

UST holds Day Two of Academic Forum on Education, Cultures, and Religions

Anthony G. Roman

Manila, 29 April 2023 --- Day Two of the annual Saint Thomas Aquinas Forum, or STAF, was held today at the Pontifical University of Santo Tomas' Thomasian Alumni Hall or BGPOP Building in the Manila campus.

Over 260 participants from the Philippines, Indonesia, Vietnam, Japan, and Italy joined the “hyflex” meeting, 112 of whom opted to attend via the video conferencing app Zoom.

This year, UST co-hosted with IUS, the *Instituto Universitario Sophia* in Florence, Italy, and LUMSA, the *Libera Università degli Studi Maria Ss. Assunta di Roma*.

All three higher education institutions are members of the ten-body “Global Compact for Education Observatory” formed in 2020 following Pope Francis’ 2019 call seeking the creation of an international alliance for Catholic education.

As a response to that call, the April 28-29 STAF 2023 was themed “Catholic Education, Cultures and Religions” in the post-pandemic era.

This year’s event aims to provide a platform for exchange in building an “educational village,” which Pope Francis said should be based on “open and human relationships.”

In a 2019 document co-signed by Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azha, the Holy Father said education must be

preceded by an environment without discrimination, and where fraternity flourishes.

Technology-driven changes that threaten traditional paradigms, call for the kind of education that “unifies and respects all aspects of the human person,” the document states, in order to maintain the “solidity and psychological structure” of the human identity.

STAF 2023 is an opportunity for Catholic theologians, scholars, educators, formators, as well as students to discuss and reflect on these issues from a spiritual and theological standpoint.

Participants from the Philippines and Asia will be able to update on trends in contemporary Catholic education in the spirit of unity, sharing, and dialogue.

Day Two of the conference opened with a synthesis of Day One activities from UST-IR faculty Dr. Concepcion Liza V. Corotan.

The second plenary talk from IUS acting rector Dr. Declan O’Byrne immediately followed.

Dr. O’Byrne’s discourse on “Interreligious and Intercultural Exchange in the Global Village” echoed the Pope’s analysis detailed in the 2015 Encyclical *Laudato Si* that education today is challenged by a phenomenon called “rapidification.”

Through “high-speed technology and computerization,” this process “traps humanity’s existence,” and “alters traditional points of reference” leading to a “loss in people’s identity and psychological structure.”

The IUS Director of the Post-Doctoral School then stressed the need to foster interreligious and intercultural exchanges in as much as they allow for a deeper appreciation of one's identity and the realization of his "giftedness for others" at the same time.

Putting our strengths in a "village of education" promotes "open collaboration, engagement, and sharing of positive experiences with others," Dr. O'Byrne said.

While communication technologies are found beneficial to certain "processes of interaction," the professor said, they have yet to prove their capacity to "develop wisdom," "build peace," and maintain cultural diversity.

People must remain open to "offline" or physical engagements so as to "develop wisdom" and "mature as individuals" interconnected in today's "global village." Every person and community "must find the right balance between the local and the global," Dr. O'Byrne added.

In the third plenary talk, LUMSA chair for human sciences, Dr. Maria Cinque, cited prospects and challenges in promoting "Catholic Education in the *Digiverse*."

Digiverse, or the network of digital applications shaping people's lives, results in a lived experience of combined "online" and "offline" dynamics. This phenomenon Dr. Cinque terms "onlife" poses challenges to both utilization and overall governance of cyberspace.

From convergence in "digital squares" like chatrooms, blogspots, and others, the professor urged the requisite and complementary

move towards “physical” spaces where genuine learning, sharing, networking even pastoral care can occur.

Dr. Cinque echoed Pope Francis’ call for responsibility, commitment, and ethical use to realize the positive potentials of communication technologies, which when abused compromise “fairness” in classroom management.

In an April 2023 meeting at the Vatican, the Pope said “I am convinced that the development of artificial intelligence and machine learning has the potential to contribute in a positive way to the future of humanity; we cannot dismiss it.”

“At the same time, I am certain that this potential will be realized only if there is a constant and consistent commitment on the part of those developing these technologies to act ethically and responsibly,” the Pope added.

In the afternoon, a “Roundtable” gave invited resource speakers the opportunity to share insights on the challenges posed by the Global Compact on Education.

Dr. Cheryl R. Peralta, UST Vice-Rector for Academic Affairs, detailed the Pontifical university’s post-pandemic plan to expand the use of communication technologies while integrating service-learning approaches in its academic offerings.

She said that the changing context of education due to constant technological innovations demands that higher education institutions “rethink, reframe and redesign education.”

Echoing Pope now Saint John Paul II in the 1990 Apostolic Constitution *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, Dr. Peralta said education should teach future leaders “to serve humanity better because knowledge is meant to serve the human person.”

She stressed the important role of Catholic educators in “rehumanizing in the age of machines, by placing the human person at the center of every learning opportunity.”

Meanwhile, Dr. Roberto Catalano from the IUS Department of Theology, Philosophy, and Human Sciences, highlighted the need to recenter education on human dignity and flourishing.

This is the antithesis of the paradigm set by multinational corporations whereby education is mistakenly placed at the service of employment, investments, and profit. Today’s global society “fails to combine identity and otherness” and thus, disunites and fragments with an “exclusivist sense,” the professor said.

The model of an “educational village” proposed by the Global Compact on Education, however, will accommodate processes, not least a “culture of dialogue, that augurs well for human and community development, the professor said.

The third Roundtable speaker, Dr. Carina Rossa from the Congregation for Catholic Education of the Holy See, listed pedagogical guidelines on the conduct of interreligious and intercultural dialogues.

An “inclusive sociology for centering the human person” is imperative, Dr. Rossa said, coupled with learning about different

cultures within “experiential spaces” that allow the free-flowing exchange of cultural narratives.

Listening to testimonies of “credible witnesses” is also paramount in the creation of platforms for diverse cultural and religious expressions. The same platforms should be open to interdisciplinarity and trans-disciplinarity, Dr. Rossa said.

She also mentioned that “full participation, open-mindedness, and inter-generational dialogue enrich people’s memory and perspective.”

Finally, Dr. Rossa said can well respond to the Global Compact on Education by discovering the truth and goodness through the “path of beauty.” This will ensure unity not just in content and methods but also in attitudes and behavior toward dialogue and education.

Dr. Ruben Mendoza, Theology Department Chair of the Quezon City-based Ateneo de Manila University, shared measures to gauge the effectiveness of Catholic educational institutions.

He mentioned clarity of vision and mission, particularly an institution’s marked contribution to the “protection and advancement of humanity” in general.

Another measure is determining how well an institution is able “to mold minds and form hearts” to adhere to the mission of Catholic education, Dr. Mendoza said.

Sustained efforts should be in place constantly seeking the development of programs that effectively fuse social with spiritual goals, while making them accessible to the underprivileged sector.

Academic programs must foster “conscientization” that is akin to the 1970s movement, critical thinking, as well as openness to ecumenism and dialogue. Overall, Catholic schools must “empower people in their role as agents of social change,” Dr. Mendoza said.

In his Closing Remarks, the UST Vice-Rector for Religious Affairs, Fr. Pablo T. Tiong, OP, thanked the organizers and all who made STAF 2023 possible.

Fr. Tiong said he is hopeful that the Global Compact on Education partner institutions would continue responding to the call for a “village of education” where the human person is placed at the core of “every educative endeavor.”

The Dominican Friar repeated the message of STAF 2023 Keynote speaker, Jose Cardinal de Mendonça, Prefect of the Vatican Dicastery on Culture and Education, that Catholic universities should “educate towards a ‘more humane rationality,’ always in search of the truth, the whole truth, and being continually open to discussion and dialogue.”

Fr. Tiong entrusted the cause of continuing relevance and advancement of Catholic education to the care of UST’s Patron St. Thomas Aquinas, whose 700th anniversary of canonization will be celebrated on March 7, 2024.

* Anthony G. Roman, MCM MAT is a faculty member of the UST-Institute of Religion. Inquiries may be sent to agroman@ust.edu.ph

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