



Vatican City, 8 December 2020

**CONGREGATIO  
DE INSTITUTIONE CATHOLICA  
(DE STUDIORUM INSTITUTIS)**

830/2020

**Circular Letter n. 3**

**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. 3 – addressed to all Chancellors, Rectors and Deans of Ecclesiastical Faculties – is intended to complement Circular Letter n. 2 (8 December 2019) in expressing and realizing the Holy See's care for the promotion of ecclesiastical studies.

**1. Situation in Society Created by the COVID-19 Health Emergency**

The situation in society created by the COVID-19 pandemic has had a most significant impact on higher education and academic institutions worldwide. Before all else, the Congregation for Catholic Education warmly thanks all academic authorities, teachers, officials, and administrative and service personnel who, with great dedication and skill, are assisting the students to continue effectively in their ecclesiastical studies, often under difficult circumstances.

Taking into account the relative instructions from civil authorities, this Congregation, which has received numerous requests for guidance, has addressed the issue several times, within the limits of its possibilities, to help and encourage those involved in our institutions. The Congregation's first statement (Note of 12 March 2020, quoted also in its Communiqué of 7 April 2020) addressed the question of examinations carried out on-line. Subsequently, on 6 May 2020, the Congregation published extensive *Transitional Norms for the Application of the Apostolic Constitution Veritatis Gaudium in the public*

*health emergency arising from the COVID-19 epidemic*, which dealt with examinations and equivalent tests, courses taught on-line, enrolment documents and procedures, the duties of the Chancellor, ecclesiastical Faculties within non-ecclesiastical Universities, sessions of Faculty Councils and other organs of government, updating the database (which is very important at this time), and – finally – emphasizing how very important it is that the challenges posed by the crisis find an adequate pastoral response. With the *Norms of Application of the Apostolic Constitution Veritatis Gaudium for the Coming Academic Year*, published on 15 June 2020, in consideration of the developments in society due to the worldwide health situation, the Congregation extended the *Transitional Norms* of 6 May 2020; it also emphasized the Universities’ and Faculties’ autonomy and the principle of subsidiarity when applying the criteria of *flexibility* (in an emergency situation that is truly exceptional), *clarity* (to avoid ambiguity and misunderstandings in interpreting instructions) and *equity* (i.e. parity of condition for all subjects involved). All these *Norms* were published on the Congregation for Catholic Education’s website ([www.educatio.va](http://www.educatio.va), under heading “Documents”) and then distributed in hard copy.

On 10 September last, we sent a *Circular Letter to Schools, Universities and Educational Institutions*, to express our closeness and encouragement to families, teachers, management, administrative personnel and, especially, students, bearing in mind that education is an extraordinary opportunity for relaunching every society’s public and cultural life, and is the best investment for building the future, by providing formation for our young people.

At this time, in which “we have realized that we are on the same boat, all of us fragile and disoriented, but at the same time important and needed, all of us called to row together, each of us in need of comforting the other” (*Extraordinary Moment of Prayer Presided Over by Pope Francis, 27 March 2020*), the Congregation for Catholic Education emphasizes its complete availability, and offers its support to accompany in the best way possible all persons and institutions involved in the field of higher education.

## **2. Instruction on the Use of Distance Learning in Ecclesiastical Universities and Faculties**

The situation in society due to the health emergency has made it necessary to use distance learning in our ecclesiastical Universities and Faculties, despite its obvious limitations. This is not just a technological change, but something that can alter academic culture, which has to remain at the service of the people’s holistic formation.

Therefore, the Holy See, well before the current health crisis began, expressed its interest in this way of teaching. In fact, the Congregation for Catholic Education had already granted the possibility – on an experimental basis – to Higher Institutes of Religious Sciences to teach some subjects via distance learning, with the proviso that certain conditions were adhered to with respect to community formation and academic formation.

Pope Francis' Apostolic Constitution *Veritatis Gaudium* (8 December 2017) advanced this process, by introducing important criteria for some aspects of how distance learning is realized. Thus, it insists on “the urgent the urgent need for ‘networking’ between ... institutions” (VG, Foreword, 4, d). It underlines that “universities constitute the main centres of scientific research for the advancement of knowledge and of society; they play a decisive role in economic social and cultural development, especially in a time like our own, marked as it is by rapid, constant and far-reaching changes in the fields of science and technology” (VG, Foreword, 5). It exhorts ecclesiastical Faculties that “up-to-date didactic and teaching methods should be applied in an appropriate way, in order to bring about the personal involvement of the students and their active participation in their studies” (VG, article 37 § 2). It encourages each ecclesiastical Faculty to “have information and technical audio-visual equipment, etc., to assist its didactic and research work” (VG, article 56 § 1). It invites ecclesiastical Faculties, both those of the same region and those of a wider territorial area, to cooperate so as to foster “the advance of interdisciplinary collaboration, which appears to be ever more necessary”, to contribute “to the development of complementarity among the various Faculties”, and, in general to help “to bring about the diffusion of Christian wisdom throughout all culture” (VG, article 66). Ecclesiastical Faculties and Universities now have the possibility, with the prior approval of this Dicastery, to draw up Plans of Study in which “part of the courses can be realized by distance learning” (VG, *Norms of Application*, article 33 § 2).

In its Circular Letter n. 1 (8 December 2018), the Congregation for Catholic Education asked the academic Authorities of the world's ecclesiastical Faculties and Universities as what criteria they held to be decisive with regard to the following: admissions criteria for such programs; how to place them in the Holy See's qualifications framework; degrees and other awards to be granted at the programs' conclusion; the percentage of credits obtainable via distance learning; the student's rapport with his/her teacher, his/her tutor, the other students and with the academic leadership; how many in-presence meetings are necessary, and distribution of distance learning among the various forms of teaching and learning (lessons, seminars, colloquia, etc.); examinations and ways to oversee the same; teaching aids, such as digital platforms; rapport with AVEPRO for verifying the quality of all such programs; cases of joint degrees/programs; fees; other observations.

Collating the results of this wide consultation, the aforementioned *Instruction*, soon to be published, will offer guidelines and norms for the use of distance learning in ecclesiastical Faculties and Universities, and thus assist their progress and development.

### **3. AVEPRO in Today's Context**

The health emergency has led the Agency to review its practices and policies both in terms of internal organization and as regards its evaluation of ecclesiastical academic institutions. The logic that inspired these decisions regards the service that the Agency is obliged to offer. AVEPRO's work methodology is not based on programmed responses of punishment/reward, but is there to support the Faculties as they nurture a culture of quality. It follows that the evaluations are organized in tandem with the institutions and is based on their specific needs. The Agency has adopted criteria and instruments to be able to effect visits either on-site or on-line; but preferably in blended form, i.e. with at least one Commission member on-site and the others following on-line.

Such flexibility comes naturally to AVEPRO and is mentioned several times in its 2019 *Guidelines* for evaluation and quality promotion. The *Guidelines* contain changes that follow legislation or are consequences of the Holy See's participation in international networks; but they are also the result of lessons learned and experience gained during the Agency's first years of operation.

When drafting and setting down these *Guidelines*, AVEPRO aimed to address two levels of complexity: on the one hand, the growing need to cultivate the process aspect of Quality Assurance, i.e. to make the care for quality an on-going activity within the Holy See's system of higher education; and, on the other hand, the desire, expressed by many institutions, to link Quality with Strategic Planning as closely as possible.

It seems appropriate to underline that these Guidelines have the principal aim of guaranteeing a shared, unified path of direction for all ecclesiastical academic institutions present in Europe and worldwide, while avoiding entering too much into specifics thus respecting the individual institutions' diversity and particular nature, in their respective circumstances. In fact, following the publication of the Apostolic Constitution *Veritatis Gaudium* and the corresponding *Norms of Application*, AVEPRO is now called to operate in an international setting, in conformity with the Church's universal vocation, and therefore not only in Europe but worldwide. In this development, cooperation with local and regional Bishops' Conferences will be crucial, to share in the Mission and service for the benefit of the whole academic community and the Universal Church.

#### 4. Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications in Higher Education

The rapid growth of higher education's internationalization is destined to continue: according to UNESCO, today more than 5.3 million students study abroad.

UNESCO's Asia-Pacific international conference of Ministers of Higher Education, which took place in 2011 in Tokyo, initiated discussion on the possibility, feasibility and appropriateness of a *Global convention on the recognition of academic studies and degrees worldwide*. Subsequent evaluation of the plan by international experts led to support for the idea, with the proviso, however, that the *Global convention* non overlap with the *regional conventions* nor impede the good results already achieved, especially in the case of the *Lisbon Convention*.

The principal idea – shared particularly by the delegates from Africa, Asia, the Arab countries and other experts, including the Holy See, who were commissioned directly by UNESCO to draw up the text's first draft – was to follow the *regional conventions* as regarded the technical aspects and, for the *global convention*, to concentrate on the basic values and principles of higher education as a shared good and an eminent means for promoting human beings' personal growth, the development of nations, and justice and peace among peoples, including an insistence on a more equitable distribution of the relative educational resources worldwide.

The text, reworked and shared for consultation among the various countries, was submitted to two UNESCO-based International Conferences of States, in 2018 and 2019. Then, following further discussion at UNESCO's General Conference, the *Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education* was adopted on 25 November 2019 in Paris. The Holy See actively participated in all these Conferences, and managed to maintain the universal and “umbrella” nature of the *Global Convention* over the other *regional Conventions*, even in the face of efforts to curb its importance. Now, UNESCO's member countries and the Holy See are invited to proceed with its ratification. Seeing as the *Global Convention* requires the ratification of at least twenty countries, is it probable that some time will pass before it enters into force.

Nevertheless, right from the start of negotiations the extra-judicial benefits of the *Global Convention* became evident: a broader perspective regarding global questions among countries and higher-education systems; a heightened appreciation for the work of the Holy See as the *de facto* only global player; a renewed impetus in almost all areas of the world for promoting the work of national and regional recognition, e.g. the effort to

review the *Regional Convention of Arab States*, the signing of the revised *Regional Convention for Latin America and the Caribbean* on 13 July 2019 (Buenos Aires Convention), further ratifications of the *Regional Convention for Africa* and its entering into force on 15 December 2019, and – not least – the creation of the APNNIC network (*Asia-Pacific Network of National Information Centres*, to which the Holy See’s International Centre for Recognition also belongs) in September 2019.

The text in various languages can be found at: <https://en.unesco.org/themes/higher-education/recognition-qualifications/global-convention>

## **5. Doctoral Theses**

The doctorate, which is the academic degree that allows one to teach in a Faculty, requires “a doctoral dissertation that makes a real contribution to the progress of science, written under the direction of a teacher, publicly defended and collegially approved; the principal part, at least, must be published” (VG, art. 49 § 2). The preparation of the doctoral dissertation as well as the norms for its public defence and distribution can vary, while always respecting the “necessary requisites” (VG, *Norms of Application*, art. 36 § 1) set out in the Faculty’s Statutes. Considering developments in the world of research, the Apostolic Constitution *Veritatis Gaudium* allows, where the Plan of Studies foresees it and determines its conditions, that the publication of the dissertation may be done “electronically”, as long as “the dissertation be permanently accessible” (VG, *Norms of Application*, art. 36 § 2).

To respond to “the urgent need for ‘networking’ between those institutions worldwide” (VG, Foreword, 4), there is the recommendation to send a copy of the dissertation to Faculties, at least those of the same region, which deal with the same sciences. In any case, the academic Authorities of all ecclesiastical Faculties are reminded that “a printed copy of the published dissertation must be sent to the Congregation for Catholic Education” (VG, *Norms of Application*, art. 37).

## **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 Card. VERSALDI**

*Prefect*



**Angelo Vincenzo ZANI**

*Titular Archbishop of Volturno*

*Secretary*