

**Visit to the Faculty of Theology at Saint Augustine's Seminary,
Toronto: Address for the luncheon (28 August, 12.00)**

Comments from the Faculty: "for the 10–15 min Formal Address during the luncheon on August 28, if it pleases Archbishop Polvani, some affirming words regarding the importance of ecclesiastical studies in the life of the Church would be appreciated."

Your Eminences, Your Excellencies, Reverend Fathers,
Civil Authorities, Students,
Brothers and Sisters,

On behalf of Cardinal José Tolentino de Mendonça, Prefect of the Dicastery for Culture and Education, I am pleased and honored to address you today as we celebrate the Faculty of Theology at St. Augustine's Seminary.

The Faculty of Theology of St. Augustine's Seminary will be called to train students to address some of the great questions of our times. The advances of various technologies, in particular in the fields of biology and computer science and the irruption of Artificial Intelligence, has brought us to ponder in a new way who we are as humans, and how we are distinct from the rest of creation.

Indeed, biochemical advances in understanding the functioning of DNA – especially augmented by machine learning models that can process an entire genome and predict the results of its modifications – will increase the possibility not only of advanced therapies, but also of artificially genomes assembled by the sole decision of human beings. Indeed, the outbreak of Artificial Intelligence will question more and more the specificity of human intelligence. These are just two examples of how, the developments in the fields of science and technology, will translate into deep philosophical and theological questions all having to do with a fundamental one: "what does it mean to be human?". As you know, some public thinkers have gone so far as to suggest – and some even to hope – that humankind will transcend itself and guide its own evolution into a new species.

Pope Leo XIV highlighted this same issue of what it means to be human in his first Encyclical Letter, *Magnifica humanitas*. And our Holy Father faces these concerns not with fear or hesitation, but by confidently announcing the greatness of humanity itself.¹ The book of Genesis underscores that God created man and woman as the very pinnacle of the material universe; and that God not only made us the most advanced animals but in fact created us in His own image. Our first instinct to confirm this insight, might be to look to the history of the great accomplishments of human cultures and individual geniuses. And yet, this might prove a difficult approach, because such a study will inevitably show humans to be able of the greatest good and yet the greatest evil through the same discoveries. The same advanced image-recognition techniques that are used to diagnose cancer early and save lives are also employed to launch autonomous drones that kill men and women on the battlefield., for instance.

Pope Leo XIV frames this contrast as a choice: a binary choice between to models of humanity: the Tower of Babel and the New Jerusalem: “Humanity, created by God in all its grandeur, is today facing a pivotal choice: either to construct a new Tower of Babel or to build the city in which God and humanity dwell together.”² The Holy Father invites us to consider the possibility that the true greatness of humanity lies not in any particular accomplishments, but rather in our human nature itself. This human nature is unique in the gift of freedom we have received from our Creator, which makes us capable not only of self-discipline and personal growth, but also of genuine relationships with other persons and ultimately with God Himself. The Pope, therefore, teaches that “the Church reminds us, with a firm yet humble voice, that true fulfilment is not achieved by eliminating weakness but through harmonious growth. It is found where freedom and responsibility are intertwined with mutual care and true solidarity, and where progress is measured by the dignity of each person and the good of all peoples.”³

¹ Pope Leo XIV, *Magnifica humanitas* 1(hereafter MH).

² MH 1.

³ MH 12.

In his structuring of the Encyclical, Pope Leo makes use of the rhetorical structure called *inclusio* to illustrate this point. The opening words boldly proclaim the greatness of humanity as created by God, is a truth that is accessible to all. As the Encyclical progresses, however, the Holy Father gradually deepens this notion of greatness, drawing the reader closer to the revealed mysteries of God. God's revelation of Himself first and foremost enables us to know and to love Him ever more; indeed, He draws us into friendship with Himself. Then, as in any true friendship, we come to love those people whom our friend loves, and thus God's revelation leads us to see more clearly the true grandeur of each human person as beloved of God.⁴

Indeed, God's love for us is so immense that "the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us, and we saw his glory, the glory as of the Father's only Son, full of grace and truth."⁵ It is here that Pope Leo closes the *inclusio* and thus shows us the full span of his idea of our greatness of humanity: "I entrust our desire to the Mother of Christ, to the Woman of the *Magnificat*, that she may guide our steps through this time of change and preserve in each of us true faith in the Gospel, so that we may bear witness to the *grandeur of humanity, in which God has made his dwelling*."⁶

Therefore, to fully answer our question—what does it mean to be human?—we must look upon the face of the Son of God: as Pope Leo writes, "for this reason, as a believer among believers, I invite everyone to contemplate, in the face of the Son of God, the *grandeur of humanity* that shines a light also on the era of AI."⁷ Our instinct to the build the Tower of Babel, to reach to heights beyond our natural capacity, finds its true fulfilment here: "if an authentic 'more than human' exists," it is found not in "a technological divinisation, but through God's grace received in Christ."⁸

⁴ Thomas Aquinas, ST II-II.23.1, <https://aquinas.cc/la/en/~ST.II-II.Q23.A1>.

⁵ John 1:14, https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0839/_PX9.HTM.

⁶ MH 245; emphasis added.

⁷ MH 233.

⁸ MH 126.

The Holy Father directly connects this gazing on the face of Christ with the work of theology, writing: “*Gaudium et Spes* reminds us that ‘it is the task of the whole People of God, particularly of its pastors and *theologians*, to listen to and distinguish the many voices of our times and to interpret them in the light of God’s word, in order that the revealed Truth may be more deeply penetrated, better understood and more suitably presented.’

Listening to the ‘many voices’ is no mere sociological exercise, but instead requires *spiritual discernment*. Guided by the Spirit, the People of God come to recognize in cultural and social transformations both the signs of the presence of Christ, who comes and guides history toward its fulfilment, and those that obscure his face.”⁹

The Apostolic Constitution *Veritatis gaudium*, by which Pope Francis renewed the governance of Ecclesiastical Faculties, reminds us that a Faculty of Theology “has the aim of profoundly studying and systematically explaining, according to the scientific method proper to it, Catholic doctrine, derived with the greatest care from divine revelation. It has the further aim of carefully seeking the solution to human problems in the light of that same revelation.”¹⁰

As Pope Leo expresses it, the Gospel “offers a vision of the human person, relationships, authority and the common good that is still capable of guiding economic, political and cultural choices today. In other words, the Gospel remains relevant because it provides the criteria for recognizing what humanizes or dehumanizes and what liberates or oppresses in ever-changing situations.”¹¹

This new Faculty of Theology, therefore, is called to contemplate the face of Jesus Christ, the Son of God who became man; to receive from past generations the knowledge of what they have seen in this contemplation; to be nourished by your contact with God through His revelation; and to promote the true grandeur of

⁹ MH 22, emphasis added.

¹⁰ Pope Francis, *Veritatis gaudium*, art. 69-

¹¹ MH 36.

humanity by communicating to the world the grandeur of Jesus Christ. This is, of course, the evangelical mission that Christ has entrusted to all of His disciples. However, the Holy Father asks “academic institutions and universities” in a particular way “to give fresh impetus to these principles, and to apply them in a way that will be relevant and effective in addressing the digital revolution. In this way, theological and philosophical enquiry will be able to further explore and support the Church’s pastoral journey, and contribute to the Magisterium’s task of enlightening the consciences of the faithful and guiding their efforts to make the life of our societies more just and fraternal.”¹²

On behalf of Cardinal José Tolentino de Mendonça, Prefect of the Dicastery for Culture and Education, I ask you to take to heart these emphases of Pope Leo and to keep them in mind even in the day-to-day routine of lectures, meetings, reading, and exams. There is an element of the grandeur of humanity to be found in the freedom with which you dedicate yourselves to your daily tasks as well as in the concrete community which you form here.

As you seek the face of Christ through your long hours of study, I invite you to ask Him to also teach you to find His face in your neighbour, whether your current companions in this Faculty, or your families, or the parishes you serve, or the stranger you encounter on the street.

Our society is seeking to understand what it means to be human. It will be your mission to show them the grandeur of humanity revealed in the Incarnation and shared with each of us by Grace. As Pope Francis specified in His Apostolic Letter on Blaise Pascal, the greatness of humanity is entrenched in a reality that the great French philosopher and scientist formulated in a piece of paper he always kept closed to his heart: “Everlasting joy in return for a single day’s effort on earth¹³”.

¹² MH 47.

¹³ Pope Francis, Apostolic Letter *Sublimitas et miseria hominis* (cfr. Blaise Pascal, *Œuvres Complètes*, par L. Lafuma, cet., n.193).