



CONGREGATIO  
DE INSTITUTIONE CATHOLICA  
(DE STUDIORUM INSTITUTIS)

Vatican City, 8 December 2018

PROT. N. 689/2018  
*(Hic numerus in responsione referatur)*

### Circular Letter n. 1

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

One year ago, the Holy Father promulgated the Apostolic Constitution *Veritatis Gaudium* on Ecclesiastical Universities and Faculties. Subsequently, the Congregation for Catholic Education published the appropriate Norms of Application (27 December 2017). To facilitate these documents' reception and to promote ever closer cooperation, our Dicastery has organized various continental meetings with the Rectors of Ecclesiastical Universities and Deans of Ecclesiastical Faculties: in Rome (3-4 May 2018), Bangkok (11 May 2018) and Bogotá (6-7 November 2018). Another is foreseen for 2019, in Nairobi.

This Circular Letter – addressed to all Chancellors, Rectors, and Deans of Ecclesiastical Faculties – aims to express and realize the Holy See's care for the promotion of ecclesiastical studies, by answering some practical questions that various academic institutions have posed.

#### 1. The Office of Chancellor

Beyond what was already foreseen by *Sapientia Christiana* (and repeated in *Veritatis Gaudium*) for this important and indispensable office, the new Constitution adds that the Chancellor:

- a. receives, from the Rector or President, “an annual report ... on the economic situation of the University or Faculty” (VG, *Norms of Application*, art. 46 § 2);
- b. in the five-year report to the Congregation for Catholic Education on the academic, moral and economic situation of the University or Faculty, he is also to give “his own judgement” (VG, *Norms of Application*, art. 9, 7);
- c. he is to ensure the annual update of statistics, to be sent electronically to the database of the Congregation for Catholic Education (q.v. VG, *Norms of Application*, 16, 6; 17, 6).

## 2. Statutes and Plan of Studies

By 8 December 2019 (q.v. VG, art. 89 § 1), Ecclesiastical Faculties of the whole world are to revise their Statutes (q.v. VG, art. 7) and their Plan of Studies (q.v. VG, *Norms of Application*, art. 30), in accordance with the new Apostolic Constitution. To simplify this procedure, it is appropriate that:

- a. the new Statutes be presented according to the order indicated in Appendix I of article 7 of the *Norms of Application (Norms for Drawing Up Statutes of a University or Faculty)*, in parallel with the current Statutes, highlighting in the text (bold/scored out, etc.) the changes that have been made;
- b. the Plan of Studies, which can be incorporated into the Statutes as a separate chapter, is to be presented according to the order indicated in Appendix I of article 7 of the *Norms of Application*.

## 3. Other Awards

The new Constitution foresees that, besides the academic degrees conferred by authority of the Holy See, a Faculty “may grant other degrees” (VG, *Norms of Application*, art. 41), as long as it respects the unity of the Holy See’s system of Higher Education (q.v. *Qualifications Framework* – [www.educatio.va](http://www.educatio.va)).

- a. Therefore, it is necessary that: (1) the Congregation for Catholic Education has given its *nihil obstat* for the conferral of the degree in question; (2) the respective Plan of Studies establishes the nature of the degree, indicating expressly that it is not an academic degree conferred by authority of the Holy See; (3) the Diploma itself declares that the degree is not conferred by authority of the Holy See” (VG, *Norms of Application*, art. 41);
- b. Before granting its *nihil obstat*, our Congregation will evaluate, besides the Plan of Studies presented according to the order indicated in Appendix I of article 7 of the *Norms of Application*, the following criteria: the coherence of the proposed degree with the professional/specialist profile and with the specific inspiration or charism of the Faculty (q.v. VG, art. 3 § 1); the necessity and usefulness of such academic programmes, which must “collaborate intensely, in accordance with their own nature and in close communion with the Hierarchy, with the local and the universal Church the whole work of evangelization” (VG, art. 3 § 3); the pertinent legislation and (where appropriate) regional practice; who the competent authorities are; human resources (number, specific competence in the field, etc.); the necessary materials; and how quality assurance is foreseen.

## 4. Ecclesiastical Faculties present in non-Ecclesiastical Universities

Ecclesiastical Faculties present in non-Ecclesiastical Universities, which confer both canonical and civil academic degrees, “must observe the prescriptions of the present Constitution, while respecting the bilateral and multilateral conventions signed by the Holy See with various nations or with the universities themselves” (VG, art. 8). For this kind of Faculty:

- a. in countries where there already exists a “Decree for the correct accommodation and application of the Apostolic Constitution *Sapientia Christiana*”, promulgated by our



Congregation, the Bishops' Conferences are kindly asked to send us proposals for the revision of this Decree before 8 December 2019, except where the Dicastery decides otherwise;

- b. in such cases, the revision of Statutes and/or Plan of Studies approved *donec aliter provideatur* will happen after the promulgation of the new Decree;
- c. on the other hand, the revision of Statutes and/or Plan of Studies approved *ad tempus determinatum*, completed before 8 December 2019, will receive approval *ad experimentum* until such a time as the new Decree is promulgated;
- d. it is also possible for Faculties to "be given a longer period of time to revise their Statutes, with the permission of the Congregation for Catholic Education" (VG, art. 92), indicating the reasons for such a request;
- e. in countries where such a Decree does not exist, the Bishops' Conferences can ask our Dicastery for such a Decree before 8 December 2019, without prejudice to the *ex officio* right of this Congregation to promulgate Norms of Application for the correct implementation of this Apostolic Constitution (q.v. VG, art. 10).

## **5. The Instruction "*The Study of Canon Law in light of the Reform of the Matrimonial Process*" (29 April 2018)**

In light of the Motu proprios *Mitis Iudex Dominus Iesus* and *Mitis et Misericors Iesus*, which reformed the canonical processes for the causes of declaring marriage nullity, the Congregation for Catholic Education, within its competence over academic institutions of ecclesiastical studies, promulgated on 29 April 2018, after approval from the Holy Father Pope Francis, a new Instruction "*The Study of Canon Law in light of the Reform of the Matrimonial Process*". The aim of the Instruction is to favour the specific preparation, including academic preparation, of the various persons called to work in ecclesiastical tribunals, or who are involved in those forms of marriage- and family- guidance that also require an adequate preparation in Canon Law. Among the various directives of this Instruction, we wish here to underline the following:

- a. for Faculties of Canon Law and equivalent institutions, "without prejudice to the existing norms for aggregated and incorporated institutes, an aggregated institute must have at least three permanent teachers with the academic degree of Doctor in Canon Law; an incorporated institute must have at least four permanent teachers with the academic degree of Doctor in Canon Law. A Faculty of Canon Law and an institute *ad instar Facultatis* must have a minimum number of five permanent teachers" (art. 2);
- b. "to ensure that students in the first cycle of a Faculty of Theology or an affiliated theological institute have a sufficient knowledge of canon law, a minimum duration of at least three semesters (at least 9 ECTS) of canon law studies is to be established, dedicating at least one semester to Matrimonial and Procedural Law (at least 3 ECTS). With the necessary adaptations, the same criteria must be adopted by non-affiliated theological institutes (which do not grant academic degrees) present in a seminary" (art. 21 § 1).
- c. "In this perspective, each Faculty of Theology, affiliated theological institute and non-affiliated theological institute must update its own Plan of Studies" (art 21 § 2).

## **6. AVEPRO**

The Holy See's Agency for the Evaluation and Promotion of Quality in Ecclesiastical Universities and Faculties (AVEPRO) was established by Chirograph of Pope Benedict XVI on 19 September

2007. It is an institution connected with the Holy See (in accordance with articles 186 and 190-191 of the Apostolic Constitution *Pastor Bonus*) which is endowed with canonical public juridical personality and Vatican civil juridical personality (q.v. *Statute*, art. 1 § 4). According to its *Statute*, it promotes the quality of research and teaching (q.v. art. 1 § 2) of ecclesiastical institutions (q.v. art. 1 § 3). It also evaluates whether adequate international standards have been reached. Although it has its legal base in the Vatican City State (q.v. art. 1 § 5), it enjoys autonomy in particular vis-à-vis the Congregation (q.v. art. 2). Besides its President, its Director and its administrative personnel, the Agency has a Board of Directors and a Scientific Council, whose members, appointed by the Holy Father, come from all over the world.

- a. At this time, all ecclesiastical Universities and Faculties throughout the world “are normally subject to evaluation by the Holy See’s Agency for the Evaluation and Promotion of Quality in Ecclesiastical Universities and Faculties” (AVEPRO)” (VG, *Norms of Application*, art. 1 § 2). To this end, ecclesiastical institutions are invited to form an internal working group to begin the evaluation process as well as to make contact with AVEPRO ([www.avepro.va](http://www.avepro.va)).
- b. So as not to overburden needlessly the academic authorities and so as not to distract them from their mission of teaching, research and accompaniment of their students, the new Apostolic Constitution foresees that the report asked of the Chancellor is now to be every five years (q.v. VG, *Norms of Application*, art. 9, 7). The documentation (or part of it) gathered in preparation for the self-evaluation report and/or Strategic Plan, in conformity with AVEPRO’s guidelines, whose visits are generally every five years, can act as a basis for drawing up the said *relatio*.

## 7. Diploma Supplement

The new Apostolic Constitution foresees that “in countries where the international conventions stipulated by the Holy See require it, and in institutions where the academic authorities deem it opportune, as well as the authentic documents of the academic degrees there is also to be a document with further information regarding the curriculum of studies completed (for example, the *Diploma Supplement*)” (VG, *Norms of Application*, art. 39). The revised model for the Diploma Supplement, adopted by the Paris Summit (24-25 May 2018), will soon be approved by UNESCO for the following regional conventions to which the Holy See is party: with immediate effect, for the Convention for the European region and the Convention for Asia-Pacific; and, later, for the revised Conventions for Latin America and the Caribbean, and the Convention for Africa. As regards the precise form of the Diploma Supplement, the Congregation for Catholic Education will publish information so as to guarantee unity and comparability within the Holy See’s entire system of Higher Education, after UNESCO has given its definitive approval. In the meantime, multilateral obligations mean that the Diploma Supplement is to be issued:

- a. automatically to all students together with their degree certificates of the first, second or third cycle, without the student having to request it explicitly;
- b. in a language spoken internationally in addition to the national language of the institution (in general, English, French or Spanish);
- c. without cost to the student.



## 8. Refugees, forcibly displaced persons and those in similar situations

Among the obligations that derive from UNESCO's regional conventions, to which the Holy See is party, there exists the requirement concerning the recognition of the studies and academic degrees of refugees, forcibly displaced persons and those in similar situations. Therefore,

- a. the new Apostolic Constitution asks each Faculty to “determine in its Statutes procedures for evaluating the ways to treat the cases of refugees, forcibly displaced persons and persons in similar situations who lack the normal documentation required” (VG, art. 32 § 3).
- b. Since the specific points (procedures to be followed, deadlines and costs, the obligation to provide extensive information to potential applicants and the institutions concerned, the introduction of the so-called background document and specifications regarding its procedure, form and legal value) go beyond what the above-mentioned article could lay down, this Congregation will develop appropriate guidelines as well as requirements that are globally applicable.

## 9. Distance Learning

Universities must face the development of distance learning in many ways. The result is an array of offerings that remains very informal and has not yet allowed for international agreement in this area. For example, UNESCO has not given clear indications in this regard that are shared and accepted by all. Faced with this reality, some Ecclesiastical Faculties desire to offer various kinds of distance learning. In the past, our Dicastery authorized distance learning not for Ecclesiastical Faculties but, *ad experimentum*, for some Higher Institutes of Religious Studies. With the promulgation of *Veritatis Gaudium* there is an important innovation, since the *Norms of Application* foresee that “part of the courses can be realized by distance learning, if the Plan of Studies approved by the Congregation for Catholic Education foresees it and specifies its conditions, especially as regards the examinations” (VG, *Norms of Application*, art. 33 § 2). To evaluate properly the requests that it will receive, our Dicastery desires to establish the most objective criteria possible, while at the same time maintaining an attitude of collaboration rather than competition, since there is “the urgent need for ‘networking’ between those institutions worldwide that cultivate and promote ecclesiastical studies” (VG, Foreword, 4, d). With this in mind, we kindly ask the academic authorities’ opinion (if possible, by 31 March 2019, either by mail, or by e-mail to [vati2182@cec.va](mailto:vati2182@cec.va)) on the criteria that they would hold to be decisive regarding the following points:

- a. criteria for admission to the programme;
- b. how to position it within the Holy See's qualifications framework;
- c. degrees and other awards granted at the end of the programme;
- d. percentage of credits obtained (each semester/year/cycle) by distance learning;
- e. relationship with the teacher, with the tutor, with the other students, with the academic leadership;
- f. the necessary amount of in-class time, and the division of distance learning among the various forms of teaching and learning (lectures, seminars, colloquia, etc.);
- g. examinations and forms of overseeing/supervising them;
- h. didactic aids; internet platforms, etc.
- i. reference to AVEPRO for quality assurance for all programmes;
- j. the case of joint degrees/programmes;

- k. fees;
- l. other observations.

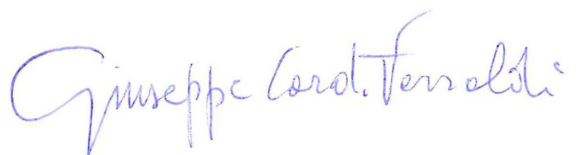
## 10. Any Further Suggestions

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.

We thank the Rectors of Ecclesiastical Universities as well as the Deans and Presidents of Faculties for their active participation in the various meetings, by Continent, to present *Veritatis Gaudium*.

The recipients of 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, art. 10), are asked 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 cooperation in the reception of 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.

  
+ D. Vincenzo Zani, Leg.