



Renewal of Theology: Emerging Themes in the Church Today

Prof. Sahayadas Fernando
Dean, Faculty of Theology, UPS

1. Introduction

- “Don Bosco, Utume, Salesian Theological College”, Nairobi, is an Affiliated Institute of Higher Studies (20 December 2024), operating under its own **Statutes** and **Plan of Studies**, approved by the Holy See, through the Dicastery for Culture and Education.
- **Implications** of being an Affiliated Institute of Higher Studies:
- As a College affiliated to the Faculty of Theology of the Salesian Pontifical, Rome, its identity, vision, and mission go beyond being a simple Major Seminary, while fully respecting its importance for the formation of candidates for the priesthood.
- Rather, it embraces **theological study as a public and scientific discipline**, open to **dialogue with other sciences** and responsive to the broader needs of the Church and society.
- It is recognised as an institute with **public juridical personality approved by the Holy See**. Therefore, it is not an isolated religious house, but an active part of **the universal Church and the wider academic community**, committed to a holistic and credible formation of theological thought and ecclesial service.
- Its academic structure ensures **mobility of students and teachers**, promotes **inter-institutional collaboration**, and upholds **theological and academic excellence**.
- To fulfil its mission, it requires a **permanent core of seven theologically qualified professors**, appropriate **infrastructure (classrooms and library)**, and the regular contribution of **highly competent visiting professors**.
- Most of all, it requires a substantial number of students, namely, candidates for the priesthood, religious and laity, who are willing to pursue theological studies as a way to strengthen their Christian faith and scientific knowledge to enter into dialogue with today’s culture.

2. Governing Documents of the Life and Activities of Salesian Theological College

The life, academic structure, and activities of the **Salesian Theological College (STC)** are governed by a set of legislative texts that ensure fidelity to the Church’s mission.

1. **Apostolic Constitution *Veritatis Gaudium*** (Pope Francis, 2017):

This foundational document regulates ecclesiastical universities and faculties. It provides the general framework for the renewal and governance of ecclesiastical studies in service of the

Church's evangelising mission. It emphasises academic quality, interdisciplinary dialogue, and inculturation of the faith in today's world.

2. **Instruction on the Application of *Veritatis Gaudium*** (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2020):

This *Instruction* offers practical norms and guidelines for implementing *Veritatis Gaudium*, particularly for Affiliated, Aggregated, and Incorporated Institutes. It clarifies the academic structures, faculty qualifications, curriculum design, and institutional responsibilities that are needed in such an ecclesiastical institute of higher education.

3. **Statutes of the Pontifical Salesian University (UPS):**

As STC is *affiliated* with the Faculty of Theology of the UPS, it follows essentially the Statutes of the University. These Statutes define the identity, purpose, governance, and academic norms of UPS and accompany the Colleges that are affiliated or aggregated to our Faculty, such as STC.

4. **Statutes of the Salesian Theological College (STC):**

These are the specific internal statutes that outline the mission, governance, academic structure, and daily functioning of STC. They are approved in line with ecclesiastical norms and at the same time adapted to the local context, ensuring the proper implementation of the broader ecclesial directives within the life of the college.

Together, these four documents provide the legal, theological, and institutional foundation for the formation, academic programs, and governance of STC, ensuring its full integration into the life of the Church and the academic world.

3. Recent Documents of the Church on Theological Studies

- Pope Francis, *Veritatis Gaudium*. Apostolic Constitution on Ecclesiastical Universities and Faculties (27 December 2017).
- Congregation for Catholic Education (for Educational Institutions), *Instruction on the Affiliation of Institutes of Higher Studies* (8 December 2020).
- Pope Francis, *Ad theologiam promovendam*. Apostolic Letter in the form of "Motu Proprio" with the approval of the new Statutes of the Pontifical Academy of Theology (1 November 2023)
- Pope Francis, "Address to Participants in the International Congress on the Future of Theology Organised by the Dicastery for Culture and Education" (9 December 2024).

4. The Role and Mission of Theology Today

What kind of Theology does the Church expect today? What are the characteristics of Theological studies that the Church intends to promote? We need to reflect on how to appropriate the great theological patrimony of generations past and to imagine its future.

4.1 Pope Francis on Theology

a. Theology as Light: Revealing without drawing attention

Pope Francis offers a striking image: **theology is like light**. Light reveals the world—its shapes, colours, and faces—**without calling attention to itself**. It allows us to see reality clearly and truthfully. In the same way, **theology works quietly, humbly, and beautifully**, not to promote itself, but to make visible the **light of Christ and His Gospel**.

b. Theology, a Spirituality

True theology is **rooted in friendship with Christ** and flows from a love for the world – a world marked by **beauty and suffering**. Theology is, therefore, not merely an intellectual discipline but a spiritual and human journey. Its strength comes from being grounded in **grace and communion with God**, who is the true source of all light.

c. The Vital Contribution of Women in Theology

Pope Francis has also repeatedly emphasised that **women must be more fully involved** in theological reflection and teaching. He cites the biblical episode of the prophetess **Huldah** (2 Kings 22:14-20), who interpreted the rediscovered Book of the Law when the male scholars and the king could not fully grasp its meaning.

This episode illustrates that **there are insights only women can offer**, and excluding their voices renders theology **incomplete and deficient**. The Church must therefore move toward a **more inclusive theological practice**, overcoming the long-standing dominance of an all-male perspective.

d. Rethinking Thinking: Expanding Theological Imagination

Pope Francis called on theology to **rethink how it thinks**. The way we think shapes how we feel, decide, and act. Theology must cultivate a **broad, imaginative, and creative mindset** that encourages depth, innovation, and the courage to explore new perspectives. In contrast, rigid or overly abstract approaches, often found in traditional theological manuals, can become **closed, sterile, and disconnected** from real life.

To overcome narrow thinking, theology must resist **simplification** that distorts complex realities and reduces them to **ideological or superficial slogans**. This requires a new approach: embracing **interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary methods**, as promoted in *Veritatis Gaudium*. Theology must engage with **philosophy, science, arts, literature, economics, and more**, allowing for a **mutual enrichment of knowledge**.

This dialogue helps theology remain **relevant and alive**, actively participating in the Church's mission and the cultural search for truth.

e. Theology as a Companion in Adult Faith and Midlife Renewal

Pope Francis has observed a growing interest among adults, especially those in middle age, in returning to theological study and faith formation. This stage of life, often marked by **professional stability** but also **existential questioning** or even crisis, creates a desire for **renewal and deeper meaning**.

Theology can serve as a **compassionate and intelligent companion** in this journey. Theological institutions must become **welcoming spaces**, accessible to seekers of all kinds, offering room for **exploration, questioning, and spiritual growth**.

Such openness demands **pastoral creativity and flexibility**. Institutions must imagine new forms of teaching, course structures, and learning environments, ensuring that theology is **not reserved for specialists** but is available to **all who seek to deepen their faith and understand their lives in light of the Gospel**.

4.2 Characteristics of Theology needed for today

1. Prophetic Theology

- Theology must not merely repeat past formulas but actively interpret today's challenges in light of Revelation. It must confront profound cultural transformations, aware that: "What we are living through is not simply an age of change, but a change of epoch" (Pope Francis, Address to the Roman Curia, 21 December 2019).
- It is called to read the signs of the times and offer new direction for the future. History demonstrates that, throughout the centuries, the role of theology has undergone drastic changes: from being the initial place of theological formation for clergymen in a context where other institutions were lacking and inadequate for that purpose, to a group of scholars called upon to investigate and deepen theological themes of particular relevance.
- In practical terms, theology must renew its language, symbols, and methods to respond meaningfully to current questions in society, culture, and science.

2. Mission-Oriented and Outgoing Theology

- Theology should not remain confined to academia or abstract theorising; it must engage with the "peripheries" of society. (*Teologia in uscita*)
"Do not be satisfied with a desk theology. Let your place of reflection be the frontiers. [...] Good theologians, like good pastors, also smell of the people and the street and, by their reflection, pour oil and wine on the wounds of men." (Pope Francis, Letter to the Grand Chancellor of the Catholic University of Argentina)
- Openness to the world, with its problems, wounds, challenges, and potential, urges theology to an epistemological and methodological rethinking, as indicated in the Foreword of the apostolic constitution *Veritatis gaudium*.
- This calls for a theology rooted in life, not detached from it – a theology that serves and walks with people, especially the poor and marginalised.
- A new paradigm is required: a shift from static, universal abstractions to contextual and incarnational reflection. We need a "fundamentally contextual theology".
- The *Incarnation* is the model: theology must enter into the culture, languages, and worldviews of each people.

3. Dialogical and Relational

- Theology must foster dialogue across boundaries: between traditions, faiths, disciplines, and worldviews.
- Dialogue is not optional – it is intrinsic to the human condition and creation itself, which reflects a "web of relationships."

- Theologically, this is rooted in the Trinitarian nature of God: theology must mirror this relational structure (VG, Foreword, 4a).

4. Transdisciplinary Approach

A dialogical and relational vision of theology implies not closing itself up in self-referentiality.

- Theology must go beyond **multidisciplinarity** (parallel perspectives) to **trans-disciplinarity**.
- A **multidisciplinarity** promotes a better understanding of the object of study by considering it from multiple points of view, which nevertheless remain complementary and separate.
- Instead, **transdisciplinarity** should be thought of “as the placement and fermentation of all knowledge within the space of Light and Life offered by the Wisdom that emanates from God’s Revelation” (VG, Foreword, 4c).
- Hence, the arduous task for theology is to utilise new categories developed by other disciplines (philosophy, science, art, literature, psychology), to penetrate and communicate the truths of faith, and to transmit the teaching of Jesus in today’s languages with originality and critical awareness.
- This approach challenges theology to adopt new categories and frameworks to express timeless truths in contemporary language with originality and critical awareness.

5. Ecclesial and Synodal Practice

- Theology should be done within the synodal life of the Church, marked by communion, participation, and mission.
- Theologians must embody and model fraternity and shared discernment, not isolated academic pursuits. “Ecclesial synodality therefore commits theologians to do theology in a synodal form, promoting among themselves the capacity to listen, dialogue, discern and integrate the multiplicity and variety of instances and inputs.” (Pope Francis, Address to the Members of the International Theological Commission, 24 November 2022).
- Institutions should provide spaces for theological collegiality, where diverse voices are heard and integrated.

6. Sapiential and Spiritual

- Theology must not be reduced to cold rationalism or academic detachment; it is also wisdom, rooted in the Spirit. Inspired by thinkers like Aquinas and Rosmini, theology is seen as “intellectual charity”, where love and truth are inseparable.
- This implies a theology that is deeply prayerful, humble, and oriented toward transformation, both personal and communal.
- Scientific reason must expand its boundaries in the direction of wisdom, lest it dehumanise and impoverish itself. In this way, theology can contribute to the current debate on “rethinking thinking,” demonstrating itself to be a true form of critical knowledge, akin to sapiential and spiritual knowledge that is developed through prayer and adoration. It is a transcendent knowledge and, at the same time, attentive to the voice of the people; therefore, “popular” theology, mercifully addressed to the open wounds of humanity and creation and within the folds of human history, to which it prophesies the hope of an ultimate fulfilment.

7. Inductive and Pastoral

- Theology should use an *inductive* method, beginning from people's lives, stories, questions, and suffering. It implies allowing theology to be seriously challenged by reality in which theology is inserted.
- The goal is not to impose truths abstractly, but to discern God's presence in history, especially in the voices of ordinary people. In this way, the knowledge of people's common sense becomes a privileged theological place.
- This makes theology a pastoral practice - at the service of the Church's mission to communicate the God of love in concrete realities. Theology should have a "pastoral stamp", as Pope Francis repeatedly affirmed.

8. Evangelising and Inculturated

- Theology must serve evangelisation by helping faith become culture – a lived, wise ethos shaping human behaviour and values.
- In this way, popular religiosity and the "sensus fidei" (sense of faith of the people) become valuable theological sources.
- Theologians must pay attention to distorted images of God among people and re-present the Christian God as love, mercy, and justice.
- Theology must remain scientifically serious and methodologically sound while being imaginative, creative, and dialogical.

9. Consecrated Life: Spiritual and Apostolic Dimensions of Study

- For Religious and Priests, study is seen as part of **life in the Spirit** – a form of asceticism and a path to wisdom. It is not just for intellectual development, but for **spiritual discernment**, understanding God's presence in history, and proclaiming the Gospel with depth and credibility.
- Today's secular culture often questions the meaning of consecrated life. Study helps **reaffirm its prophetic role** and articulate its cultural and spiritual significance. Evangelising a world shaped by secular ideologies and new technologies demands **deep intellectual formation**.
- Consecrated people must be capable of engaging with diverse cultural codes, expressing the Gospel in today's language, and re-awakening faith in public life.
- Through reflection and cultural engagement, consecrated people can be **leaven in the world**, inserting what is new from Christ and critically engaging what is harmful.
- **Neglect of study** risks, therefore, superficiality, poor evangelisation, and diminished relevance in modern society.

10. Salesian Perspective of Study

Don Juan Vecchi, RM of the Salesians, "*For you I study...*" (C 14). *Satisfactory preparation of the confreres and the quality of our educational work*" (15 September 1997).

a. Study as a Core Element of Salesian Mission and Identity

- The phrase "**For you I study**", taken from Don Bosco, expresses a deep pastoral and educational commitment. It highlights study not as an academic luxury, but as **an essential form of loving service** to the young.

- Study is **an act of charity** – a way of understanding the world, deepening faith, and preparing oneself to better serve the needs of youth, society, and the Church.

b. Study as a Form of Pastoral Charity

- Studying enables Salesians to better **understand youth, respond to contemporary challenges, and communicate faith meaningfully.**
- It requires time, reflection, and spaces for prayer, solitude, and research – activities which were integral to Don Bosco's own routine.
- There is a vital connection between pastoral **charity and competence**, action and contemplation, spirituality and formation.

c. The Salesians' Role in Shared Mission

- Salesians now work in **shared responsibility with laypeople**, and their role increasingly involves leadership, guidance, and formation of others.
- This requires not only pastoral zeal but also **solid theological, pedagogical, and cultural grounding.**
- To animate and accompany complex communities, Salesians need to grow in **dialogical competence, planning ability, and educational insight.**

d. The Demand for Qualified Personnel

- Effective educational ministry today requires high levels of **professionalism, cultural intelligence, and adaptability.**
- Inculturation, updating methods, and context-specific responses are essential for effectively reaching young people.
- New fields (e.g., higher education, publishing, social communication, disadvantaged youth, intercultural ministry) **demand highly prepared personnel.** Superficial qualifications or a lack of reflection can **undermine the credibility and effectiveness** of Salesian works.

Conclusion: Study as Missionary Love

- “**Study and piety will make you a true Salesian,**” Don Bosco wrote. Culture and spirituality are **two inseparable dimensions** of being a true educator and pastor.
- Study is not marginal or optional; it is a **vital condition** for living out Salesian pastoral charity today.
- In a fast-changing world, **study becomes service**, enabling Salesians to be discerning, prophetic, and effective witnesses of Christ's love among the young.

In other words, we need a theology that becomes a **light for the Church and the world**, helping individuals and communities **see more clearly, love more deeply, and live more wisely** in the light of the Gospel.

I conclude thanking you, dear fellow theologians and teachers, for your work, which is often hidden, unrecognised, calling for selfless sacrifice. We do it because we have been called to transmit what we have received and reflected upon for the good of the Church and the world.