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Conversation between the Presidium of the European Society of Catholic Theology and Representatives of the Roman Curia

Introduction

On 25 and 26 April 2017 the biennial meetings of representatives of the European Society for Catholic Theology with representatives of the Roman Curia were held in Rome. ESCT representatives were Prof. Dr. Pierre Van Hecke, President (Catholic University of Leuven), Prof. Dr. Marie-Jo Thiel, Vice-President (Université de Strasbourg), Prof. Dr. Karim Schelkens, General-Secretary (Tilburg University), Prof. Dr. Roman Zavijskyj, presidium member (Ukrainian Catholic University, Lviv). These two-yearly meetings stand in a tradition of the ESCT maintaining transparent and open contacts with those congregations and dicasteries that are of particular importance for theologians in Europe.

In April 2017, the following Roman offices were visited: The Centre for Child Protection (CCP) at the Collegio Bellarmino, the Gregorian University at Piazza della Pilotta, the Congregation for Catholic Education at Piazza Pio XII, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith at Piazza dell Sant'Uffizio, the Dicastery for the Laity, Family and Life at Piazza S. Callisto a Trastevere, and the Congregation for the Bishops at Piazza Pio XII. As is customary, each meeting started with a brief introduction to the history and background of the Society. It was explained how the European Society arose out of a common ideal for European integration after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, and was set up as an international and interdisciplinary organisation offering a forum for exchange and collaboration for theologians in Eastern, Central and Western Europe. Founded in Germany, after the Cologne Declaration, the ESCT's mission was and remains to facilitate an authentically Catholic plurality of theological approaches in response to the challenges faced by the Catholic Church in Europe¹. In order to fulfil this mission, the Society has a structure that unites local sections in twenty one

¹ Cf. *The Statement of the European Society for Catholic Theology on Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI's Letter*, of March 2018. See <https://www.kuleuven.be/eurotheo/home/Statement/>.

European countries – from Ireland to Romania, and from Malta to Poland. These are represented in an annual meeting of the Curatorium, and the daily organization is overseen by the international Presidium. The Society issues its periodical *ET-Studies* twice a year and organizes an international conference every two years². By the end of the 1990s a process of dialogue between the European Society and the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith had been launched. Initially these talks were organized as a formal exchange of information, and over the past two decades the scope has expanded. This has led to the current situation in which talks are held in an open atmosphere on particular topics (e.g. in 2015 on the question of the regulations regarding the ‘nihil obstat’) (s. Lintner/Schelkens 2015). In 1998 the ESCT was a founding partner for the establishment of the International Network of Societies for Catholic Theology (INSeCT)³, which incorporates thirteen member organisations and various affiliated groups and institutions. Its general scope is to help connect Catholic theologians and to support continental forums of exchange. These continental networks are combined in joint worldwide programmes and meet together every two years at the meetings of INSeCT. ESCT plays a central role in this process. From this perspective, ESCT’s ongoing dialogue with the magisterium of the Catholic Church is regarded as a means of bridging, building and maintaining relationships between local theological research and discourse and the voice of the universal magisterium. In recent years, the ESCT has maintained good collaborative contacts with the Congregation for Catholic Education, and has benefited from its counsel.

1. Centre for Child Protection (CCP)

A meeting was held with Fr. Hans Zollner SJ, Vice-Rector of the Gregorian University and president of the ‘Child Protection Centre’⁴ and with its Executive Director, Prof. Karlijn Demasure, on the recent crisis of sexual abuse in the Catholic Church. The Centre is connected to the Gregorian University, has the support of the Holy See and engages in research and training on the topic of abuse (e.g. Diploma in Safeguarding of Minors). It has organized international conferences to discuss how to deal with this issue. The Centre is sustained by fundraising and is supported from a number of sources, among them the Archdiocese of Munich under Cardinal Archbishop R. Marx. It was founded in 2012 in conjunction with

² The most recent conference was organized in Strasbourg, France, on the topic of fraternity. The proceedings of the conference are published by Thiel/Feix 2018.

³ For detailed information on INSeCT, see <https://insecttheology.wordpress.com>. The ESCT is represented in INSeCT by Prof. Dr. Gunther Prueller-Jagenteufel.

⁴ For more information on the Centre, see: <http://childprotection.unigr.it/>.

the symposium “Towards Healing and Renewal” (Scicluna 2012) in Ulm, Germany, before moving to Rome, where it opened officially in February 2014. It collaborates with the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors, established by Pope Francis, of which Hans Zollner is a member.

The CCP regards itself as an important intermediary between the specialists in the field (it collaborates with psychologists, care workers, medical doctors, etc.), church officials and theologians. Since it cannot be everywhere, its efforts focus on strengthening a worldwide network where the emphasis is first and foremost on prevention. The focus is not merely on the church in Europe as a global perspective is required and much attention is being given to the southern hemisphere. In this regard, it was emphasized during the conversations with the ESCT that this perspective also requires interdisciplinary collaboration. European theologians were invited to join in a common reflection with philosophers and psychologists, and to elaborate a “good theology of childhood”. It was observed that moral theologians give considerable attention to the issue, but that there would be a benefit if other theological disciplines, such as systematic theology, exegesis and church history, were to join in the reflection. Theologians are invited to participate in a broad reflection on the topic of sexual misbehavior and abuse of power in the Catholic Church.

It was further explained that the CCP engages strongly in an education programme, with students from a wide range of nationalities. A four-month programme of blended learning has been set up, in which international experts were invited (e.g. Prof. Dr. Peter Adriaenssens, Mons. Stephen Rosetti) and recently a two year Master programme in Safeguarding was launched. Plans exist for a series of publications with Peeters, with the first book to appear in June 2018, and an international Conference was planned on ‘Child dignity in the digital world’⁵. The ESCT was seen as a valuable partner since it unites academic theologians from all disciplines. It was decided that a presentation about the Centre and the topic of abuse would be delivered by Prof. Demasure at the ESCT Curatorium meeting in February 2018⁶.

2. Gregorian University

A brief meeting was held with Fr. Dariusz Kowalczyk SJ, Dean of the Theological Faculty, and members of the Gregorian University’s theological faculty

⁵ The Conference ‘Child Dignity in the Digital World’ was held from October 3 to 6, 2017, in Rome.

⁶ As a result, Prof. Dr. Karlijn Demasure addressed the Curatorium of the ESCT in Mechelen, on February 16, 2018, with a lecture on *Child Sexual Abuse: Perspectives and challenges*.

staff on eventual future collaboration. It was observed that the Roman theological institutions – who are nineteen in number – are very rarely engaged in the activities of the ESCT. This is partly due to the fact that the Pontifical Institutes in Italy have their own networks, and many Italian theologians are members of the *Associazione Teologica Italiana* (ATI). It was agreed that enhanced collaboration would be fruitful and that the ties between the ESCT and ATI should become closer, as they have been in the past.

3. Congregation for Catholic Education, Piazza Pio XII

An open round of exchange was held at the CEC with Fr. Friedrich Bechina, Undersecretary to the Congregation, and members of staff. The topic was on doing ‘Theology Today’⁷, and the focus was on the often complex relationship between academic education programmes in either theology or religious studies. From the side of the ESCT, it was explained that this topic was discussed at length during the February Curatorium meeting and symposium at Braga, Portugal in 2017.

It has become clear that in northern Europe (e.g. France, Germany and the Netherlands) state officials tend to prefer religious studies curricula to programmes in Theology. This is often presented as a way of safeguarding academic neutrality. The report of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, entitled ‘Ready for a turnabout’⁸ is a clear example of this tendency. All the while, a closer study of the evolution of academic programmes in recent decades demonstrates that where theological programmes are transformed into religious studies programmes, this is often the last step before a final dismantling of the academic study of religion is carried through.

Next, in order to discuss the future set-up of academic theological programmes, the importance of securing a balance between the passive element in education (the digestion of knowledge, the importance of rootedness in a tradition) and the active element of the development of student skills and competencies (academic writing, digital skills, research skills) was emphasised. It was also deemed important that academic theologians be open to interdisciplinary research, not only among theological disciplines but also with other academic areas.

⁷ The discussion was related to the document of the International Theological Commission 2012.

⁸ See Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences 2015. The topic was addressed during the ESCT regional symposium at the Universidade Católica Portuguesa, in Braga, on February 24 2015. During the symposium, ESCT-president Prof. Dr. Pierre Van Hecke discussed the topic in his lecture on *Institutional Relations between Theology and Religious Studies: Examples of Northern Europe*.

4. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith

The ESCT had a meeting with Mgr. Luis Ladaria S.J., the then Secretary of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith⁹, with P. Hermann Geißler, head of the doctrinal section, and members of staff. The discussion was on contemporary issues in Catholic Theology. The conversation opened with a reminiscence of the conversations of 2015 on the *nihil obstat* procedures. It was observed that the ESCT proposes itself as a partner in dialogue whenever problems arise on a dossier. The CDF was kindly invited to make good use of the theological competence available in the European Society. During the discussion, the importance for the CDF of appointing academically qualified censors to judge upon theological discussions was touched upon.

Furthermore, the conversation entered into the need for a deepened sense of collaboration between theologians in the local academic world and the magisterium. It was observed that mutual confidence is crucial and that academic theologians in the context of state universities and in northern European countries often find themselves in a precarious position. The conversation touched upon the importance of thinking in degrees whenever delicate issues such as procreation or the boundaries of life, natural law or Christian anthropology are at stake. The CDF works with thirty consultants who meet twice a year. A report on the state of theology is put together and sent to the cardinals. The problems met by the CDF, as indicated by the staff, are mostly related to moral theology and to salvation (such as the interpretation of *Dominus Iesus* and theological standpoints on interreligious dialogue). It was also pointed out that problems on theological dossiers are mostly raised by local ordinaries.

5. Dicastery for the Laity, Family and Life

The ESCT met with Cardinal Kevin Joseph Farrell, recently nominated as Prefect of the new Dicastery for the Laity. The topic discussed was 'The Interface between Theology and the World: what challenges are to be faced'. The Cardinal recalled the importance of the project of Pope Francis in integrating three former dicasteries on Laity, Family and Life. The future of the Catholic Church, it was emphasized, is dependent on the role of the laity, but until recently clericalism had hindered the development of the laity. Too often the role of lay people in responsible church positions was met with distrust and fear. The Second Vatican Council created the dicastery for lay people but then the

⁹ In July 2017, Mgr. Luis Ladaria was promoted to the rank of Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

office was overwhelmed by ecclesial clericalisation. The Prefect praised the fact that lay people are now more engaged in missionary and evangelizing movements. It has also become clear that during their ad-limina visits local bishops express their regret that lay people are reluctant to take up roles in parishes. The question was raised whether the growing interest of the laity in religious institutes and lay movements is to the detriment of the diocesan parishes.

It was observed that the Pope wishes to restructure the dicastery by including more lay people, including women and couples in positions at all levels. As the former Bishop of Dallas, Cardinal Farrell forced Catholic universities to train lay managers in the church. Today, he stressed, more people hold a PhD degree, but it remains to be seen what the church can offer to highly qualified lay people. The Prefect noted that there remains a lack of courage. It was observed that the ESCT might be of help in the organisation of schools of theology, schools of ministry (parish ministry), and short courses for lay people in Catholic leadership.

6. Congregation for the Bishops

The ESCT also talked with Cardinal Marc Ouellet, Prefect of the Congregation for the Bishops, on the topic of the 'Possibility and viability of a *vademecum* for Bishops on the *nihil obstat* procedures'. This discussion builds on the ESCT's earlier conversations and upon the fact that the German episcopal conference has already created a document for dealing with this issue, with the approval of the Catholic Congregation for Education. It was proposed that the ESCT may be consulted as a partner to develop such a *vademecum*. It was also noted that such a document might help new bishops to become acquainted with their often unexpected role as chancellor of an academic institution. Ideally, the *vademecum* ought to become an element of the training that the Holy See organizes for new bishops.

It was agreed that there should be more dialogue between theologians and the magisterium, particularly on the *nihil obstat* procedures: new bishops do not always understand what is at stake when they decline a submission from a theologian, certainly in the case of lay theologians. Bishops ought to feel more engaged in a fruitful dialogue rather than veto someone for an academic theological position. On the other hand, Cardinal Ouellet also mentioned the reluctance of bishops to send young priests to be trained as theologians: This is an important problem because foreign student priests (Africans and others) who come to study at European academic institutions hope not only to find theologians but also models of intellectually skilled priest-theologians.

The Prefect recalled the publication of the directives for mutual relations between religious and bishops in the 1978 document *Mutuae relationes* as a moment for the Church to better acknowledge its charismatic vocation. It was

emphasised that theologians also need to be engaged with and hold teaching positions in those academic fields where competence in the human sciences is not enough. They should be competent in and contribute to the charismatic dimension of the church in all scientific disciplines. The Cardinal noted that the ESCT could be an important interlocutor, with motivated theologians who may assist in the renewal of church life in Europe. Currently, the cardinal has often to convince bishops of this, since they are tempted to take religious people to fill professional gaps, without respecting their charism. Finally, the Cardinal has agreed to receive the ESCT Newsletter.

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