

INTERVIEW • with the President of Georgetown University held in Rome

Mr John J. DeGioia shares his insights

The culture of encounter as an antidote to division

By VALERIO PALOMBARO

I developing a culture of encounter and dialogue, an imperative for rethinking a divided world, a demand more pressing than ever in light of the Covid-19 pandemic and the conflict in Ukraine. This is one of the main themes of the conference: "The Culture of Encounter: An Imperative for a Divided World" held on 27 and 28 May at Villa Malta in Rome, organized by Georgetown University and "La Civiltà Cattolica". For the occasion, "L'Osservatore Romano" interviewed the president of Georgetown University, John J. DeGioia, who in 2001 became the first lay person to hold that position in the oldest Catholic university in the United States.

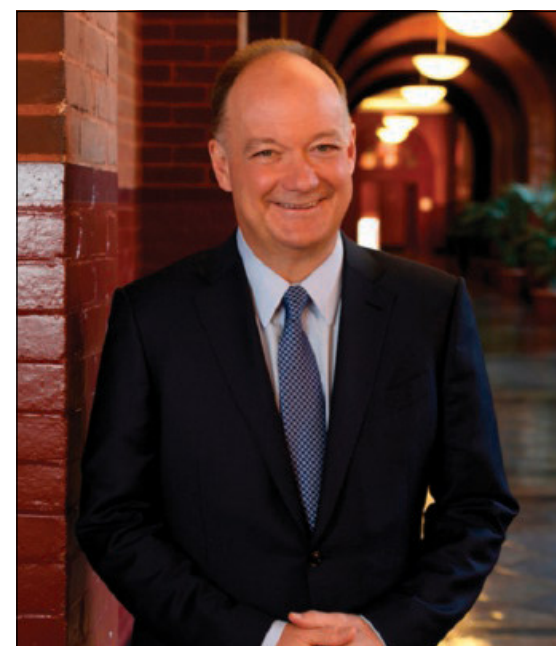
President DeGioia, before we address the themes of the conference taking place in Rome, I have a personal question: What was it like to meet with Pope Francis at the Vatican?

Very moving and inspiring. It was a profound honor for me to spend time with the Holy Father.

The conflict in Ukraine highlights yet again that war is a rejection of encounter. How can the Church and the Catholic community work to change this tendency to reject dialogue and instead promote a form of governance that is focused on the common good?

The current violence in Ukraine highlights the urgency and the imperative of developing and deepening the culture of encounter. The Holy Father in *Fratelli Tutti* and in *Evangelii Gaudium* and in other works develops the concept of a culture of encounter that goes back more than two decades to work he led as archbishop in Argentina. The idea is a powerful one. The imperative now is for us to develop these capacities to engage with and mutually recognize one another. When we encounter one another, we are able to see the depth, the uniqueness, and the humanity of the other.

We have many recent successes in dialogue, especially interreligious dialogue, but the consequences of our failure to encounter one another are global – and as we've seen in these last few years, quite catastrophic. So it requires new skills in discourse, even a new vocabulary. Encounter is



about recognizing the responsibilities we have to one other and seeing things from the other's perspective.

Where do you see good examples of encounter and dialogue? How can digital technology be used to strengthen rather than damage a real possibility for encounter today?

Over the last roughly 60 years, we have seen great opportunities for interreligious encounter. We've seen deep Christian-Jewish dialogue, Muslim-Christian dialogue, and trilateral efforts. At Georgetown University, the oldest Catholic university in the United States, founded in 1789, we have a Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding. We have a Center for Jewish Civilization. We have the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs. We sponsor Building Bridges, one of the most important Muslim-Christian dialogues, originally a project of the former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams. We were the first university in the United States to have a full-time imam. We've had a full-time rabbi for nearly sixty years. We have a full-time leader for our Dharmic community as well as a Protestant and an Orthodox minister.

In interreligious and other settings digital technologies can either be used to enrich the capacity for encounter or to undermine it. We want to show that both interreligious understanding and new digital technology can be resources to strengthen a new model for encounter. *Fratelli Tutti* offers us some ways of thinking about what that new model could look like.

Is the conference this week in Rome part of a larger project on the culture of encounter?

The conference is part of a series that we are honored to be cosponsoring with La Civiltà Cattolica. Pope Francis sent a public letter to me and Father Spadaro last October encouraging this collaboration. The first conference last November focused on the culture of encounter and interreligious dialogue, while this one is dedicated to global challenges, including climate change. Since 1945 we have traditionally looked at the global order through the lens of bipolarity. A logic of nuclear deterrence developed that has persisted into our more multipolar world. We have tried to make sense of international armed interventions by justifying them morally through the lens of the "just war" theory. These elements of the global order need to be reevaluated in our current context.

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The oldest Catholic and Jesuit Institution in the United States

Founded by John Carroll in 1789, Georgetown University is the oldest Catholic and Jesuit Institution of higher learning in the United States.

Today it is a major international research university with nine schools, an affiliated hospital and many highly ranked academic programs offered to the more than 12,000 undergraduate and graduate students enrolled. The School of Medicine was established in 1851 and the Law School in 1870. The university's schools are spread across five locations, including a campus in Qatar.

Georgetown University was born in the early years of the United States and shaped by the turbulent events of the nation's history, from the Civil War and the Great Depression, to World War II, the Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam War.

Jesuit principles and Ignatian spirituality have been at the heart of the university's culture from its inception, embracing the changing times while staying true to core values – engaging the intellect, promoting ethical and spiritual growth, exchanging ideas freely and building a more just world. The university also strives to promote interreligious

dialogue and to be a home for all faith traditions, for believers and non-believers alike. Jesuits have contributed to the university as teachers, scholars, administrators, chaplains and counselors, and are actively involved in university life. In 2001, John J. DeGioia became the institution's first lay president.

Some of the fundamental aspects that characterize Georgetown University are captured in its official logo, pictured above. The cross, for instance, symbolizes the practice of religion as well as the virtues of goodness and morality in all areas of life. The olive branch represents peace and the oak branch represents strength. The eagle is a symbol for Georgetown as a protector of the ideal of faith. The globe and calipers symbolize science and knowledge. The lyre represents the harmonization of different notes into song, an analogy for the link between heaven and earth. The stars represent the 16 states of the union that existed at the time when the seal was created in the late 18th century. The emblem also has two Latin inscriptions. *Collegium Georgiopolitanum Ad Ripas Potomaci In Marylandia* means "Georgetown College on the banks of the Potomac in Maryland". The other, *Utraque Unum*, meaning "from several parts into one", refers to the compatibility between science and religion.



GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY

2022 Rome conference on 'The Culture of Encounter'

A deeper way of engaging with the world

By PAUL ELIE

The term “culture of encounter” is used seven times in the English translation of Pope Francis’s 2020 Encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* – and the word “encounter” and its cognates appear another forty times.

Eighteen months after the Encyclical’s publication, however, “culture of encounter” is still one of the more elusive concepts of Francis’s pontificate: less familiar than “mercy” and “mercy-ing,” less vivid than the image of the Church as a “field hospital,” less practical-seeming than “care for our common home.”

But a conference held in Rome last week set out to change that situation, and the three dozen of us participants were left with a robust sense of the meaning of “culture of encounter” and also with the sense that we had instantiated a “culture of encounter” through two days of meetings and conversations.

The conference was organized by Georgetown University, through its Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs, and La Civiltà Cattolica, whose editor Antonio Spadaro SJ, took part in, and it was held at the Villa Malta. Three Vatican dicasteries served as co-sponsors: The Pontifical Council for Culture, the Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue, and the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development. Georgetown’s president, John J. DeGioia, welcomed conference participants with a reception at Villa Malta.

The Rome conference extended efforts that have taken place since last year among several dozen scholars, clergy, faith leaders, and activists from six continents. And it featured addresses by Archbishop Paul Gallagher, Under-Secretary for Relations with States, and Arturo Sosa SJ, Father General of the Society of Jesus. The project is funded by the GHR Foundation (Minnesota, USA).

What is the “culture of encounter”? Pope Francis has said: “There is always movement in an encounter. If we all stand still, we will never meet. ‘Life, for all its confrontations, is the art of encounter’. That is what life is: the art of encounter. Encounter is, as it were, the oxygen of life. And this is why we need a culture of encounter, because ‘we the peo-



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ple, should be passionate about meeting others, seeking points of contact, building bridges, planning a project that includes everyone’.”

Thomas Banchoff, a Georgetown vice president for Global Engagement who also serves as director of the Berkley Center, has identified four aspects of a culture of encounter: humility, generosity, realism, and patience. He traces its roots to Jorge Mario Bergoglio’s experience as a Jesuit in Argentina. And he sees it “as a key to understanding the ideas and actions of Pope Francis; for a Church that is internally polarized and faced with a credibility crisis; and for the global agenda in a world that is increasingly divided.”

The “culture of encounter” has deep roots in the modern papacy. Pope St. John XXIII called the Second Vatican Council as an effort for the Church to encounter the modern world. Pope Paul VI left Rome to address the United Nations. Pope St. John Paul II had countless encounters with others during his apostolic journeys – and at the Prayer for Peace with world religious leaders in Assisi in 1986. Pope Benedict XVI founded the Courtyard of the Gentiles as a way for the Church to engage with unbelievers.

Pope Francis has made encounter cen-

tral to his pontificate. “The practice of encounter,” Banchoff observes, “can be seen in the human scale of many of his dealings – through his one-on-one meetings with others, whether a head of state, a survivor of clerical sexual abuse, or a person with leprosy; in the letters he has written to people of all kinds; and in the simplicity of his speech and way of life.”

The keynote speakers developed the idea of a “culture of encounter” in terms of Catholics’ engagement with the world.

Father General Sosa traced a pattern of encounter from “inculturation” of Christian faith in one’s own culture, to “multiculturality,” to “intercultural encounter.” This last is a “reciprocal exchange between cultures that leads to the transformation and enrichment of all those involved.” But he warned that it “is not just an ‘encounter between cultures’ that avoids the need to acquire a critical view of one’s own culture, nor does it allow one to be satisfied with simple respect for cultural diversity . . .”

Archbishop Gallagher characterized the “culture of encounter” as “a call to responsibility in an age of entitlement.” Just back from Ukraine, he devoted his address to presenting the “culture of encounter” as crucial to diplomacy – as “the most adequate approach to viewing the future of the international community and humanity as a whole.” Before taking questions from the audience, he drew specific connections to the Holy See’s approach to diplomacy – so many that in the course of his address he named the “culture of encounter” more than thirty times.

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The terrible massacre at the school in Uvalde in Texas has again elevated the guns issue in the United States. Do you think it is finally time to really do something to put an end to these tragedies?

Yes, absolutely. We have not demonstrated the capacity as a people to address the need to protect our children.

There’s a balance between the individual freedoms that each one of us has and the responsibilities we have to protect our children. For more than a decade now, since the tragedy at Sandy Hook, and with now the tragedy in Texas, we cannot be satisfied with the ways in which we are protecting our children. Nothing should have greater priority.



From left, Bishop Paul Tighe, Pontifical Council for Culture; Fr. Marcel Uwineza, SJ, Hekima University College; Irina Bokova, Former UNESCO Director-General and Paul Elie, Georgetown University (chair) participate in a panel discussion on Digital Connectivity and the Culture of Encounter at a Conference on “The Culture of Encounter: An Imperative for a Divided World” held in Rome on 27 and 28 May.