

**ACCCR Statement on Pope Francis' *Motu Proprio*:  
On Promoting Theology**

Catholic theology is at a turning point. On 1 November 2023, Pope Francis endorsed a major evolution. It is, as it always has been, a search for understanding but it is no longer restricted to Scripture and Tradition as sources. Francis is clear; the experience of human living is an essential source of theological reflection. The traditional description, "faith seeking understanding" has been declared inadequate and has been superseded.

The human experience of the faithful, the concrete situations in which we live, and the knowledge we gain through our relationships with one another are genuine sources of mature theology.

Movement towards this position has been going on for some time. Vatican II suggested it in *Gaudium et Spes*. Theologians including Karl Rahner, Bernard Lonergan, Gustavo Gutierrez, Leonardo Boff and others pioneered this approach in the aftermath of the council. However it has been met with overwhelming passive resistance by many bishops and clergy, preachers and commentators and even some faith formation programs with the result that most Catholics know little or nothing about it.

A theology that speaks to people as a living spiritual and intellectual inspiration and guide must be grounded in the human experience of a personal search for integrity, wholeness and a truly fulfilling life. Real relationships of love, whether intimate as in a family, shared as in a community or drawing us to transcendence as with God, are central to the theological enterprise. It is not abstract and ideological, but spiritual. By spiritual Francis clearly means the concrete reality of an integrated authentic person living in life-giving relationships with God and others. "It is impossible to know the truth without practising love, engaging and connecting with others."

Theology must be grounded in the prevailing socio-cultural environment. Its existential basis is in reading and interpreting the Gospel in the real-life conditions in which women and men live daily, in different geographical, social, and cultural environments. Doctrines must evolve and develop to meet the needs and circumstances of particular populations, cultures and conditions in order to present the Gospel message effectively.

Genuine theology is a liberating search for understanding our world for which it must engage with other branches of knowledge, collaborating with all, to be relevant for our times. It has to become a true critical discipline.

Acknowledging the experience of people outside Catholicism is essential. Theological reflection is to be undertaken in a culture of dialogue and encounter between different traditions and knowledge, different Christian confessions and different religions, openly engaging with all, believers and non-believers. This emphasis on the experience of other faiths and of non-believers, is revolutionary. The church is a sacrament of salvation; all who live and work for salvation in whatever way belong in the church

In this instruction, Pope Francis gives a powerful affirmation to the *Sense of the Faith of the Faithful*. He recognises that living a life of faith, of being in love with God, reveals otherwise unknown truths. As Pascal said: “The heart has reasons that reason does not know”. Wisdom is not the preserve of church authorities and academics alone.

The Pope also makes up for an appalling feature of the Synod Synthesis Report – the omission of any reference to the role that ordinary Catholics have played in fostering the Christian vision and values in the absence of clergy as, for example, in the first settlements in Australia, the Amazon region today and the Irish penal times.

The task now for ACCCR and all concerned Catholics is to promote awareness of the *Motu Proprio* and to work for its implementation by everyone for whom theology, implicit or explicit, is relevant to what they do.

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