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Head of Rome's Gregorian University seeks trust, respect from Vatican

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When Catholic bishops and theologians come into arguments about the teachings of the church, they must enter into a dialogue where there is "trust and respect on every side," the head of one of the oldest and most respected Catholic universities said in June.

If theologians find themselves in conflict with the Vatican over their writings, said Jesuit Fr. François-Xavier Dumortier, the two sides must presuppose "that the other one is open to you, ready to talk to you, ready to explain to you if something is not clear or if something is not OK."

"The church is not a kind of ideological structure," said Dumortier, who heads Rome's Pontifical Gregorian University, which the Jesuits have run since 1551 (with a brief interlude in the 18th century) and is known for granting theology degrees to many of the world's bishops.

"There is no police system," Dumortier continued. There is "no FBI, no CIA within the church structure."

Dumortier spoke to *NCR* at the sidelines of a conference of European theologians [1] held June 27-29 at Berlin's Katholische Akademie.

Among other issues the university rector discussed:

- How the Gregorian seeks to form its students for leadership in the church.

  "We are very aware that most of them, because of their ministry, will be in charge of people and assuming responsibilities," he said. "To be responsible means to respond. They will have to respond to the people. They will have to respond to the people who trust them."

- Tendencies among modern seminarians to favor more traditional modes of being Catholic.

  "I think the present generation of students is not the generation of people who were students 30 years ago or 20 years ago," he said. "The expectations of this generation are very demanding in terms of: What is faith about? What is Catholic identity about? What do fidelity to the pope and to the church mean and imply?"

- The role of the various Vatican congregations not as an administrative center, but as the "heart of the church."

  "Rome is Rome because of Saints Peter and Paul," he said. "If and when Rome is not able to bring life and to bring love in some way within the world and to make people loving people within the church for

the service of the whole humanity, something is wrong."

Dumortier was appointed to lead the Gregorian for a three-year term by Pope Benedict XVI in September 2010. His appointment was renewed for another three years by Pope Francis, a Jesuit, in May.

A French native, Dumortier served as the head of the Jesuit order in France from 2003 to 2009. A philosophy professor, he is also a former rector of Centre Sèvres, the Jesuit faculty of philosophy and theology in France, where he was rector from 1997 to 2003.

Following is the full interview with Dumortier, edited for context and length. Dumortier spoke in English with occasional pauses for word choice.

***NCR*: You were recently reappointed as the rector of the Gregorian for another three-year term. How did the first term go? What were your biggest accomplishments?**

Dumortier: When I was appointed the first time as rector, I had no experience of Rome, of the pontifical universities in Rome, or of the Gregorian. I was not a former student and I was not a former professor of the Gregorian, so I knew very little. It was necessary to learn everything. It was a kind of novitiate at the beginning.

The first year was a kind of learning time for me and of discovering also the structure of the Gregorian. It's a very old institution, founded in 1551 by St. Ignatius as the Collegio Romano, and [is] indeed a complex institution.

The second important thing during my first term was to work with the deans and vice rectors as a team to initiate a few reforms. So, for instance, we initiated the restructuring of the lecture rooms in order to modernize them.

Thirdly, I had to appoint new people as directors of departments, deans and presidents of institutes. Moreover, there were some significant events: Last year, we had a symposium on sexual abuse.

And there are also a lot of activities that are extracurricular, but from my point of view, a university is not only a program of courses and seminars, but we have also to promote within the city of Rome a kind of intellectual activity. It is why we set up also a new center for young people, the Center for Faith and Culture, named after the Chilean Jesuit Fr. Alberto Hurtado.

For some people, the Gregorian has a reputation of being very formal -- maybe the most formal of the universities in Rome. It publishes the names of alumni who become bishops or cardinals.

First of all, let me say that we have six faculties. Each faculty is different with some specific features: the faculty of canon law has a long tradition of taking very seriously canon law as it is written in a quasi-exegetical way.

The faculty of theology is the largest faculty of theology in the world with about 1,300 students. And we have more than 400 people for the Ph.D. program in theology. It's a huge number. Therefore, any change in the pedagogy and in the way of doing it takes time. And we have to proceed carefully, respecting everybody.

Right at the beginning, I made an evaluation of various aspects of the university and I must say: The programs are very good. [The] people are very, very committed and hard-working people and, according to me, very good people.

Regarding the choice of bishops and cardinals, the Gregorian is not a school for bishops. As the pope reminded the nuncios recently, they have to make choices on the ground.

As for us, we try to do the best for our students, to structure them by an integral formation so they learn to serve the people and the church as best they can, wherever they will be after their education. Then, if they are good people, intelligent people, they might receive some responsibilities in the church. It might be a result of their formation at the Greg -- it's not a reason for applying for studying at the Gregorian.

We are not preparing people for official positions. Since 85 percent of our students are seminarians, priests, nuns or religious, we are very aware that most of them, because of their ministry, will be in charge of people and assuming responsibilities.

To be responsible means to respond. They will have to respond to the people. They will have to respond to the people who trust them.

You were reappointed in May?

At the end of May.

You met with the pope in June? What is it like to meet with this pope?

When the pope was elected in March, the next day we had an academic event at the Gregorian, the "academic day." There were about 600 students gathered in two lecture rooms. The main speaker was speaking about the councils, from Trent to Vatican II, in the church.

Introducing him, I said it would be good to begin our meeting praying for our new pope elected the day before. On behalf of all, I said it was a joy for us that such a man, who is a Jesuit and coming from the "end of the world," according to his own words, was elected because we were already feeling something of his humility.

There was a huge applause. And I said, I'll write a letter to invite him to come to the Gregorian. All the popes did in the past, and the university, as a pontifical university, is under his responsibility.

At the end of June, I got a phone call from the Vatican telling me the day and time of the audience. So I went and I met him. He is very simple. He is very fraternal. I was very touched.

Can you share anything he might have said about the role of the Gregorian, the role of education or the role of theology?

He knows the Gregorian, and I was very moved because in his first Angelus at St. Peter's Square he mentioned the Gregorian in connection with God's mercy and compassion.

He knows the Gregorian. He didn't ask me about programs and so on. I don't think I can say what he told me because it was a kind of personal and private meeting. He is the pope and, at the same time, he's a brother as a Jesuit. I can say that everything he said since he was elected sounds very Jesuit, at least from my point of view.

Something that has been mentioned at this meeting is how some students who are studying theology feel a need to express more traditional modes of being Catholic. How is that affecting the education of students?

Personally, I don't like too much the traditional terminology of "conservative" or "progressive." I think the present generation of students is not the generation of people who were students 30 years ago or 20 years ago. Most of them -- at least when they are coming from North America and Western Europe -- are coming from and

living in secularized societies.

There was certainly a kind of break in the process of transmitting faith in such a social environment, and I think that in post-modern societies, the Christian faith is no longer obvious. It's a kind of personal choice.

Because the average Christian culture is very often weak, everybody has to strive to deepen his own faith. The expectations of this generation are very demanding in terms of: What is faith about? What is Catholic identity about? What do fidelity to the pope and to the church mean and imply?

So the first reaction is not to raise questions or doubts, saying, "I don't know if," but to say, "I would like to know": "I would like to know how the church is, what the church is saying, teaching, doing." But the background is a desire of being Christ's followers, being Christ's disciples within the world as it is.

It's always a pedagogical challenge to take students as they are. It's my conviction, and I expressed it several times to the faculty staff, that at the heart of a university, there is not an academic program. There are the students and the students as they are today.

And we have to help them to grow in their intellectual understanding of what faith is about and in their ability to serve the church and God's people as best they can according to their cultural and national context and to go to the deeper level of their own humanity and Christian faith.

According to me, an intellectual formation at the Gregorian unites growth in humanity and discovery of God's and Christ's revelation.

Obviously, the task of theology is to study God or to study the revelation of God. At this meeting, something that came up several times is the issue of dialogue: with each other as theologians and also between theologians and representatives of the institutional church, particularly the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. In your role, what kinds of things do you think need to be modeled for that dialogue?

I think we have to be very aware of the conditions of dialogue. The conditions of dialogue are trust and respect on every side. Not everything is to be demanded or required from one side and not from the other. Moreover, dialogue is between free people, and freedom means responsibility.

I think there is no dialogue when the people are not taking very seriously their responsibility as free people. From my point of view and according to my experience, the relationships with the congregations in Rome are of mutual trust. Trust is the natural way of relating to one another. Moreover, if there is some problem, it's important to say that there is such a problem, and if there is no problem, to say there is no problem.

The church is not a kind of ideological structure. There is not a kind of control of everybody. There is no police system -- no FBI, no CIA within the church structure.

I think that the worst is certainly to lose trust or to live a kind of mistrust. It's my conviction that dialogue is the first thing. And there is no dialogue when there is no trust, no openness.

Is the task ahead to find ways to build trust?

I think trust is always a kind of process. You have to prove that people can trust you. But in my spirituality as a Jesuit, there is what we call a presupposition, a kind of prerequisite that the other one is open to you, ready to talk to you, ready to explain to you if something is not clear or if something is not OK.

Sometimes I think that the image of Rome from the outside is different from what people are living in Rome on

the daily basis.

The image outside Rome is not accurate?

I think that the image outside Rome is often to see Rome as the center of the church, as a kind of big and administrative center regulating the church life. I said several times that perhaps Rome is the center of the church, but first of all, it is the heart of the church.

Rome is Rome because of Saints Peter and Paul. If and when Rome is not able to bring life and to bring love in some way within the world and to make people loving people within the church for the service of the whole humanity, something is wrong.

And I think many people are trying to do their best to make Rome the heart of the church.

Part of this meeting has been to try and connect Western Europe with Eastern Europe. From your perspective, what should the West look to learn from the East?

First, I was born after the Second World War, and I had been living the Cold War until 1989. Eastern Europe was in my prayers because I have had the chance to know a little bit the reality of the Eastern part of Europe, and I have been very struck by the situation of our brothers in Europe.

I have read the main novelists and also the main philosophers. Personally, I think that, as Westerners, we didn't take enough into account what we must learn from their experience of resistance, of living dark times until a kind of new birth. 1989 was a kind of political miracle. So I think we have to take this very much into account.

The two parts of Europe right now are different, but we are the same and one Europe, from my point of view. When I go to Poland, I feel to be European, and sometimes more than in some parts of my own country. I am very much European and very much in favor of the European Union.

Europe has something to do and something to say as one Europe with its two parts. Within the Eastern part of Europe, the Eastern churches have their own tradition, their own spirituality.

I think, as Pope John Paul II expressed it, that we must breathe with our two lungs -- to breathe only with one is to miss the other one. The two parts of Europe are really complementary in many regards, and we have a lot to learn from one another.

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