



CONGREGAZIONE
PER L'EDUCAZIONE CATTOLICA
(DEGLI ISTITUTI DI STUDI)

00120 CITTÀ DEL VATICANO

Vatican City, 8 December 2021

Prot.: 907/2021

Circular Letter n. 4

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. 4 – addressed to all Chancellors, Rectors and Deans of Ecclesiastical Faculties – follows Circular Letter n. 3 (8 December 2020) in expressing and realizing the Holy See's care for the promotion of ecclesiastical studies.

1. *Instruction on the Use of Distance Learning in Ecclesiastical Universities and Faculties* (13 May 2021)

Since the early years of this millennium, the influence of digital means of communication on the world of formation and teaching has drawn attention to the broad category of "distance learning". This is not only a technological innovation that has been introduced into the world of university formation: it is also something capable of profoundly changing academic culture and of rewriting practices for how to educate and learn, as well as the goals of formation.

Therefore, even before the publication of the Apostolic Constitution *Veritatis Gaudium*, the Holy See has shown an interest in this way of teaching. Indeed, some years ago the Congregation for Catholic Education granted to certain Higher Institutes of Religious Sciences license to teach some courses by distance learning, as long as certain conditions were fulfilled as regards the students' formation as part of a community. In

fact, Catholic education is never a mere process of passing on facts and intellectual skills: rather, its aim is to contribute to the person's holistic formation in its various aspects (intellectual, cultural, spiritual, etc.), including, for example, community life and relations within the academic or educational community, in close contact with the teachers, non-teaching personnel and the other students.

A further step forward took place with publication of the Apostolic Constitution *Veritatis Gaudium*. Ecclesiastical Faculties and Universities now have the possibility, with the previous consent of this Dicastery, of drawing up Plans of Studies where “part of the courses can be realized by distance learning” (VG, *Norms of Application*, art. 33 § 2).

The aim of this Instruction (www.educatio.va) – the result of a wide-ranging consultation of all Ecclesiastical Faculties and Universities (q.v. Circular Letter n. 1, of 8 December 2018), expert contributions from international specialists in the field, as well as proposals from the Members of this Congregation and from various administrations of the Roman Curia – is to offer guidelines and rules regarding the various teaching methods (with percentages prescribed for distance learning), the importance of academic relations (with particular attention to the person of the tutor), the diversity of students (especially pastoral works, members of the contemplative life and those on the human peripheries), access to the library and databases, the question of student evaluation, etc.

2. Credits

The *Norms of Application* of the Apostolic Constitution *Veritatis Gaudium* refer to the number of credits (q.v. articles 55, 1°, a; 64 § 3; 66, 1°, a). There have been requests for clarification about this matter directed to our Congregation; to answer them, we deem it necessary to revisit this question, keeping in mind however that ecclesiastical studies cannot be limited to passing on knowledge, professional competence and experience to the men and women of our time who desire to grow as Christians, but must also take up the urgent task of developing intellectual tools that can serve as paradigms for action and thought, useful for preaching” (VG, Foreword, 5). From this point of view, it would be a serious error to circumscribe the academic work of a student in an ecclesiastical faculty to simply completing “the Plan of Studies, obtaining the respective comparable formative credits/ECTS. Rather, the student must broaden the horizon of his or her academic formation by frequenting lectures; by participating in assignments and frequenting seminars; by private study; by his or her personal work under the guidance of the teachers; by writing papers; by actively joining in with other students; by research; by pastoral action; and by taking examinations (q.v. VG, art. 33; VG, *Norms of Application*, arts. 3,

32, 33 § 1)” (*Instruction for the Use of Distance Learning in Ecclesiastical Universities and Faculties*, II).

To respond properly to the Faculties’ expectation, and to respect the obligations that the Holy See has assumed on the international level, the Congregation will prepare regulations concerning credits. In this regard, it would be useful to receive, by mail or by email (segedu@libero.it), by 31 March 2022, any relevant observations you may wish to make.

3. Other Awards

In reply to other questions raised, we should like to clarify what was stated in Circular Letter n. 1 (8 December 2018). The Apostolic Constitution *Veritatis Gaudium* 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). 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.

We add that the other awards are “considered as qualifications aimed at presenting and deepening a specific aspect of Christian truth” (q.v. VG, Foreword, 4 a) (*Instruction for the Use of Distance Learning in Ecclesiastical Universities and Faculties*, article 7 § 1) and “inspired by the criteria of interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity” (article 7 § 2).

These other awards, although they have received the *nihil obstat* of the Congregation, are awards proper to the Institution. Therefore, as such, they cannot be validated by the Congregation nor by other Dicasteries of the Holy See nor by the various Apostolic Nunciatures.

4. Any Other Suggestions

The Congregation for Catholic Education wishes to repeat that it is completely ready to support the best possible reception of the 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’ 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