



Vatican City, 30 March 2009

392/2005
PROT. N.
(Hic numerus in responsione referatur)

Circular Letter n. 6

To Grand Chancellors,
Rectors and Deans of
Ecclesiastical Faculties
and, for information,
to Rectors of Catholic Universities
and Presidents of Episcopal Conferences

The year 2010 draws close, which is the date for concluding the first stage of the “Bologna Process” that aims to establish the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). With that in mind, the 46 countries that are members of the Process have agreed to draw up a first account of the reforms and progress achieved in recent years within the academic field.

The Holy See, too, as the competent authority for more than 180 Ecclesiastical Faculties present in European countries (to which must be added about 200 institutes that are affiliated, aggregated or incorporated to those same Faculties), has been able to evaluate the results of over five years of participation in the Process. This Circular Letter cannot deal with all the issues involved, but will concentrate, in a particular way, on how the *study of theology* fits into the framework of the “Bologna Process”, taking into account the various institutional arrangements of Faculties of Catholic Theology. Many of these are autonomous institutions; others are part of Catholic Universities; and still others, especially in certain countries, are part of State Universities. All of these institutions enjoy the same right of conferring academic degrees in Catholic theology in the name of the Holy See. This fact is unique, and regarded with admiration by many countries. They see that the Catholic Church, from the beginnings of the first medieval universities, has been able to maintain a unity of studies, of academic degrees and of related qualifications, and thus has made it possible for students and teachers to move easily from one place of study or research to another. In this way, the Church’s academic institutions are recognised throughout the world, with all that entails.

This example shows that many of the principles and goals of the “Bologna Process”, even before the Process’s launch, were already firmly rooted within the area of ecclesiastical studies. A good example is the triple structure of academic degrees, corresponding to a basic formation (first cycle), to a specialisation with an introduction to research work (second cycle), and to a terminal degree by means of a worthy

contribution to one's own ecclesiastical discipline (third cycle). Furthermore, mobility as well as collaboration among different institutions have been common practice since the beginning.

Following the reception of the principles of the "Bologna Process" into academic legislation in various countries, some Ecclesiastical Faculties have considered it opportune or necessary to adapt to the changes introduced in the national system in which they exist. That has most often been the case where a Faculty is linked to a Catholic or State university that, as such, has to conform to new norms. There are plenty of examples of changes and adaptations that have diverged from the common norms of *Sapientia christiana*, regarding the structure, the contents and the resulting qualifications in theological studies in a Faculty. There is a risk here of compromising the compatibility of such a Faculty's studies and academic degrees with the studies and degrees of other theological Faculties of the same type, which are also subject to the same authority of the Holy See. Also at risk in such a situation is the Faculty's suitability for preparing students for ecclesiastical assignments.

Taking all of this into consideration, and with the aim of guaranteeing the future unity and comparability of academic studies in Catholic theology throughout the world, in harmony with the more relevant aspirations of the "Bologna Process", the Congregation for Catholic Education deems it necessary, with this Circular Letter, to formulate *some principles and general guidelines explicitly regarding Theological Faculties*. Another Circular Letter will follow with correspondent guidelines for other Ecclesiastical Faculties. On the one hand, these instructions set out the correct interpretation of the law already in effect particularly in the Apostolic Constitution *Sapientia christiana*, and in light of the "Bologna Process" and of current challenges within the academic field. On the other hand, these regulations are *canonically binding for all Faculties of Catholic theology* and constitute the necessary basis for them to continue to be within the law and to keep their right to grant academic degrees in Catholic theology that have canonical effect.

1. The "Bologna Process" does not propose norms or guidelines that have to be applied directly by academic institutions.

The "Bologna Process" is a form of intergovernmental collaboration, with the aim of realising the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) by means of strategies, principles and measures that are agreed upon and – moving forward as a community – become ever more finely tuned. It is the task of each national authority to decide and, when necessary, update its own legislation in view of the goals that have been agreed upon. Therefore, the individual academic institutions, for them to reach the same goals, cannot ignore whatever legislation in matters of higher education is in effect within their own country, so as to conform directly to the "Bologna Process" or to the regulations of another national authority.

- 2. The “national” authority that is competent for Institutions that grant academic degrees with canonical value is the Holy See, and this is recognised by the principles of the “Bologna Process”. More exactly, such competence, according to article 116 of the Apostolic Constitution *Pastor bonus*, is entrusted to the Congregation for Catholic Education.**

It belongs to the competence of the Congregation for Catholic Education to decide how to apply correctly the principles of the “Bologna Process” within the area of Catholic theological studies. This is also the case when a Faculty of Theology is part of a State University. In these particular cases, there are always Concordats or other agreements, which have to ensure that the *internal* organisation of studies (concerning their contents, structure, and the resulting degree qualifications allowing access to ecclesiastical assignments) remain the exclusive competence of the ecclesiastical authorities; of course, the Church has the obligation both to respect national laws about the general (*external*) structuring of academic institutions within the country, and to maintain the quality level required by comparable studies elsewhere.

In cases where new requirements call for an updating of the structures and organisation of theological studies, where the institute is subject to both civil and ecclesiastical jurisdiction, the Holy See has at its disposition all the means necessary to arrive at the necessary bilateral solutions which do justice to both forms of legislation, while respecting the different jurisdictions involved. Such means include whether major ones such as Concordats, or more recent means, such as international Conventions applicable to the field of academics.

According to its customary and effective way of proceeding, this Congregation always makes use of such means in close collaboration and in harmony with the local churches, and, whenever possible and opportune, directly with the academic institutions involved. One must remember, however, that every change regarding theological studies in an academic institution in which both the State and the Church are involved, must always be preceded by a bilateral agreement.

Regarding quality assurance, one must remember that it refers to the mission of the Faculties themselves: to their structure, the correct way of proceeding in both teaching and theological research, as well as the suitability of the qualifications gained with a view to the “professions” and ecclesiastical assignments. Therefore, such quality assurance cannot be delegated to a non-ecclesiastical agency. To avoid, *inter al.*, that a Faculty, in order to obtain outside economic subsidies or to facilitate State recognition of its degrees, may be forced by law to avail itself of a non-ecclesiastical agency, the Holy See set up, in September 2007, its own *Agency for the Evaluation and Promotion of Quality in Universities and Ecclesiastical Faculties* (AVEPRO). A future Circular Letter will address the Agency’s jurisdiction, as well as its functions of supporting theological Faculties in all that concerns quality assurance and promotion, including, in specific cases, the achievement of State accreditation. It belongs to the

Holy See, by means of bilateral agreements and its participation in international initiatives, to ensure the recognition of AVEPRO in all countries.

3. The “Qualifications Framework” of the Holy See is the obligatory point of reference for studies of Catholic theology, as regards their structure, levels, contents and resulting qualifications.

As foreseen by the agreements of the “Bologna Process”, every national academic authority must prepare a “*National Qualifications Framework*” (NQF), using common parameters and the “Dublin descriptors”. The NQF offers a complete view of all the academic studies offered by each “national” system, describing their specific nature, their academic level, the work-load required of the student, and the qualifications that the students will obtain at the end of each single cycle (“learning outcomes”). According to the *Overarching Qualifications Framework* of the *European Higher Education Area* (EHEA), the use of common criteria and tools agreed upon for all of Europe means that the studies and academic systems of the various countries become comparable and easier to evaluate, with the aim of their full recognition in all the countries involved.

In principle, with regard to theology, the NQF of the Holy See is already contained within the legislation of the Apostolic Constitution *Sapientia Christiana*, where the structure, level and goal of the three academic degrees in theology are described. These norms are in keeping with the scheme that has subsequently been proposed by the “Bologna Process”. One need only remember, in particular, articles 72 (a-c), 66-74, 46-50, 38-45, as well as the respective *Ordinationes*.

Nevertheless, it falls to this Congregation to translate the above-mentioned legislation into the terminology requested by the Process. For their part, the Faculties hitherto are bound to formulate their curricula, in such a way that the actual work-load for the students is expressed in the form of credits (ECTS). They are also to define, precisely and realistically, the *learning outcomes* to which a curriculum of study, an entire subject-matter, or even only a single course intends to prepare the student – within a given academic cycle. This procedure also should result in the “*Diploma supplement*”, which must be issued – either automatically or at least upon the request of the student – both in the local language as well as in another European language among those more widely known and spoken.

The Congregation for Catholic Education is ready to offer further clarifications and any assistance necessary, in order for the Faculties to put into effect the above-mentioned objectives.

4. *Sapientia christiana*, in defining the structure of the theological studies, with the three academic cycles and related academic degrees, guarantees that such degrees, issued by Faculties of Theology, are conferred validly and legitimately throughout the world.

The very nature of the academic study of Catholic theology posits some principles that, in every case, are decisive for the character of the related curricula. Among these principles, the following are especially important:

⇒ The plurality of disciplines that require a specific expertise as well as a specific methodology and, consequently, also require a distinct “chair” viz. a permanent professor.¹

⇒ The complementary relationship between theology and philosophy, in that philosophy is necessarily propaedeutic to theology and constitutes an integral part of it.

⇒ The distinctions between basic formation (first cycle), specialisation (second cycle), and further specialised scientific work (third cycle).

While guaranteeing that the instruction is complete, as regards the disciplines, it is also necessary to guarantee that the number of credits (ECTS) ascribed is precise and realistic, so that these credits are calculated in the same way for all academic degrees in theology granted by Ecclesiastical Faculties in Europe. To this aim, the following guidelines are to be applied:

⇒ The first cycle (philosophical-theological *quinquennium*) must consist of a minimum of 300 ECTS distributed over at least 5 years of study;

⇒ The second cycle must consist of a minimum of 120 ECTS, distributed over at least two years;

⇒ The work of the third cycle (doctorate) does not necessarily have to be expressed in ECTS. In each case, the writing of a doctoral dissertation is requested, which contributes to academic progress in the relative field that is studied. The length of time to obtain the doctorate cannot be less than two years of full-time study.

¹Over and above the subject-matters (and their respective chairs) in philosophy, the Faculty of Theology must have at least 12 chairs, viz. permanent teachers with an ecclesiastical doctorate. These chairs are usually distributed according to the following disciplines: Sacred Scripture (2); Fundamental Theology; Dogmatic Theology (2); Moral Theology; Spiritual Theology; Liturgy; Canon Law; Parristics; Church History; Pastoral Theology.

5. The necessary unity both of goals and of the general structure of theological studies can be put into practice in different ways.

The various ways of putting the above into practice – which, in some cases, might be dictated by the specific demands of national educational systems – are only possible when they are based on the correct application of the above-mentioned fundamental principles. These principles guarantee the unity of studies and of the academic degrees in Catholic theology, inasmuch as they follow the specific ecclesiastical norms based on the Apostolic Constitution *Sapientia christiana* and on the customs of this Dicastery.

In some countries, one must take into account certain pastoral requirements of Episcopal Conferences, as well as the ordinances that the Conferences have declared in the field of academic studies; such ordinances, having been examined and approved by this Congregation, can facilitate the development of study plans and reinforce the position of individual academic institutions vis-à-vis the State authorities. In such cases, over and above the above-mentioned means (for example, the NQF), the required approval by this Dicastery of each individual curriculum leading to an academic degree grants the system both legitimacy and appropriate flexibility.

Wherever objectively required, the structure of studies can be arranged differently, although the fundamental principles, the levels, and the value of the three degrees (viz. academic cycles) must be maintained. According to art. 72 a) of the Apostolic Constitution *Sapientia christiana*, the five-year period for the first cycle of theology (= 300 ECTS) can take the form of a five-year unified philosophy-theology program (ten semesters = 300 ECTS), or else a three-year theology program (six semesters = 180 ECTS) if a two-year programme of philosophical studies (4 semesters = 120 ECTS) has preceded it.

With reference to the triple structure of cycles and academic degrees as set out in the “Bologna Process”, in some European countries the five years of the philosophy-theology first cycle, which concludes with a canonical Baccalaureate in Theology, is already recognised as a second cycle (= “Master”, which corresponds to 300 ECTS). In such cases, so as not to create a fourth cycle (viz. a new academic degree), the student can immediately pass to the third cycle (doctorate), as long as all that is required for the second ecclesiastical cycle is guaranteed and previously fulfilled: a specialisation in the subject-field chosen lasting two years (4 semesters = 120 ECTS), with the related examinations, and including a special dissertation (cf. *Sapientia Christiana*, art. 51, 2°). Such a doctoral curriculum, which is usually called a “structured doctorate”,² lasts at least 4 years (8 semesters).

² In the case where a student, after having obtained the qualifications and the credits (120 ECTS) of the ecclesiastical second cycle through a “structured doctorate”, does not continue with the writing of the thesis, he or she has the possibility of receiving the relevant canonical license, which according to the State system could be accredited as another specialised (that is, “professional”) Master degree, suitable for the teaching of his/her subject in seminary theological studies.

To be able to teach the corresponding theological subject in a major seminary, one must have received at least the canonical degree of license (with a total of 300 ECTS + 120 ECTS), even if this has been partly achieved in the course of a “third cycle.”

The five years of philosophy-theology of their nature also include the necessary qualifications for teaching religion and for other ecclesiastical assignments that do not require the Sacrament of Holy Orders.³

6. The recognition of studies and academic degrees in theology and their insertion in other NQFs must respect the confessional nature of Catholic theology and its inherent principles.

By means of international treaties (as, for example, the Lisbon Treaty signed by the Holy See in 1997), Concordats or other forms of conventions, the Holy See promotes a wide recognition of studies and academic degrees throughout the world, according to the principle of reciprocity. This does not contradict the confessional nature of Catholic theology, which usually constitutes a “substantial difference” of theological studies vis-à-vis other Christian denominations, both as regards content and, in many cases, methodology. For example, wherever a doctorate in Catholic theology is required, it must necessarily correspond to a suitable canonical doctorate or, in any case, be officially recognised in accordance with art. 9 of the Apostolic Constitution *Sapientia christiana*. It will fall to the Congregation for Catholic Education to provide authoritative information, including in cases of evaluating non-Catholic or non-ecclesiastical “theological” studies. It is clear that a simple civil recognition of a degree, defined as a “study of theology” (even if it is called “Catholic”), is not enough to have ecclesiastical effect. This rule applies, in a particular way, with regard to teaching theology in seminaries, in a Catholic Faculty of Theology and in Higher Institutes of Religious Sciences.

7. Theology is a condition of study for priestly formation and for other academic specialisations in theology. As such, it is “substantially different” from academic and non-academic studies aimed at the formation of teachers of religion, catechists, and other Church and social professions.

The Apostolic Constitution *Sapientia christiana* (cf. arts. 84-87) foresees the setting up of other Faculties that, although not “theological” in the strict sense, nevertheless deal with theological or related disciplines. Besides these specialised Faculties, there is a wide range of autonomous institutions that are part of, or connected to, other academic structures. The recent *Reform of the Higher Institutes of Religious Sciences* (2008) regulates the majority of these institutes, which must always be “linked” with a Faculty of Theology.

³ This principle applies, with the proviso of possible additional requirements contained in particular legislation in view of teaching religion in State schools.

However, it is necessary to remember that all types of study arranged according to the *Reform of the Higher Institutes of Religious Sciences*, or other similar studies that qualify the student to teach religion in schools, are clearly distinct from the programmes offered by a Faculty of Theology, both on the epistemological level and as regards the individual obligatory disciplines. Since an academic degree granted by a Higher Institute of Religious Sciences cannot be recognised as equivalent to one granted by a Faculty of Theology, it does not allow direct access to a higher cycle in a Faculty of Theology. Keeping in mind the great variety of these institutions in Europe, as well as the related degrees/diplomas given, before recognising any courses as part of a theology degree, one will have to evaluate attentively the studies that have been completed. The same criterion holds true for all distance-learning studies as well as for all forms of e-learning, which are not authoritatively recognised as studies in Catholic theology. In these cases, too, the Congregation for Catholic Education is able to provide authoritative information.

As regards all other ecclesiastical studies outside the ambit of theology (philosophy, canon law, etc.), this Dicastery will provide the necessary guidelines, correlated with the current process of reforms in the European academic world, in a subsequent Circular Letter.

Wishing you well for the rest of this 2008-2009 academic year, we renew our sentiments of esteem and convey our cordial greetings.

Canon Const. Juchaczewski

+ Jean-Louis Brugnot
scqz.