

EXTERNAL EVALUATION REPORT FACULTY OF THEOLOGY, UNIVERSITY OF LUCERNE, SWITZERLAND

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► Introduction

The Faculty of Theology in Lucerne (from now on: TF) is the oldest institution of higher education for Catholic theology in Switzerland. Its origins go back to a Jesuit college founded in the sixteenth century. Academic studies in philosophy and theology were offered there since 1600. Since 1771, the Canton of Lucerne officially designated the institution as a Faculty of Theology. After the suppression of the Jesuit order, the Faculty became a public institution. In 1938 Pius XI. confirmed the use of the designation "Faculty". In 1964 a catechetical institute was established at the TF for the formation of religious education teachers; it is unique in Switzerland. (In its name, the term *catechetics* was replaced in 2004 by the term *religious pedagogy*.) In 1970 the Lucerne government granted the Faculty the right to confer academic degrees according to civil law. In 1973, the Holy See permanently approved the TF as an Ecclesiastical Faculty. When the University of Lucerne was established as a public university in 2000, the TF became part of the University. In 2005, an agreement on the TF was concluded between the Bishop of Basel, the University of Lucerne and the Canton of Lucerne, replacing older agreements from the time when the Faculty was not yet integrated into a university.

The TF is one of four faculties of Catholic theology in Switzerland. Two of them (Fribourg and Lucerne) are part of a public university, while the other two (Chur and Lugano) are under ecclesiastical sponsorship. While the faculty in Lugano serves the Italian-speaking part of the population, the other three faculties offer study programs in German; the faculty in Fribourg also offers programs in French. It is clear that the main competitor of the TF is the faculty in Fribourg.

In the fall of 2019, the TF contacted AVEPRO to prepare an evaluation of the Faculty, as required by the 2017 Apostolic constitution *Veritatis gaudium*. It was decided to carry out this evaluation within the framework of the institutional accreditation of the University, carried out by the Swiss Agency AAQ, as required by Swiss legislation. To this end, an agreement had been concluded between AVEPRO and AAQ on 29 September 2020, defining this type of collaboration as a pilot project. It was agreed that those elements of a typical AVEPRO evaluation not covered by the institutional accreditation would be evaluated by AVEPRO. Therefore it was not necessary for the TF to submit a complete self-evaluation report according to AVEPRO standards; instead, it was considered sufficient to submit a self-evaluation report that included the following parts:

- the SWOT analysis;
- AVEPRO's standards 4, 5, 6 and 7:
 - ✓ Standard 4: General overview regarding programmes: education, multi-disciplinary, inter-disciplinary and trans-disciplinary approaches;
 - ✓ Standard 5: Strategies and modes of learning and the centrality of students;
 - ✓ Standard 6: Support and services for students;

- ✓ Standard 7: Learning and teaching: definition of study plans, their monitoring and review, appreciation of teaching staff;
- the statistics required by a typical AVEPRO evaluation.

As an expert for the external evaluation, on November 26, 2020, AVEPRO appointed:

- Prof. Dr. Ulrich Rhode SJ, professor of the Faculty of canon law of the Pontifical Gregorian University, Rome, and dean of the same faculty.

He joined the expert group that had been appointed by AAQ and that had five members:

- Prof. Dr. Thomas Puhl, rector of the University of Mannheim, Germany (president of the expert group);
- Prof. Dr. Stephanie Bohlen, vice-rector for teaching, Katholische Hochschule Freiburg, Germany;
- Dr. Christine Fahringer, director of quality management, University of Innsbruck, Austria;
- Prof. Dr. Maarten Hoenen, professor of philosophy, University of Basel, Switzerland;
- Ruth Sophie Thommen, student in the master program in social anthropology, University of Neuchâtel, Switzerland.

A pre-site visit was held on 11 January 2021. The main site visit took place from 9-11 March 2021. Due to the pandemic caused by the coronavirus, both the pre-site visit and the main site visit were conducted by video-conferencing. The AVEPRO expert attended both the meetings held by the AAQ expert group with the different groups of the University, and special meetings organized for the evaluation of the TF. These special meetings took place on the afternoon of 11 March 2021. On this occasion, the AVEPRO expert met with

- the Chancellor of the TF, i. e. the Bishop of Basel, Mons. Felix Gmür, together with a staff member responsible for Catholic education in the diocese;
- the staff of the TF: the dean, the persons responsible for the study programs, the heads of the institutes of the Faculty, representatives of the professors and the assistants (“Mittelbau”), the persons responsible for the quality management and for the evaluation of the Faculty, and administrative staff of the Faculty;
- a group of seven students of the TF.

The AVEPRO expert received the same material from the University as the members of the AAQ expert group. The cooperation between him and the other experts was harmonious. During the meetings with the different groups of the University the AVEPRO expert was allowed to ask questions in the same way as the other experts. During the discussion of the AAQ expert group on the accreditation of the University the AVEPRO expert was present as a listener, without interfering in the discussion, and without voting rights. He was not asked to participate in the preparation of the AAQ expert group report. The members of the AAQ expert group were invited to participate in the meetings with the different groups of the TF; however, none of them chose to do so. AAQ’s support throughout the evaluation process was excellent. During the meetings with the groups of the TF, one AAQ staff member took detailed notes.

In retrospect, it seems unfavourable that AVEPRO had appointed only one expert. Compared to a group of at least three (a president, a student, and one or more experts for specific areas), as the AVEPRO Guidelines provide, a single expert necessarily has less experience; and he has no opportunity to consult with other members of a commission appointed for the same ecclesiastical institution. For these reasons, the AVEPRO expert strongly recommends to AVEPRO for future evaluations to follow its Guidelines and appoint for its commissions at least three members, even when the evaluation is conducted in collaboration with another quality assurance agency. – Another limitation of this evaluation was the limited time available for the meetings with the groups of the TF. For future evaluations it is recommended to significantly increase the number of meetings with different groups; especially meetings with smaller groups (e.g., only with a group of professors) would most likely increase the possibility to get to know different and opposing opinions within the Faculty.

1. Self-Evaluation Report/SER

The SER of the TF was approved by the Assembly of the TF on 20 October 2020. The members of this Assembly include professors and lecturers, students, and non-teaching staff of the TF; in this way, all relevant groups of the TF were able to participate in the approval process. The finalized version of the report is dated 13 November 2020. Excluding the indexes, statistics and appendices, it has 18 pages. The statistics fill another

er six pages. While the original version of the SER is written in German, a full translation into English was also provided. (One may ask whether it was appropriate to request this, given that the AVEPRO expert is a native German speaker.) A further 24 documents were submitted as appendices to the report. At the request of the AVEPRO expert, the TF provided seven additional documents on 2 February 2021. After the site visit, the TF added a document on electronic resources of the library. Documentation on the drafts of the new versions of the plans of studies¹ (“Studien- und Prüfungsordnungen”) and related material was submitted by the Chancellor (the Bishop of Basel) after the site visit.

With respect to the preparation of the report, the SER itself refers to several processes and documents that had been produced in recent years: a document describing the “vision” of the Faculty, as first articulated in 2010; a strategy process that the TF undertook between 2012 and 2018; and the documentation of that strategy process, as adopted in December 2018. Also several central offices of the University provided information for the preparation of the SER. A number of surveys that had been conducted in previous years – both general surveys conducted by the University, and specific surveys conducted by the TF – were used to prepare the SER. No further surveys were conducted specifically for the SER.

➔ *Comments and observations*

With few exceptions, noted below, the SER has been prepared with great care and accuracy. It contains a detailed SWOT analysis, and it covers all the areas and topics that had been requested for this evaluation; all the statistics required by the AVEPRO Guidelines are also present. Given the eminent role of the strategy process for the government of the TF, it was surprising that the documents resulting from this process were not part of the SER appendices; they were instead classified as “internal documents”. Nevertheless, these documents were accessible to the AVEPRO expert, because they were part of the documentation provided by the University for its accreditation process. Obviously the University considered the strategy process carried out by its TF as exemplary.

During the site visit, an important topic of discussion with the Chancellor and with the staff of the TF were the plans of studies for the canonical degrees. In particular, the discussions dealt with the question of their approbation by the competent ecclesiastical authorities, and with the fact that the TF already in 2017 has submitted to the Chancellor new plans of studies for these programs; these plans of studies have been forwarded to the Congregation for Catholic Education (CCE), and the TF is since then waiting for their approbation. The representatives of the TF spoke with great candour about this topic. It is not clear why the SER had avoided this topic. On the other hand, the documentation provided by the Faculty created some confusion by including in the description of the current study programs some information that actually referred already – without saying so – to the future plans of studies that are not mentioned in the SER and that are not yet approved.

Four of the 24 appendices of the SER refer to the distance learning mode. The high level of attention given to this issue seemed to indicate the existence of some tensions in this area. To some extent, these tensions were already visible in the respective appendices. In the discussions during the site visit they became quite evident. However, the SER seemed rather to hide these tensions, only trying to highlight the advantages and quality of the distance learning mode.

➔ *Recommendations*

- While it is certainly legitimate to present a SER that reflects the opinion of the majority of the Faculty, it would be helpful for the visiting commission in a future evaluation to receive a report that mentions also the actual difficulties and disagreements, both those that exist among faculty members and those that concern relations with the relevant external authorities.

2. Vision, Mission, Governance and Strategic Plan

In accordance with the agreement between AVEPRO and AAQ (cf. Introduction, above), the subjects of this section of the report were not directly among the subjects of the evaluation by AVEPRO. Nevertheless, the

¹ “Plan of studies” is the term used on the Vatican website for translating the Latin term *ratio studiorum* in *Veritatis gaudium* (cf. the heading before art. 37, and especially art. 30 of the Norms of Application for *Veritatis gaudium*). It refers to those regulations of studies and examinations (“Studien- und Prüfungsordnungen”) that require the approbation of the Congregation for Catholic Education.

SER, its appendices and the discussions during the site visit shed some light also on these subjects. However, as they are not the focus of this report, they are only briefly presented here.

The TF has 13 chairs. Eleven of them serve the typical disciplines of a faculty of theology, including a chair of philosophy; in addition, there are chairs of “Jewish Studies and Theology” and of “Islamic Theology”. There are currently 19 other lecturers, who are not employed in a permanent manner. The figures given do not include the lecturers of the Institute for Religious Pedagogy (RPI); at present there are 20. Eight of them are permanent, though it seems mostly part-time. According to the TF website, the numbers of assistants employed by the Faculty (“Mittelbau”) is about 25; about five of them are funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNF). As a result, it can be stated that the ecclesiastical norms on the minimum number of teaching staff are met. There are also adequate numbers of administrative staff. While Faculty funding has declined slightly over the past five years, it still appears to be sufficient.

The number of students was reported separately for the TF without the RPI (244) and for the RPI (68). Considering the tuition fees charged by public Universities in Switzerland (about 800 – 1000 Swiss francs per semester), it is safe to assume that these numbers represent students who are actually studying. In the last five years student numbers have remained more or less stable. Compared to other faculties of theology in the German-speaking countries, where the student numbers are declining – especially in the canonical study programs –, this is remarkable. In the SER, the statistics on student numbers distinguish the students according to the degree programs. Students in the full study program (“Vollstudium”, “quinquennium”) and in the major-minor program (theology combined with another discipline) study for the same degrees (Bachelor of Theology and Master of Theology). Thus the statistics in the appendix of the SER did not allow to determine how many students are in the canonical study programs. However, the TF provided this information after the site visit.

The Assembly of the TF has adopted a document entitled “Leitbild” that describes the mission of the TF. The current version is from 2017, and it mentions the mission that the TF has received from the Church, the integration of the TF into the University, the integration of research and teaching, the TF’s commitment to the students, and also its third mission. The vision and strategy of the TF can be identified in the documents of the strategy process (from 2010 to 2018). For the period from 2019 to 2026, they describe initiatives in ten areas: Teaching, Research, Continuing Education, Third mission, Cooperation, Organization, Government, Marketing and Communication, Human Resources, Finances.

It is evident from the SER and from the discussions during the site visit that the existence of the TF is highly appreciated both by the Canton – that mentions it in the law governing its University – and by the University itself. Considering that the TF – like many other faculties of theology – has many professors for relatively few students, this appreciation is remarkable. On the other hand, as is evident from the agreements between the University and the Canton as its owner, the Canton expects a slight but steady increase in student numbers from year to year. The TF makes every effort to contribute to the achievement of this goal. In particular, it strives to establish new study programs and to increase enrolment through the possibility of distance learning.

In both teaching and research, the TF is heavily involved in inter- and trans-disciplinary projects. It participates in a joint-degree Master’s program “Religion – Economy – Politics”, and collaborates in the three research priorities of the University.

For an evaluation by AVEPRO, it is natural to pay particular attention to the relations between the TF and the ecclesiastical authorities. In this respect, the agreement between the Canton, the University and the Bishop is of the utmost importance. In its essential aspects (involvement of the local bishop in the appointment of professors; possibility of dismissing a professor by the request of the bishop; consent of the bishop for the plans of studies) it corresponds to similar agreements in Austria and Germany. There is one significant difference: while the respective conventions in Austria and Germany require the consent of the respective bishop for all plans of studies, the agreement for Lucerne limits this need to the canonical degree programs. While this was less problematic in 2005 when the agreement was made, it does not conform to the norms of *Veritatis gaudium*, that require not only the approval of the canonical plans of studies, but also a *nihil obstat* for non-canonical plans of studies. From the Church’s point of view, a revision of the treaty would be desirable in this regard, although this may be difficult to achieve in practice. Of course, the responsibility to take the initiative for such a revision does not lie with the TF. Nevertheless, it is advisable that the TF be aware of this par-

ticular situation (cf. what is said below, in section 3, on the non-canonical study programs).

As for the Bishop of Basel, the TF maintains contact with him as its Chancellor. It sees him as its ally in the negotiations with the CCE with regard to the approbation of the canonical study programs. On the other hand, the relationship with the Chancellor is not free of tensions. He does not feel sufficiently informed about and involved in some decisions of the TF, e.g. on significant changes of the study programs, and on honorary doctorates.

As for the status of the TF as an Ecclesiastical Faculty recognized by the Holy See, there is some ambiguity. In recent decades, especially since the integration of the TF into the University in 2000, compliance of the TF with the relevant norms of the Holy See has been incomplete. This is especially true with respect to compliance with the norms of the Holy See on the canonical degree programs, as will be explained below in section 3 (“Learning and research”). At the same time, however, there is a clear desire on the part of the TF to maintain its status as an Ecclesiastical Faculty and to continue to offer the canonical degrees. The current leadership of the TF has impressively demonstrated its commitment to making this possible.

For several years the TF suffered from uncertainty about the relationship between the evaluation of the canonical study programs by a quality assurance agency on the one hand, and the ecclesiastical approbation on the other. The order to be followed between the two steps was unclear to the TF. It seems that the TF felt caught between conflicting expectations. As it appears, this uncertainty was caused not only by a lack of information about the applicable standards and procedures, but also by misleading and contradictory advice received from those responsible for the evaluation and approbation.

➔ *Comments and observations*

The documents on the vision, mission and strategy of the TF appear consistent and realistic. They show an honest willingness on the part of the TF to reflect on its situation and a strong commitment to improve.

While the TF actively involved its Chancellor whenever necessary to implement its strategy, there were also instances when it avoided informing him when it made decisions with which he might disagree. With regard to the requirement of a *nihil obstat* from the Chancellor for the appointment of a professor, there were difficulties arising from the length of time that the procedure could take in some cases.

➔ *Recommendations*

- It is recommended to strengthen the trustful dialogue with the Chancellor, especially when there are difficulties concerning the granting of the *nihil obstat* for the appointment of a professor.
- It is recommended that the TF keep itself continually informed of the current norms of the Church on higher education and the current procedures of implementing them. It may be helpful to seek more external advice on these matters.

3. Learning and Research

According to the agreement between AVEPRO and AAQ (cf. Introduction, above), teaching and learning were at the focus of the evaluation by AVEPRO. While the research projects conducted by the members of the TF are obviously numerous and of a high quality, they were not an object of this evaluation.

3.1 Study programs

The study programs offered by the TF can be divided into four groups, according to whether they (A, B, C) follow the Bologna model or (D) do not, whether the respective degrees (A, B, D) are offered by the TF or (C) by others, and whether the degrees (A) have a canonical recognition or (B, C, D) do not:

(A) With regard to the typical canonical study programs offered by a Faculty of Theology, the situation is this:

- In the TF, the full study program (“Vollstudium”, “quinquennium”), that according to Church legislation leads to a canonical *baccalaureatus* in theology, is substituted by the sequence of a “Bachelor of Theology” and a “Master of Theology” program.
- While the canonical licentiate is not offered by the TF, it is possible to study for a doctorate in theology (“Dr. theol.”), i. e. for the canonical doctorate according to Church legislation.

(B) The TF then offers several non-canonical degrees:

- theology as a major-minor program, i.e., a combination of theology as major with another subject of

choice as minor discipline; the degrees awarded in this program carry the same title as the degrees awarded in the full study program, i.e. “Bachelor of Theology” and “Master of Theology”, but with a different subtitle noted on the diplomas;

- a Bachelor and Master in Religious Education;
- a Master in Liturgical Music, in cooperation with the Lucerne School of Music; this program is not currently offered for financial reasons; the degree in this program would be called “Master of Theology”, as in the full study program and in the major-minor program;
- a Doctorate in Philosophy in Theological Studies, leading to a non-canonical “Dr. phil.”-degree.

(C) Third, the TF offers some programs that lead to a degree only in combination with other elements:

- a minor in ethics (for bachelor’s and master’s degrees) and presumably also – although not mentioned in the SER – a minor in theology;
- an Inter-University Joint degree Master’s program in Religion-Economics-Politics; this degree is awarded in cooperation with the Faculty of Culture and Social Sciences and the Universities of Basel and Zurich.

(D) Finally, there are some other programs that do not follow the Bologna model:

- the Diploma program offered by the RPI;
- an “Episcopal study program”; the TF and the Diocese of Basel are jointly responsible for this curriculum; it allows for the admission of students who do not meet the state requirements for enrolment in a university.

While the programs of the groups A, B, C follow the Bologna model in that they lead to a bachelor’s or master’s degree, there are details that deserve a new consideration. Among these details is the fact that neither the current plans of studies (of 2013) nor the drafts of the new ones (of 2017) require a bachelor thesis. Another important question is the number of examinations. It seems that the current norms require exams for the individual courses. This naturally leads to a high number of exams. Therefore, it cannot be surprising that among all Faculties of the University it is mainly the TF whose students complain about a high number of examinations. The TF has acknowledged that a reflection on this issue is necessary in the context of the revision of the study and examination regulations.

For an adequate evaluation of the canonical programs, it is important to take into account the common practice at the Swiss faculties of Catholic theology, and the legal situation at the faculties of theology in Austria in Germany. In this way, the characteristics of the programs offered by the TF can be distinguished into three categories: (i) features common to the Swiss faculties of theology; (ii) practices shared by the TF with the faculties of theology in Germany and Austria; (iii) features unique to the TF, i.e. features that do not belong in either of the other two categories.

(i) As a result of the Bologna reforms, three of the four faculties of Catholic theology in Switzerland (Chur, Fribourg and Lucerne; but not Lugano) have replaced the full study program (“Vollstudium”, “quinquennium”) with a sequence of a Bachelor of Theology and a Master of Theology program. While the CCE has not endorsed this practice at the international level, it has apparently tolerated it in Switzerland. There is even a 2005 document of the Swiss Bishops’ Conference (but not approved by the CCE) that adopts this model. At present, the Swiss Bishops’ Conference desires two new documents to be issued: a decree of accommodation of *Veritatis gaudium* to the situation in Switzerland, to be published by the CCE itself; and framework regulations for the five-year full study program in philosophy and theology, to be published by the Bishops’ Conference, as part of the national norms on priestly formation. In the meeting during the site visit, the Bishop of Basel, who is also the President of the Swiss Bishops’ Conference, confirmed the preparation of these documents. – At the TF, the current version of the plans of studies for the full study programs is from 2013; the AVEPRO expert has not been able to determine whether it has been approved by the CCE. – Just a few years later, in 2017, the TF prepared a new draft, and submitted it to the Chancellor. He confirmed that this version is in line with the drafts of the framework regulations of the Bishops’ Conference, and had been forwarded to the CCE for approbation. At present, the TF is awaiting a response from the CCE. This seems reasonable, even though the 2017 draft already requires some revision in light of *Veritatis gaudium*.

(ii) In Austria and Germany, the CCE issued two “accommodation decrees” (to *Sapientia christiana*) in 1983, according to which admission to doctoral studies in theology, under certain conditions, is possible after com-

pletion of the five-year full study program in theology, even without having obtained a licentiate in theology. (At present, these accommodation decrees are in a revision process, due to *Veritatis gaudium*.) – In 2003, the TF adopted a new plan of studies for the doctorate in theology, which presupposes the same possibility. In this plan of studies, which is still in effect today, the licentiate is not even mentioned. While in this respect the plan of studies is not significantly different from plans of studies for the doctorate in theology in Austria and Germany, it appears that in Lucerne the plan was adopted without a legitimate basis in Church law. It seems that the TF has become the only faculty of Catholic theology in Switzerland that does not offer the canonical licentiate. The AVEPRO expert has not been able to determine whether that plan of studies for the doctorate has been approved by the CCE. – A draft of a new plan of studies for the doctorate, with the last update of 2017, was submitted to the Chancellor. It makes reference to the CCE's 6th Circular Letter of 2009, in which the CCE required a “structured doctorate”, whenever a student without a licentiate is admitted to the doctorate program. The draft requires the completion of 60 credits during the first two years of the doctorate studies and states that this meets the requirements of a canonical licentiate. As it appears, the draft is consistent with what the CCE expects of a doctorate program. At this point it seems reasonable to wait for a response from the CCE, even though the 2017 draft already requires some revision in light of *Veritatis gaudium*.

(iii) The current plans of studies contain several provisions that are not in line with Church legislation and are unique to Lucerne. These provisions are not found in other faculties of Catholic theology in Switzerland, Austria or Germany. They are primarily related to the fact that the same degrees that are awarded in the full study programs – i.e. the Bachelor of Theology and the Master of Theology – can also be earned in non-canonical programs, mainly in the major-minor program, and also in the Master's degree in Liturgical Music (which is not currently offered, for financial reasons). As a result, under the current plan of studies for the doctorate (dating from 2003), a student may be admitted to the doctorate program without having completed the full study program. This option was removed in the 2017 draft for the doctoral program. Another consequence of the ambiguous designations “Bachelor of Theology” and “Master of Theology” is that a student who has earned a Bachelor of Theology in a major-minor program may be admitted to the full study program for the Master of Theology. The 2017 draft of the new plans of studies for the full study program does not appear to eliminate this possibility, although it does not seem appropriate.

3.2 Distance learning mode

In 2013, along with the new plans of studies for the full study program and for the major-minor program, the TF introduced the option of studying for the Bachelor of Theology in a distance learning mode. This option is aimed at students who, for family, health, or professional reasons, are unable to participate in face-to-face study. At the same time it could attract new students to the TF. While the lectures are registered and can be viewed at any time, the seminars are organized in the form of video-conferences or block events in Lucerne. In any case, students have to come to Lucerne for a few days during the examination period. There are no special plans of studies for the distance learning mode; students follow the same plans as those studying in the face-to-face mode. Since 2017, the face-to-face study mode and the distance study mode have been merged into the “flex study mode”. This means that all students can choose whether they prefer to take individual courses in one mode or the other.

Over the years, there have been several surveys among distance learning mode participants, and several evaluations have been conducted. The TF has continually sought to improve the quality of distance learning. While students for whom face-to-face study is not possible are grateful for the opportunity of distance learning, it is also evident that this form of studies is met with some scepticism, especially by dioceses as the typical employers of those who complete their theology studies. In this context, it is interesting to note that the same students who highly value distance learning and affirm that they would not otherwise be able to study theology, stated that they would like to see distance learning not mentioned on the diplomas since this expression (“Fernstudium”) does not have a good reputation. In fact, some students suggest that this term be dropped altogether, and only the term “flex study mode” be used. While some students would welcome the distance learning mode also for the master's phase, it seems that the ecclesiastical authorities are against this option. The documentation on the distance learning mode and the discussion with the students show that many of the students who study in distance mode have strong other commitments (in family or profession) to fulfil, and therefore have only little time left for studying. Under these circumstances it is natural that they are not able to complete their studies at the same pace as those who study full time. It is obvious that

the TF cannot do much to solve this difficulty.

The TF felt well prepared for the challenges posed by the pandemic because of its experience in online teaching. Moreover, the TF feels vindicated by the Norms of application of *Veritatis gaudium* according to which “part of the courses can be realized by distance learning” (art. 33 § 2). In this sense, the TF see itself as a kind of pioneer in this field. On the other hand, of course, one may also point to that fact that the advantage that the Faculty once had, has meanwhile be evened out as the other Faculties have caught up as a consequence of the pandemic.

For some time now, the TF has been considering establishing a new master program taught in English. Such a program would presumably be aimed primarily at students who choose the distance mode of study. When the SER was prepared, it was still unclear whether such a program would be planned as a canonical or as a non-canonical degree program. During the site visit the TF informed that in the meantime, at least as a first step, it had decided for a non-canonical program with an interreligious character (Christianity – Judaism – Islam). In addition TF mentioned that a master program in theology in English could be introduced at a later stage.

3.3 Other aspects

On the whole, students are very satisfied with what is offered to them by the TF. Most of the critical remarks made during the site visit did not refer to the TF as such, but to individual professors. Among other things they addressed the great differences in expectations of the individual professors, and the fact that some professors give little or no feedback on seminar papers and master theses. Students are satisfied with the opportunity to express their opinions and desires in the councils and commissions of the TF, especially in the Teaching and Examinations Commission.

Those who study at the RPI, while mainly having their own professors and courses, also participate in some courses aimed at the students in the full study program; it seems difficult to determine to what extent such a joint formation is useful for them.

For those who are in the Bachelor program it is already possible to take a limited number of exams that belong to the Master program, before having completed the Bachelor program. This possibility may be an explanation for the fact that the time it takes many students to complete their Bachelor program is relatively long, while the time it takes them to complete the Master program is relatively short. It may also explain why the number of students in the Master program is relatively small. A normative basis for the praxis described is not apparent; it could, however, be useful, if only to promote transparency.

The commitment of those responsible for student advisory service and for IT support was highly praised. However, it was noted that there is a potential conflict of interest if the person responsible for advising students on study matters is at the same time responsible for making the decisions on their requests.

➔ *Comments and observations*

While the study programs at the TF are certainly demanding, especially because of the large number of examinations, at the same time the programs have several features that do not correspond to the standards required by ecclesiastical legislation for the acquisition of the canonical degrees. This is most evident in the current plan for doctoral studies, particularly in the criteria for admission to doctoral studies. At the bachelor’s and master’s level, the fact that the same degrees (Bachelor of Theology and Master of Theology) are earned in the full study program and in the major-minor program, also raises the possibility of not meeting the standards required by ecclesiastical legislation. The documentation provided by the TF did not allow to determine the reasons that have led to this situation. But that as it may, in the long run deficiencies in meeting the standards required by ecclesiastical legislation can create distrust among competitors, damage the reputation of the degrees awarded by the TF, and even lead to the withdrawal of the status of an Ecclesiastical Faculty. The site visit revealed that the current Faculty leadership is aware of these risks, and is willing to adhere to the common standards of Ecclesiastical Faculties of Theology. The draft of the new doctoral program is the most visible sign of this willingness.

To achieve this goal, a revision of the plans of studies for the canonical study programs does not seem sufficient. It will be necessary to also address the issue of the academic degrees for the major-minor program (and eventually of the Master program in Liturgical Music). It is unusual and confusing that the same degrees (Bachelor of Theology and Master of Theology) are awarded in the canonical and non-canonical programs. It

is certainly good practice to continue to offer a major-minor program with theology as a major. Many faculties of theology in the German-speaking countries offer such programs. However, through such programs they offer a degree that is different from the canonical degree for the full-study program. At the faculty in Fribourg, for example, this degree is called “Master of Arts in Theological Studies”.

From a legal perspective, it is not clear whether the introduction of the distance learning mode in 2013 (and of the flex study mode in 2017) was legitimate. In this regard the norms of *Sapientia christiana* were ambiguous. However, it is now evident that the Holy See has become interested in this question, as *Veritatis gaudium*, Norms of application, art. 33 § 2 states: “Part of the courses can be realized by distance learning, if the Plan of Studies approved by the CCE foresees it and specifies its conditions, especially as regards the examinations”. Although the TF tries to interpret this norm as a new openness towards distance learning, the norm could actually lead to a restriction of distance learning, at least for the canonical study programs. In its Circular Letter n. 3 of 8 December 2020, the CCE announced that it would “soon” publish an Instruction on this subject. This letter uses phrases such as: “the percentage of credits obtainable via distance learning” and “how many in-presence meetings are necessary”. Given this wording it is unlikely that the CCE will allow a (canonical) program to be studied entirely through distance learning mode, with the examinations being the only exception. Although the CCE has been generous in allowing distance learning during the pandemic, the relevant letters have been unequivocal that the solutions adopted during to the pandemic should not be made permanent. It remains to be seen whether the current practice of the Faculty will be in line with the norms of the announced Instruction. While the TF is the only faculty in the German-speaking world to offer part of the canonical full study program in distance learning mode, several other faculties of theology in other areas and languages will face the same challenges.

Regardless of the legal issues, the experience that the TF has made with the distance learning mode so far, raises the question whether the current programs leading to the Bachelor of Theology are not too demanding for many of the students who enrol for them in distance learning mode. It appears that a significant number of those who enrol in these programs underestimate the time required for study. In advertising these programs, the TF should continue to be careful not to create illusory expectations. Informing the students is also important regarding the question of whether those who complete their studies through distance learning mode will be employed by the dioceses, especially if such students have not participated in the accompanying spiritual formation programs conducted by the dioceses.

It seems that the Norms of application to *Veritatis gaudium*, when they address the distance learning mode, refer only to the canonical programs. In fact the quote above articulates: “... can be realized by distance learning, if the Plan of Studies approved by the CCE foresees it ...” For non-canonical programs approval of the plan of studies is not required. It is likely that the CCE will exercise less, if any, oversight on the use of distance learning in non-canonical study programs.

With respect to non-canonical programs the TF is in the favourable position of enjoying complete autonomy from ecclesiastical authorities under the 2005 agreement. This autonomy may be useful for any expansion of the distance learning mode in non-canonical study programs. In this regard, the decision of the TF that the new Master program in English will be non-canonical avoids the risk of conflict with the announced Instruction. Although non-canonical programs of the TF do not require the consent of the Chancellor, it is advisable to keep him informed about the initiatives in question.

Finally, a word about timing may be useful. The fact that the TF has not yet received a final response to its request for approval of the new plans of studies from 2017, is certainly causing difficulties for the Faculty. In this situation, it would not be useful to prepare major reforms before the Holy See has responded to the documents already submitted. When a final response can be expected does not seem foreseeable at this time. With this in mind, it is advisable to identify reforms that can be undertaken before the Holy See’s response has been received. Some examples may be: a revision of the examinations in the Bachelor and Master programs; and the question of the degree conferred by the master-minor program.

➡ Recommendations

- The TF should consider requiring a Bachelor thesis in all Bachelor programs.
- It should address the problem of the high number of small exams in some of the programs.
- It seems necessary to reserve the titles “Bachelor of Theology” and “Master of Theology” for the full

study program, and to choose other titles (typically: “Bachelor of Arts ...” and “Master of Arts ...” for the major-minor program (and, if it is resumed, for the program on Liturgical Music).

- In terms of timing, it is recommended that the TF distinguish between reforms that require the arrival of the Holy See’s responses to the drafts submitted, and reforms that can be initiated even before such a response.
- Given that the 2005 agreement does not require an intervention of the Chancellor in the establishment of non-canonical study programs, it is nevertheless advisable to keep him informed of such initiatives.
- It might be useful to establish clear standards for the possibility of taking some exams in the Masters program while a student has not yet completed the corresponding Bachelor program.
- Instead of the same person advising students and deciding on their requests (e. g. for recognitions), it might be better to separate the two roles to avoid conflicts of interest.

4. SWOT Analysis

The strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of the TF include the following ...

... strengths:

- the convenient location near the main train station;
- the proximity to all the other faculties in the same building of the University;
- the high attention of the TF to socially relevant and transfer-oriented research and teaching;
- the great willingness of the TF to engage in inter- and trans-disciplinary cooperation, both within the University and beyond, in both research and teaching;
- the appreciation by the University as a whole and by the Canton;
- the stable or even increasing number of students to date;
- the good supervision ratio;
- the wide range of study programs on offer;
- the student advisory service which is highly appreciated;
- the excellent career prospects for graduates;

... weaknesses:

- the unclear history of compliance with the ecclesiastical norms on canonical study programs;
- little chance of financial support from the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF);

... opportunities:

- the visibility in the central university building;
- the dynamic development of the University as a whole;
- the support from the Canton, the Diocese, and the Church in general;
- the growing social and political interest in religious and ethical questions;

... risks:

- the declining reputation of the Catholic Church, which has also consequences for the TF;
- in particular, the risk that the number of students could begin to fall;
- the risk that a decreasing number of students and the declining importance of the Church may make it more difficult to justify the existence of the TF;
- the risk that the distance learning mode, at least for the canonical study program, may not meet with the norms that the CCE is likely to publish soon.

➡ *Comments and observations*

While most of the above points can be found in the SWOT analysis of the SER, the TF did not mention the risk that the norms of the Church on distance learning may pose. It is not clear whether the TF did not realize this risk, or did not want to recognize it.

5. Quality Assurance/QA

The evaluation of the quality assurance system of the University, including its faculties, was the main focus of the accreditation process by AAQ. The results of this evaluation will be available to view in the report on the [AAQ website](#).

While the University's standards require an annual evaluation of all courses, the TF evaluates them only every third semester. It has confirmed that additional evaluation is possible if the individual lecturer desires.

6. Third mission

While the third mission is certainly an important part of the mission of the TF, and is also mentioned in its "Leitbild" as an integral part of its mission, it was not among the subjects of this evaluation.

7. Conclusions and presentation of recommendations in order of priority

The TF is well positioned to address the current and future challenges it faces. While there have been some difficulties in the past regarding the evaluation and approbation of the canonical study programs, the TF is determined to ensure that these difficulties will be overcome. Given the general situation of the Catholic Church in Switzerland, attracting sufficient numbers of students will certainly remain a challenge, as it is for all comparable institutions of Catholic theology.

In order to maintain and promote its quality, the following recommendations can be made to the Faculty, in order of priority:

- In terms of timing, it is recommended that the TF distinguish between reforms that require the arrival of the Holy See's responses to the drafts submitted, and reforms that can be initiated even before such a response.
- It seems necessary to reserve the titles "Bachelor of Theology" and "Master of Theology" for the full study program, and to choose other titles (typically: "Bachelor of Arts ..." and "Master of Arts ..." for the major-minor program (and, if it is resumed, for the program on Liturgical Music).
- The TF should address the problem of the high number of small exams in some of the programs.
- The TF should consider requiring a Bachelor thesis in all Bachelor programs.
- It might be useful to establish clear standards for the possibility of taking some exams in the Masters program while a student has not yet completed the corresponding Bachelor program.
- Instead of the same person advising students and deciding on their requests (e. g. for recognitions), it might be better to separate the two roles to avoid conflicts of interest.
- It is recommended that the TF keep itself continually informed of the current norms of the Church on higher education and the current procedures of implementing them. It may be helpful to seek more external advice on these matters.
- It is recommended to strengthen the trustful dialogue with the Chancellor, especially when there are difficulties concerning the granting of the *nihil obstat* for the appointment of a professor.
- Given that the 2005 agreement does not require an intervention of the Chancellor in the establishment of non-canonical study programs, it is nevertheless advisable to keep him informed of such initiatives.
- While it is certainly legitimate to present a SER that reflects the opinion of the majority of the Faculty, it would be helpful for the visiting commission in a future evaluation to receive a report that mentions also the actual difficulties and disagreements, both those that exist among faculty members and those that concern relations with the relevant external authorities.

Rome, 10 May 2021

Ulrich Rhode SJ