius, whose memorial is celebrated today, be a symbol of beauty to be shared, open to all. I dream of Theological Faculties where one lives differences in friendship, where one practices a theology of dialogue and welcoming; where one experiences the model of the polyhedron of theological knowledge instead of that of a static and disembodied sphere. Where theological research can promote a challenging but compelling process of inculturation.

## Conclusion

The criteria of the Foreword of the Apostolic Constitution [Veritatis Gaudium](#) are evangelical criteria. The *kerygma*, dialogue, discernment, collaboration and network – and here I would add *parrhesia*, which was cited as a criterion, which is the ability to press forward to the limits, side by side with *hypomoné*, patient endurance, the ability to stay within the limits in order to move forward – these are elements and criteria that translate the way in which the Gospel was lived and proclaimed by Jesus and with which it can still be transmitted today by his disciples.

Theology after [Veritatis Gaudium](#) is a kerygmatic theology, a theology of discernment, of mercy and of welcoming, in dialogue with society, cultures and religions for the construction of the peaceful coexistence of individuals and peoples. The Mediterranean is a historical, geographical and cultural matrix for kerygmatic welcoming practiced through dialogue and mercy. Naples is an example and special laboratory of this theological research. I wish you all the best in your work.

## Footnotes

[1] [Letter to the Grand Chancellor of the "Pontificia Universidad Católica Argentina" for the 100th anniversary of the Founding of the Faculty of Theology](#), 3 March 2015.

[2] [Speech to Participants in the Conference of the Association of Professors of Church History](#), 12 January 2019.

## Editorial remarks

Source: [Vatican](#).