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CONGREGATIO  
DE INSTITUTIONE CATHOLICA  
(DE STUDIORUM INSTITUTIS)

PROT. N. 1049/2019  
*(Hic numerus in responsione referatur)*

**Circular Letter n. 2**  
**regarding the correct application of the Apostolic Constitution *Veritatis Gaudium***

To the Chancellors,  
Rectors, and Deans  
of Ecclesiastical Faculties,  
*and, for their information,*  
to the Presidents of Catholic Universities  
and the Presidents of Bishops' Conferences,

This Circular Letter n. 2 – addressed to all Chancellors, Rectors and Deans of Ecclesiastical Faculties – is intended to complement Circular Letter n. 1 (8 December 2018) in expressing and realizing the Holy See's care for the promotion of ecclesiastical studies.

**1. Continental Meetings**

Two years ago, on 8 December 2017, the Holy Father promulgated the Apostolic Constitution *Veritatis Gaudium* on Ecclesiastical Universities and Faculties. Subsequently, the Congregation for Catholic Education published the Norms of Application for the Constitution's correction application (27 December 2017). To facilitate the reception of these texts and to foster ever closer cooperation between the Congregation and the Church's academic institutions, our Dicastery organized four Continental meetings with the Rectors, Presidents and Deans of Ecclesiastical Universities and Faculties.

The Continental meeting for Europe, the United States of America, Canada and the Middle East took place on 3-4 May 2018, in Rome, at the Generalate of the Society of Jesus. As well as the academic authorities, some Consultors of the Congregation also participated, as did the leaders of the Holy See's Agency for the Evaluation and Promotion of Quality in Ecclesiastical Universities and Faculties (AVEPRO). The previous week, on 27 April 2018, the Holy Father had approved the Instruction on "the Study of Canon Law in light of the Reform of the Matrimonial Process" ([http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc\\_con\\_ccatheduc\\_doc\\_2\\_0180428\\_istruzione-diritto-canonico\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_2_0180428_istruzione-diritto-canonico_en.html)) – which had been authored by our Congregation after wide-ranging discussion and after having consulted (and obtained the consent of) the Supreme Tribunal of the Apostolic Signatura – and authorized its publication, which occurred on 29 April 2018. Therefore, part of the discussions among the meeting's participants was centred on that

theme, which concerns not only Faculties of Canon Law but also Faculties of Theology (q.v. *Instruction*, articles 3-5, 7, 20-23 and 37) and Catholic Universities (q.v. *Instruction*, articles 8, 20 and 37).

The Continental meeting for Asia and Oceania took place on 11 May 2018 at Assumption University in Bangkok (Thailand), due to the expert assistance of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC). Since a parallel meeting had been organized by the FABC's Office of Theological Concerns, some seminary Rectors and Prefects of Studies, as well as theologians from the Continent, were able to join in our meeting with the academic authorities of the various Ecclesiastical Faculties.

The Continental meeting for Latin America was organized in cooperation with the *Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano* (CELAM) and with the *Pontificia Universidad Javeriana* of Bogota (Columbia), where the meeting was held on 6-7 November 2018. The Presidents and Deans were joined by the various Universities' Rectors. As most of the Ecclesiastical Faculties of that region are to be found within Catholic Universities, it was considered appropriate to invite these Rectors, since the impact of their Universities on their respective civil societies is of vital importance for their development.

The Continental meeting for Africa was held on 29-30 November 2019, at the *Catholic University of Eastern Africa* in Nairobi. This meeting was attended not only by the Deans and Presidents, but also by several Chancellors who had participated, a few days earlier, at an international symposium in Kigali, Rwanda, on the philosophy and theology of education as well as on the challenges African Universities face as regards education to citizenship.

After these four Continental meetings to present *Veritatis Gaudium*, we wish to thank the academic authorities most sincerely for their active participation and for the quality of the exchanges that contributed to our mutual enrichment. In this way, we put into practice the criterion underlined by Pope Francis in *Veritatis Gaudium*, concerning "the urgent need for 'networking' between those institutions worldwide that cultivate and promote ecclesiastical studies, in order to set up suitable channels of cooperation also with academic institutions in the different countries and with those inspired by different cultural and religious traditions. At the same time, specialized centres of research need to be established in order to study the epochal issues affecting humanity today and to offer appropriate and realistic paths for their resolution" (VG, *Foreword*, 4d).

## **2. Regional Conventions**

These Continental meetings reflect the regional Conventions, drawn up since 1974 and subsequently updated, sponsored by UNESCO, in favour of recognizing degrees, diplomas and academic studies: for Latin American and the Caribbean (1974/2019); for the Mediterranean

countries (1976); for the Arab states (1978); for Europe (1979/1997);<sup>1</sup> for Africa (1981/2014); and for Asia and the Pacific (1983/2011).

Currently, more than 130 countries have signed and ratified one or more of these Conventions, although only the European one is fully operative, as is, to a lesser degree, the Asia-Pacific one, although this latter is progressing rapidly. The updated Convention for Africa has just reached the minimum number of ratifications necessary to come into force (15 December 2019), and only a few more ratifications are needed for the updated Convention for Latin America.

The Holy See, through the Second Section of the Secretariat of State, has signed, ratified and deposited the relative instruments for four of the six regions: the Mexico City Convention (1974); the Lisbon Convention (1997); the Bangkok Convention (1983) – Tokyo Convention (2011); and the Arusha Convention (1981) – Addis Ababa Convention (2014). It has signed but not yet ratified the Buenos Aires Convention (2019), which has recently been updated.

The principal idea of all the Conventions ratified by the Holy See is that studies and academic degrees that have taken place in one of the signatory countries are to be recognized in all the other countries, unless substantial differences can be proved between similar studies in the different countries. Moreover, each Convention requires all members to provide authoritative information regarding all their academic institutions, their systems of higher education, as well as their procedures regarding the recognition of studies and degrees. To that end, each country is bound to establish or assign a particular office or organism, the National Information Centre, with the duty of dealing with these matters. For the Holy See, this task is carried out by the International Centre for Recognition (ICR) within our Congregation, which also belongs to the appropriate networks: ENIC-NARIC (*European Network of National Information Centres on Academic Mobility and Recognition*), which connects all the relevant national offices of the countries belonging to the Lisbon Convention; and APNNIC (Asia-Pacific Network of National Information Centres), which does the same for the Asia-Pacific region.

On 25 November 2019, the General Conference of UNESCO adopted the text of the first Global Convention to harmonize interregional recognition. This Convention will enter into force one month after twenty ratifications have been reached. The Holy See, which is currently the only subject of international law that adheres to the four main Conventions, corresponding to Continental regions of UNESCO, was a member of the redaction committee and has worked closely in formulating the text of the Global Convention.

### **3. Quality Assurance and AVEPRO**

In light of the aforementioned Regional Conventions and the Global Convention on recognition, the central role of Quality Assurance becomes ever more important in higher-educational systems. Based on the Norms of Application of *Veritatis Gaudium* and of the Circular Letter no. 1 (dated 8

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that the “European” region of UNESCO comprises, in addition to the European countries according to the definition of the Council of Europe, also the countries of the so-called Western hemisphere of the world, including the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Israel.



December 2018), the Congregation emphasizes that it belongs to ecclesiastical academic institutions to initiate the process; and, therefore, it invites them to contact the Agency ([www.avepro.va](http://www.avepro.va)) to agree the time and define the arrangements for their evaluation.

The call of Pope Francis to “network” must be understood within the wider context of the entire higher-educational system of the Holy See. The Congregation strongly encourages the educational institutions to network, including by working in close cooperation with AVEPRO. Specifically, we are referring to two points: quality promotion and quality assurance. As regards the second, the development of a culture of quality forms part of the activity of the academic personnel (especially the leadership, the teachers, the students, but also the general secretaries, the managers and administrative technical personnel). In practice, by means of example, giving service as “experts” for AVEPRO’s evaluations must be considered as an integral part of one’s professional activity and must be seen as a moment of growth and service, for the good of the whole Church community.

#### **4. Database**

The Holy See, to meet its obligations deriving from the regional Conventions of UNESCO to which it has adhered (that is, to publish the necessary authoritative information regarding its educational system and all academic institutions recognized within the said system), on 28 January 2014 activated the website [www.educatio.va](http://www.educatio.va), of the Congregation for Catholic Education, on higher Education of the Catholic Church. This website contains, in both Italian and English, basic information on the activity of the Catholic Church in the field of higher education, as well as an archive of the relevant principal documents. The website also presents the Qualifications Framework of ecclesiastical higher education: that is, an instrument that is shared, or at least similar, everywhere in the world, which by means of internationally agreed language and terminology, helps the reader to understand and compare the higher-educational systems of the various countries. The aim is to facilitate the recognition of degrees, qualifications and duration of studies that have taken place under different educational systems.

Furthermore, this website contains a search engine that lists all academic institutions that are “canonically erected or approved by the Apostolic See, which foster and teach sacred doctrine and the sciences connected therewith, and which have the right to confer academic degrees by the authority of the Holy See” (VG, article 2) and their educational offerings. This search engine is connected to the Congregation’s database, which assembles the information on these institutions.

Thus, one can perhaps understand better the reason for which *Veritatis Gaudium* asks Deans to “update electronically, at least once a year, the institution’s data in the data-base of the Congregation for Catholic Education” (VG, *Norms of Application*, article 17, 6), under the vigilance of the Rector or President (q.v. VG, *Norms of Application*, 16, 6). In practice, the data required are the name of the institution, the names of the teachers, the principal programmes offered within the ecclesiastical academic system as well as the appropriate specializations, etc. Each institution is responsible for inserting its own data and those of any dependent institutions. Before these data are inserted definitively and published on the website, they are examined and approved by the

Congregation, which stands ever ready to offer technical assistance to the institutions. The data published on the website are generally accessible. Other data, which are private, are normally only available to the Congregation.

It should be noted that the most frequent problems to do with recognizing degrees, diplomas and study periods are due to a lack of authentic and accessible information. Therefore, it is important to insert the required data into the data-base frequently and carefully.

The duty of keeping the data-base up-to-date is not only a formal duty that answers the needs of transparency, but is especially an effective means for demonstrating the rich variety of ecclesiastical academic institutions as well as their educational offerings. Therefore, the website can be consulted with this in mind by students and teachers from all over the world, when they come to choose where they wish to study and with whom they wish to work.

## **5. Statutes and Plan of Studies**

According to *Veritatis Gaudium*, the world's Ecclesiastical Faculties had until 8 December 2019 (q.v. VG, article 89 § 1) to revise their Statutes (q.v. VG, article 7) and their Plan of Studies (q.v. VG, *Norms of Application*, article 30). This revision is a practical sign of the vitality of ecclesiastical institutions in their response to today's challenges.

For Faculties that have not yet presented their Statutes or Plan of Studies, it should be remembered that the Apostolic Constitution already foresaw the possibility that "those Faculties which have a juridical connection with civil authorities may, if necessary, be given a longer period of time to revise their Statutes, with the permission of the Congregation for Catholic Education" (VG, article 92). Faculties that have not received this permission and have not presented their Statutes and Plans of Study must be aware that the consequence could be a future suspension of their academic rights; therefore, they are invited to fulfil this obligation as soon as possible.

## **6. Any Other Suggestions**

The Congregation for Catholic Education wishes to repeat that it is completely ready to support the best possible reception of the new Apostolic Constitution, to promote "the renewal of ecclesiastical studies ... as part of the new phase of the Church's mission, marked by witness to the joy born of encountering Jesus and proclaiming his Gospel" that Pope Francis "set before the whole People of God as a programme in *Evangelii Gaudium*" (VG, *Foreword*, 1). The Dicastery would much appreciate any suggestions for other themes of interest to the world's ecclesiastical institutions that could usefully be treated in a future Circular Letter, as well as any thoughts presented on those same themes.

The Chancellors are kindly asked to forward this Letter, whose authority is recalled by the fact that "for the correct carrying out of the present Constitution, the Norms of Application issued by the Congregation for Catholic Education must be observed" (VG, article 10), to the Rectors, Presidents and Deans, who are asked, in their turn, to distribute it as widely as possible among those directly

concerned (teachers; secretariats; incorporated, aggregated and affiliated institutions, etc.) as well as those indirectly concerned (experts in the field of Catholic education, etc.).

Counting on your full cooperation in applying Pope Francis' new Apostolic Constitution *Veritatis Gaudium* on Ecclesiastical Universities and Faculties, we thank you for your invaluable and capable dedication, and we offer you our best wishes.

Giuseppe Corat Fersoldi

+ d. Vincenzo Zanni, Sec