

Openingstoespraak prof. dr. Didier Pollefeyt op het Europees congres over profetische pastorale zorg en counselling

Monseigneur,

Dear Metropolitane and Representative of the Patriarch of Constantinople,

Dear prof. De Lange, representative of the Protestant Churches,

Dear honorary guest, mister Lemmens, principal of the Institute Sancta Maria,

Dear participants, colleagues, assistants, students,

In my capacity of vicedean of the Faculty of Theology, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, I cordially welcome you to this international conference and to the Faculty of Theology. I welcome you also in the name of the Dean of the Faculty of Theology, prof. Lieven Boeve, who is for the moment abroad and who sends his greetings and best wishes to this meeting.

I like to express the Faculty's deep gratitude for the opportunities that have been created through the collaboration in the past four years of the *Academic Center for Practical Theology* of the Faculty of Theology with the *European Council for Pastoral Care and Counseling* which finds now its temporary culmination in this conference on prophetic pastoral care and counseling.

I would like to present to you shortly the catholic university of Leuven and its Faculty of Theology, which will be the context of your meetings in the coming days.

During the academic year – which officially starts on September 21th – the population of the city of Leuven – which is now relatively calm - increases by 50% on weekdays thanks to the huge influx of students, among which 35.000 university students, studying at 14 different faculties.

The Louvain Faculty of Theology dates back to 1432, 7 years after the Catholic University was founded in 1425 by Pope Martin V, which makes it the oldest still functioning Catholic university in the world. In its early days, the university was modeled on the universities of Paris, Cologne and Vienna. The university of Leuven is proud to have had Desiderius Erasmus, Cornelius Jansen, founder of the Jansenist movement, Georges Lemaître, astronomer and first to propose the Big Bang theory and Christian de Duve, who won the Nobel Prize for Medicine in 1974, among its professors. The Faculty of Theology is also proud that several of its former professors – such as Gérard Philips, Gustave Thils and Charles Moeller – played a decisive role in the composition of some of the major documents of the Second Vatican Council.

The university library has survived three major catastrophes. In 1914, during World War I, Leuven was plundered by German troops, and a large part of the city was set on fire, effectively destroying about half of the city. The library was lost together with about 300,000 books and a huge collection of manuscripts acquired since the university's foundation.

The new main library was built between 1921 and 1928 and designed by the American architect Whitney Warren in Low Countries neo-renaissance style. Its monumentality is a reflection of the victory against Prussian Germany. It is one of the largest university buildings in the city. In 1940, ironically, during the German invasion of Leuven, the building largely burnt down again, including its (at that time) 900,000 manuscripts and books.

In 1970, following a revolt by the Flemish students who felt discriminated against by the largely French speaking university staff, the Belgian episcopate accepted the separation of the great university into two universities. The Katholieke Universiteit Leuven was to remain in the Flemish city of Leuven, whereas the Université Catholique de Louvain was established in a newly established city 40 kilometers South-East of Leuven. The way the university library

was divided belongs to the sad pages of the history of the university. Luckily, a few years later our faculty received permission to build its own library. Some of you have already visited the library today. Today, our library has become one of the largest – more than one million volumes – and the best theological libraries in the world, as is also apparent from the rankings that are regularly published by the American Theological Library Association.

Currently our faculty has 21 full-time professors who teach and do research in six main areas, biblical studies, systematic theology, theological ethics, history of church and theology, pastoral theology and religious studies. Another 12 professors have a part-time appointment. In the academic year 2008-2009, the Faculty of Theology had 890 full time students, 555 in the Dutch section and 345 in the English section. More than 150 students are registered in the doctoral programmes of the Faculty and are preparing a PhD. Even if the faculty is always proactively looking to attract lay students and women religious from the Two Thirds World, the larger part of its international student body consists of priests who have been sent by their bishops from the South to do studies abroad at master and doctoral level.

Luckily, the number of Flemish students who still desire to study theology remains very significant as well, even if Belgium is known to be a largely secularized country. Each year we welcome approximately 50 new students who want to obtain a Bachelor's degree in theology and religious studies immediately after having finished secondary school. Another new phenomenon in the last five years is the growing importance of a group of somewhat older students, who come to obtain a second degree at our faculty, sometimes in a combination of work and study. A substantial number of our Dutch speaking students decide to leave our faculty after four years of study, among other things to become teachers of religion at secondary school level. Other students decide to follow a much more research-oriented predoctoral year and a growing number of students decide to follow a one year

specialisation in practical theology which prepares them to become pastors in different fields. It is especially in this last programme that the *Academic Center for Practical Theology* – founded by prof. Dr. Kristiaan Depoortere and now under the leadership of prof. Dr. Annemie Dillen - plays an important role.

This conference will not only have an important international significance, but will also have – for sure – a fruitful impact on the Faculty of Theology, its research, its teaching and its service to the Church. It is our conviction that practical theology is not just the ‘application’ of fundamental theology, but is itself source, challenge and touch stone for every form of theology. Therefore, the Faculty is especially happy with the choice of the topic of this conference: ‘Prophetic pastoral care and counseling’ because it resonates strongly with the mission of our institution: how can we recontextualise in an authentic way the prophetic message of the Gospel in the contemporary world, in such a way that it can again mean comfort, liberation and salvation for people, especially those in need for care.

Again, a cordial welcome at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven. The Faculty of Theology wishes you an excellent conference.