

## **UST Opens Two-Day Forum on Education, Cultures, and Religions in a Post-Pandemic Era**

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Manila 28 April 2023 --- The two-day Saint Thomas Aquinas Forum or STAF opened at the Dominican-run Pontifical University of Santo Tomas, also known as “UST,” in Manila.

The research forum is organized yearly by the UST-Institute of Religion’s Professional Advancement and Research Committee or PROARC for academics, theologians, religious educators, catechists, and students of theology.

The aim is to discuss, update and deepen the participants’ knowledge about topics of concern and importance to theology and spirituality.

This year’s theme “Catholic Education, Cultures and Religions: A Post-Pandemic Conversation” was formulated to respond to a call Pope Francis made in November 2019 seeking the creation of an international alliance of Catholic learning institutions dubbed the “Global Compact on Education.”

This network would be an instrument of animating an “educational village” while ushering in a renewed commitment to education at local and international levels.

In his message for the 2020 meeting organized by the Congregation for Catholic Education on “Global Compact on Education: Together to Look Beyond,” the Pope underlined the significant role of education in “promoting a culture of dialogue, encounter, and mutual understanding.”

The Pope's call thus resulted in the formation of the "Global Compact on Education Observatory" (GCEO) in 2020 to work under the Vatican Dicastery for Culture and Education.

UST became part of GCEO along with nine Catholic universities, including this year's STAF co-organizers: the IUS or *Instituto Universitario Sophia* in Florence, Italy, and LUMSA, the *Libera Università degli Studi Maria Ss. Assunta di Roma*.

Their task is to oversee good practices and propose measures that will address concerns related to the Holy Father's vision in the field of Catholic education.

Some 261 participants from five countries, namely the Philippines, Indonesia, Vietnam, Japan, and Italy, registered for STAF 2023.

Of the total number of registrants, 112 participants joined the hybrid meeting via Zoom video conferencing, while the rest gathered face-to-face at the Thomasian Alumni Hall inside the Manila-based campus.

In his Opening Remarks, UST Rector *Magnificus* Fr. Richard G. Ang, OP gave the program rationale and highlighted the need for Catholic education to continue its mandate amid changes in the socio-religious and cultural landscape.

Fr. Ang stressed "open collaboration in research" of important topics like human dignity and human rights; fraternity and cooperation; technology and integral ecology; peace and citizenship; and cultures and religions.

The Pontifical University is called to be an active proponent of “cultures and religions” research given its Asian home’s rich cultural and religious diversity.

Echoing Pope Francis’ 2019 message to students, parents, and teachers, Fr. Ang said preserving the identity of Catholic learning institutions makes for effective dialogue with world cultures and religions.

In the 2022 Instruction of the Congregation for Catholic Education entitled “The Identity of the Catholic School for a Culture of Dialogue,” the Pope was quoted saying: “We cannot create a culture of dialogue if we do not have an identity.”

Day one of STAF 2023 also heard special messages from the Apostolic Nuncio to the Philippines, Archbishop Charles John Brown, and LUMSA Rector, Dr. Francesco Bonini.

In a recorded message, Archbishop Brown urged Catholic learning institutions to engage and collaborate in the Global Compact on Education through listening, openness to dialogue, and sustained reflection on the post-pandemic state of Catholic education.

Catholic learning institutions must “advance a new humanism based on the teachings of Christ, and “find new ways” of sharing the Christian faith relevant to the call of the times.

Dr. Bonini, meanwhile, described the events in 2019 when the Pope’s first call was made leading up to the formation of the GCEO.

He mentioned headways that have expanded the network of universities adhering to the proposed framework of dialogue and “service-learning” approaches. These steps could help realize the goals of the Global Compact on Education on both local and international levels, Dr. Bonini said.

The Keynote Address was then delivered by the Prefect of the Vatican Dicastery for Culture and Education, Jose Tolentino Cardinal de Mendonça.

In a recorded message, the prelate urged Catholic universities to join the Church’s opposition to emerging trends but also attempts that seek to “diminish the reasonableness of faith” while “delegitimizing reason.”

Catholic universities should opt for pedagogies founded on a “humane rationality” that is always in search of the truth while remaining open to discussion and dialogue, Cardinal de Mendonça said.

The prelate also urged Catholic educators to “re-propose the meaning of man, of life, and of the world, and to recover the centrality of the human person not as a mere consumer or user but a divine being created in the image and likeness of God.”

Cardinal de Mendonça’s talk resonated with the ideals of the 2022 Instruction on the Catholic identity of educational institutions, mainly that they remain the Church’s voice as “Mother and Teacher.”

Catholic schools must “combine their work of education” with “explicit proclamation of the Gospel” and continue to be valuable resources for the “evangelization of culture.”

The first plenary session then heard Fr. Jesus Miranda, OP expound on the topic “Interreligious and Intercultural Exchange in Catholic Education.”

Fr. Miranda said the family, where the child’s first religious formation takes place, is as important as the school where teachers fulfill their vocation by being “authentic disciples of the Christian faith.”

Fr. Miranda said Catholic schools must promote dialogue with cultures and religions in order to make possible the “journey with the Other (person)” with humility, openness, and receptivity.

The afternoon session heard a total of 24 paper presentations which were organized in two parallel sessions each with four clusters.

A broad range of topics was covered, directly or indirectly exploring the contextualized versions of Pope Francis’ seven commitments for the “Global Compact on Education.”

Those commitments deemed urgent in today’s milieu include making the human person the center of educative initiatives; listening to children and young people; advancing women; empowering the family; fostering a culture of inclusion; finding new ways to understand economy and politics; and safeguarding our common home.

A vote of thanks for presenters, guests, and organizers capped the day's activities along with celebratory remarks commemorating the Pontifical University's 412<sup>th</sup> founding anniversary on the same day.

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