

21st Plenary Assembly of AMECEA

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Dearly beloved brothers and sisters baptized in Christ:

Thank you for your kind invitation to this 21st Plenary Assembly of AMECEA on the theme of your *synodal journey with young people: building bridges of communion, hope, justice and good governance*.

This is not an address, conference or speech, but a meditation on each one's vocation to bring Christ's gospel of justice, love and peace to every corner of our life in society.

We gather in hope and expectation for what the Lord is calling us to, in each of our particular contexts, knowing that He is the One who goes before us, who prepares the way for us, and who leads us. No one is called to discover and follow this call alone. In fact, throughout history, we see that the Lord typically calls a people, a community, inviting them to follow His Word into the promised land. In Christ, the Lord's calling became and always remains ecclesial. You are part of a wonderful communion of saints who, together, have been praying "Thy will be done" throughout the centuries, seeking to do God's will in every age and every nation and every society.

In Christ, therefore, you *also* gather together to ask not only what you ought to do in your dioceses and local communities, but what the Lord is calling you to. In this journey, dear brother bishops, you have been entrusted with the care of your flock, taking to heart "the joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted" (*Gaudium et Spes* 1). You are not called to do this alone, but in communion with your brother bishops and chiefly with the bishop of Rome, who cares to foster your "solicitude for the whole Church" (cf. *Lumen Gentium* 23), and in synodality with all God's people.

¹ With sincere thanks to theologian Luca Colacino (Rome) for great help in editing the final version of this speech.

The Lord's calling is as simple as his invitation to become "partakers of divine life" (2 Pt 1:4). Yet, when the divine life of charity enters the realm of human life, it encounters the complexity of our everyday struggles and hopes. In this complexity, **the Roman Curia** is "at the service of the Pope and of the Bishops, who, 'together with Peter's successor... govern the house of the living God.' The Curia exercises this service to the Bishops in their particular Churches with due respect for their responsibilities as successors of the Apostles" (*Praedicate Evangelium* II).

The Church's life on earth is one of mission because the divine love that inhabits her is itself outward-looking. The Curia has developed three main organs to help this missionary life: three Dicasteries that directly serve, not a particular aspect of Church life, but the overall mission. These are the Dicasteries for Evangelisation, for Charity, and for Integral Human Development, three expressions of the one missionary life of the Church, in fact three synonyms. In particular, our Dicastery's work takes up the mission of Christ himself, who came that all may have life and have it abundantly (cf. John 10,10).

Our ecclesial call, in fact, is to become partakers *and* evangelizers of this abundant divine life given to us in Christ. St. Augustine, when reflecting upon Christ's mission to lay down his life for his own (Jn 10:11), expands the bounds of Christ's action to also include the action of his mystical body, the Church. He says:

It is true that Christ was not the only one to [lay down his life]; and yet, if those who did so are his members, it is always he alone who did it. For he was able to do this without them; but they could not have done it without him, since he himself said: "Without me you can do nothing" (John 15:5).

By realizing how, through the life of Christians, Christ continues to lay down his life so that the world may have life, Augustine sets

forth here what others have also affirmed, such as the Apostle John himself, who [...] in his letter he tells us: "Just as Christ laid down his

life for us, so also we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters” (1 John 3:16).²

Augustine emphasises that this life which Christ continues to lay down for the world passes through the Eucharist, where we become partakers of Christ’s very life, love and mission. The Gospel is a message of life, fullness of life, divine life. To participate in it and to transmit it is the calling of every Christian.

In 2017, Pope Francis merged four Pontifical Councils – for health-care workers, for migrants and itinerant peoples, for justice and peace, and for humanitarian assistance – into a single new Dicastery for the Promotion of Integral Human Development. The Latin word for “development” is *progressio*, as in Paul VI’s *Populorum Progressio* (1967), so it could also be “integral human progress”. Thus, the Dicastery expresses in a new holistic way the Church’s fundamental and inclusive commitment to human flourishing and fulfilment in all its dimensions, here and hereafter; to announce and transmit, in all its dimensions, the fullness of life promised by Christ. Our inspiration comes from Sacred Scripture and Tradition: to be a Church with a preferential option for the poor, where the poor can feel at home and even be at the heart of the Church.

This commitment calls the Church to pay attention to the serious obstacles which frustrate or block people’s integral human development: for example, human rights violations, economic and social injustices, insecurity and violence, unemployment and exploitation, environmental degradation, forced displacement, criminality and threats to democracy, traffic in persons, sickness, insecurity, drugs and arms, and humanitarian emergencies, etc. The word “etcetera” is important because the list is open; each one can ask, “what are the principal obstacles in my area?”

These concerns, so serious for local churches, can also be called “global issues”, but we focus on them as concrete local or regional obstacles, in each diocese and conference, to the people’s integral human development. We

² *Commentary to the Gospel of John*, 47, 2

stand ready to help the Churches to pastorally accompany their people in confronting these obstacles and developing towards life “in abundance”.

The Dicastery supports the mission of the Holy Father, of the bishops and their co-workers, and of all Christians, to “proclaim the gospel to all creation” (Mark 16:15), to evangelize human societies always and everywhere, overlooking or excluding no one. In this way, the Dicastery seeks to combine the Good News of Christ, sound doctrine and effective pastoral action.

Our commitment to integral human development is rooted in a profound understanding of what it is to be human. Pope Leo reminds us, “The ‘human’ is at the heart of Saint Augustine’s vision of an ethic of responsibility. He teaches how responsibility, especially in dealing with the poor and with those who have material needs, is born from human persons with their own similar needs and, therefore, from the recognition of our ‘common humanity’.”³

Striving for the integral development of people and of society entails taking their entire well-being into account, not only material, but also intellectual, cultural, social and spiritual. It means safeguarding the inviolable dignity of each human person and respecting the great diversity and many riches of the world’s peoples. Therefore, each and every initiative of development, from digging a well to deploying artificial intelligence, must be carefully evaluated according to sound ethical, social and spiritual criteria.⁴

In all this, let’s be clear, no one can develop someone else. Parents help their children to develop; they do not develop them. Similarly, the Church promotes integral human development, but the *people themselves are the primary agents of their own development*. Our role is to *accompany them in overcoming the obstacles to their development*. This accompaniment is *pastoral*, not political or sociological. Full or integral development flows from life in Christ, not from ideology or sociology.

Pope Leo dedicates his first Encyclical, *Magnifica Humanitas* to vigorously safeguarding the intrinsic dignity of each human person. “In the age of artificial intelligence” the sub-title says, that is, in our time, in the face of all

³ Leo XIV, *Address to the World Meeting Of Popular Movements*, Audience Hall, Thursday, 23 October 2025.

⁴ Cf. Leo XIV, 17 June 2025.

the obstacles to integral human development or flourishing. The Holy Father invites the whole Church, all believers, all humanity to consider seriously what type of civilisation we are in the process of building.

Two contrasting images illuminate the constant discernment of what we are called to undertake as we seek to evangelize the world and strive for God's kingdom.

On the one hand, the tower of Babel is a project of human pride, working under the illusion of self-sufficiency. Here, human intelligence serves a huge effort of ambition, only to discover that, without God, unity becomes uniformity and ultimately leads to fragmentation and disintegration, as the confusion of languages demonstrates.

This contrasts with the prophet Nehemiah, who convokes the people to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. In this shared undertaking, human intelligence and effort, placed at the service of God, express the highest forms of human effort: an action capable of promoting and enabling the dignity of every person to flourish.

Thus, *Magnifica Humanitas* has us question: What form does human industriousness take? Whom is it really serving? The question certainly concerns artificial intelligence and new technologies, but it reaches much further and includes everything that the human family undertakes. Considering each initiative, we should ask, "Is there an increase in responsibility, good governance and care? Or does it expose the human person, especially the vulnerable, to increasing exclusion, undermining human dignity as sons and daughters of God?"

Magnifica Humanitas reminds us of the most solid foundation on which all our social teaching and social action rest: the dignity of the human person created in the image and likeness of God. "Human dignity does not depend on a person's abilities, wealth or position in life, nor on the right or wrong choices made; instead, it is a gift that precedes and transcends each person, endowed by God as an expression of his unfailing love. For this reason, the human person always remains the "way for the Church and the heart of every authentic path of integral human development" (§ 50). The Church and

society are thus called to uphold the equal dignity of all, promoting and protecting their rights as well.

The principles of Catholic Social Teaching should guide our choices and decisions regarding how we live together in society. What kind of society are we actually building? The social teaching of the Church is an examination of conscience, not only for society, but also for the Church. The five principles are the common good, the universal destination of the earth's goods, solidarity and subsidiarity and social justice. Facing every choice in society and in the Church, the principles guide and orient us to find the way forward together. "For a Christian, going beyond the narrow confines of one's own interests and committing oneself, within the limits of one's ability, to the common good is a non-negotiable value, as is the promotion of life" (MH 59).

"In the ecclesial context, the common good takes the form of a synodal approach for mission at the service of the Kingdom" (MH 86). The social teaching of the Church is an examination of conscience, not only for society, but also for the Church. "This requires attention to the way decisions are taken and responsibilities exercised..., valuing charisms and skills and avoiding any form of paternalism [clericalism!] that suffocates evangelical freedom" (MH 87).

Among the courageous and generous people whom Pope Leo names as having lived the principles of catholic social teaching in practice, I am happy he includes Wangari Maathai. Her "commitment has contributed to making history more humane" (§124) as should every member of the Church and society, including bishops, clergy, lay people, religious, young people and indeed all people of good will. This is clearly the synodal approach that is so promising: walking together to make history more humane, promoting that same humanity that our Lord did not despise, but rather took upon himself and glorified. Thank God this 21st Assembly sees a significant number of young people participating.

I am happy that, in the AMECEA region, the concern for social justice and the effort to keep building a civilisation of love are front and centre. Bishops' Conferences have well-functioning departments of integral human

development, some with another name. At the AMECEA meeting on integral human development promoted by the Dicastery in November 2024, the participating Bishops, their co-workers and other participants did not hesitate to identify the serious obstacles to integral human development in their area. For example, forced migration, violence, climate change, lack of environmental justice, youth unemployment, job insecurity, strain on family life, bad governance and food insecurity. We need to keep asking, what are the most serious obstacles to integral human development in each diocese and throughout the region? and how can the Church most effectively accompany the people in facing and overcoming them? This is truly evangelizing at the local level. This is a real mission to protect and transmit abundant life.

The term “development” in human affairs often refers to a country’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and measures its economic productivity. When countries are ranked by GDP, “development” seems merely economic and material, and overlooks the broader and deeper dimensions of human flourishing.

Similarly, “development” can just be a synonym for prosperity and consumption. A developed country produces more goods, and its inhabitants consume more. This measure of material well-being, even if it’s what many people seem to want, ignores many important human, spiritual, social, and cultural dimensions of life.

Moreover, the term "development" is often associated with the so-called "Third World." It does not seem to apply to countries like Britain, the United States, or Australia, but to countries like those belonging to AMECEA. This leaves people from the rich “North” thinking that development is not something relevant for them, but only for “undeveloped” others. People in both the ‘developed North’ and the ‘undeveloped South’ might easily associate “development” with specific projects which are funded and guided by foreign governments and by NGOs or foundations, whether more or less connected with the Church. But development is much more than such projects!

Over the centuries, the Church has deepened her own understanding of development, progress, human flourishing, life in abundance – what everyone wants for themselves, their family, their people. It is in this rich ecclesial and integrally humanistic sense the we should understand development.

“I have come that they may have life,” Jesus said, “life to the full.” “*Dei gloria homo vivens*,” Irenaeus said, “the glory of God is man fully alive.” God's glory is manifested in the fullness of human life, meeting each one's needs and enhancing each one's gifts, to the point of giving oneself for others. No dimension of human flourishing is left out. Today we use the expression “integral human development”.

Pope St Paul VI first explained true development in *Populorum Progressio*: “To be authentic, [it] must be well rounded; it must foster the development of each man and of the whole man” (*Populorum progression* 14). In today's words, it must foster the development of each person, the whole person, and everyone, including future generations. It is about the fullest flowering of people's capacities. This helps to explain “integral”, even if Paul VI didn't use the word.

Gaudium et Spes locates the Church close to the world, situated in people's daily life and current affairs, perceiving and comprehending the signs of the times which the Holy Spirit brings to light. *Gaudium et Spes* comments on Jesus's saying, “Whoever seeks to gain his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life will preserve it” (*Luke* 17:33) with this fundamental truth: “Man, who is the only creature on earth which God willed for itself, cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself” (*Gaudium et Spes* 24).

The fullness of life, which is the real human vocation here and hereafter, is found in the cross and resurrection of Christ. Irenaeus says that the life of men and women is the vision of God; and we see God chiefly in Christ. Jesus gave Himself totally for us, and we are called to give ourselves for others, especially for those who need our help, as the Good Samaritan so clearly shows. Jesus is Lord, not only of our hearts; we also recognize his Lordship in society, in the world.

This fuller understanding of development is far beyond GDP or consumerism or projects. It includes giving oneself for others, solidarity with others, the pursuit of the common good; it is not just about achieving one's own material success or apparent personal fulfilment. It is about living a life of purpose and generosity and meaning, rooted in our relationship with God and expressed in relationships of listening, of accompaniment, of service. "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." This is the mystery of the ever-greater gift of oneself, hidden within the expression "integral human development", and revealed in ever making a sincere gift of oneself. The Cross and Resurrection show us what true development really means. "Man is not the ultimate measure of man. Man becomes truly man only by passing beyond himself" (*Populorum progressio*, 42).

So, the ultimate horizon of our mission is to go beyond ourselves and participate in the divine life. St. Augustine speaks of this as the homeland that we long for, and of our life on earth as the journey towards it. Pope Leo's *Magnifica Humanitas* makes us question what form human industriousness takes; Augustine's *City of God* takes us deeper into the fundamental question: "What form do our loves and desires take?" For all our actions flow from our loves. He gives us two options: love of self or love of God, concupiscence or charity. Our journey on earth takes us successfully to the homeland when all we do flows from charity, the love which takes us beyond ourselves to love God above all things and to love all things in God. The most concrete ways in which we do this is by caring for the development of human life in all its dimensions. To make our lives a gift of self, then, is to let charity define our every desire and action, to let charity define our lives. "God is love" (1 John 4:8,16).

The expression "integral human development", we now see, expresses the Church's commitment to holistic flourishing or abundant life, addressing not just material needs (much less consumerist desires) but also interpersonal, spiritual, social, cultural and environmental dimensions. It is a most challenging and hopeful idea. It is deeply rooted in our faith, faithful to our tradition, central to the Church's mission. By integral human development, Pope Leo says in *Magnifica Humanitas*, "we mean a process in which the

growth of individuals and peoples encompasses all dimensions of existence and opens the future to subsequent generations as well” (MH 82).

Moreover, such development is a universal human concern, relevant everywhere, in the First World just as in the so-called third or fourth ones. Our Dicastery tries to help Bishops and their co-workers to identify their people’s obstacles to integral human development and accompany them pastorally, so that they evangelize the social order from within, like the “yeast in the flour” (Matthew 13:33). The Church really wants to engage with people’s real challenges – whatever and wherever and whenever – so that explicitly or without words they might encounter Christ, the Lord of Life, within their specific culture and situation.

In this spirit, the Dicastery supports the pastoral initiatives and advocacy of local Churches in favour of true development or liberation. To build the Tower of Babel, one master is sufficient to command many slaves, but to rebuild Jerusalem everyone is called to contribute with freedom and love, with craft and creativity, with everything they can bring. The Church, as mother, creates spaces and opportunities for all to actively participate in building the Kingdom and transmitting the fullness of life that Christ gives to each.

In support of this vision, **our Dicastery strives** to offer dynamic support to the local Churches in your discernment, planning and action aimed at human development in all its dimensions, so that everyone can play a role in the Church’s mission. Our programme unfolds in three steps:

First, **Listening-Dialogue**: What, in your area, are the principal “joys and hopes, griefs and anxieties of the people, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted”? (cf *Gaudium et Spes* 1). The Dicastery maintains a two-way bridge with the local Church and its various ministries promoting integral human development. Listening carefully to the bishops and their co-workers, the Dicastery welcomes your questions and concerns, your needs and challenges.

Then, **Research-Reflection**: In search of responses to these challenges, the second section deploys the social and theological disciplines and applies

Catholic social teaching to them. It seeks to offer pastoral guidelines or orientations for the local Church to use in its effort to bring the Good News of Jesus Christ to its people, its society.

Finally, **Communication-Restitution**: The third section works to ensure that useful pastoral results and good practices are formulated, formatted and given back to the local churches, so that they can apply them in a creative and suitable manner; and so that these good practices are also shared with the wider Church and the world.

Thus, the Church walks with people – especially the poor – in their struggle to overcome obstacles to their human development and so to fulfil their human, God-given vocation.

In conclusion, the following four questions may be helpful for reflection:

- What are the main obstacles to integral human development in the territory of your Diocese, your Conference, and AMECEA?
- What pastoral actions do you offer to accompany God's people in facing these obstacles?
- Does your local Church succeed in communicating the Church's social teaching and applying it within your territory? Do people understand this as essential to her mission to announce and transmit the fullness of life given to us in Christ?
- Regarding the Papal Messages for the World Days of Peace, of the Sick, of Migrants and Refugees, and of Care for Creation, can we help your local church, with its communications office, to spread these messages more effectively?

As you pose such questions, the Dicastery for Integral Human Development stands ready to accompany your Church in offering Christ's hope, reconciliation and peace to all your people.

We conclude with Pope Leo in *Magnifica Humanitas*:

With the same faith as Mary, let us become “weavers of hope” in our world, sharing who we are and what we have, so that the presence of

Jesus may grow among us and his Kingdom take shape. In the humble fidelity of daily life, [ours] can become a time in which the Holy Spirit brings about the civilization of love to fulfilment in our lives. Indeed, the Lord continues to make all things new and offers every era the possibility of becoming part of salvation history in the light of the Incarnation. [May] the Mother of Christ ... guide our steps through this time of change and preserve in each of us true faith in the Gospel, so that we may bear witness to the grandeur of humanity, in which God has made his dwelling (MH 245).