

VATICAN

Pope's Letter on Church history teaching, cancels apologetics

ECCLESIA

23_11_2024

**Renato
Mambretti**



"The study and writing of history helps to keep 'the flame of the collective conscience' alive": says the [Letter of the Holy Father Francis on the renewal of the study of Church history](#). The pope urges a reflection that leads to a motivated awareness of one's own

identity with the intention of promoting, especially “in young students of theology, a greater sense of history”.

The papal document was presented on 21 November at the Vatican Press Office by Cardinal Lazzaro You Heung-sik, prefect of the Dicastery for the Clergy; Monsignor Andrés Gabriel Ferrada Moreira, secretary of the same Dicastery; Professor Andrea Riccardi, president of the Dante Alighieri Society, former professor of Contemporary History and, in remote, Professor Emanuela Prinzivalli, former professor of the History of Christianity and the Churches.

The Pope's Letter, intended for the training of new priests and other pastoral agents, proposes a wide-ranging reflection on the need to give new impetus to studies and to acquire an authentic historical dimension in understanding the history of the Church, accepting even its most difficult and obscure moments, but above all grasping its growth over time.

The various speeches touched on topics that are well known to those who are involved in Church history and the wide-ranging, sometimes rich in contrasts and opposing positions, epistemological and disciplinary debate relating to it. During the course of the conference, the need to distance oneself from an apologetic history was reiterated (in line with what was stated in the Letter, a negative meaning was attributed to the term, linked to an unconditional and preconceived interpretation that transforms the history of the Church into a mere support to the history of theology or spirituality) and the importance of not relying on an ‘angelic’ conception, far removed from the real and sometimes prosaic unfolding of ecclesial events, was reiterated. There was also criticism of the ancillary role that the discipline would continue to play with respect to theology in traditional teaching areas.

The reference to a God who enters ‘on tiptoes’ into history, who in a plan of salvation calls mankind to Himself, was particularly noticeable. Of this God, much emphasis was placed on the ability to share the human dimension, leaving somewhat muted the fact that this extraordinary initiative is willed by an Absolute who encounters the finiteness of human history, proposing Himself as the only way to salvation. The speakers then emphasised the irreducible historical dimension of Christianity, which is in part shared with the Jewish religion as opposed to Eastern religions or the Muslim creed, recognising the progressive attention that the Church of the last century has paid to this dimension, which is also present in the Christian's formula of faith.

The great formative potential of the teaching of history was then pointed out: the

ability to educate to perceive the depth of the past and thus to tear us away from the dimension of a flat, eternal present in which we risk - thanks to the exasperated use of the media - living as children of emptiness; the ability to grasp and accept what is different, not to retreat in defence within a fortified citadel of certainties but rather to engage in an encounter with the world and its complexity.

In line with many historiographic trends that have emerged in contemporary research, a theme dear to the pontiff was strongly emphasised, highlighting the need for historical studies to also give voice to the “least important”, to those who counted for nothing or very little in the unfolding of world events, to the poor in the broad sense of the term, whom no one would have cared about and who would have ended up disappearing from the common consciousness. In this regard, Andrea Riccardi's reference to the precious work of recovering the names and memory of the Christian martyrs of the twentieth century, commissioned by Pope John Paul II, is fundamental; this recovery has strongly affected and changed the self-awareness of the contemporary Church, because only a knowledge of its own past that is as integral as possible allows it to project itself into the construction of the future.

On the contrary, the loss of the historical dimension, being children of the void, of a time with no past, entails the atrophy of that eschatological hope, to which even the imminent Jubilee asks us to look.

During the course of the conference, the attempt to include the importance of the [Pope's Letter on the Role of Literature in Formation](#), of last August, into the sphere of these reflections, appeared rather problematic. In an attempt to recover this second text, generic parallels and forced intersections were proposed, which did not take into account the different epistemological status of the two disciplines.

Equally fragile were the overly synthetic statements on salvation that would not be achieved at the level of the individual, but as the people of God, and on the need to be able to learn from everyone, without further, albeit indispensable, specifications. A more thoughtful articulation and some greater precision in this regard would have enabled a better understanding of the speakers' thinking.

The interventions of the journalists were few but to the point. In particular, a question on the position of the traditionalist movements, which would seem to be out of tune with what the Papal Letter proposes, was followed by the precise reply of one speaker, aimed at denying that that world, although present in the contemporary Church, has a clear perception of the meaning of history. It is unfortunate that such a

judgement, formulated in a generic manner, lacking the necessary foundations, triggered by a reaction, was pronounced precisely by a historian, who only a short while earlier had indicated authentic historical research as preliminary to any evaluation and had sung the praises of a correct and honest method of investigation, capable of investigating the complexity of the phenomenon he intends to explore.

It is to be hoped that the revolution in the future teaching of Church history, strongly hoped for by the speakers, will take into account the best passages of the Letter of Francis, doing justice to the setbacks that clearly emerged during its presentation.