

**EXTERNAL EVALUATION REPORT**  
FOR THE **VILNIUS ST. JOSEPH SEMINARY**  
(**VILNIAUS ŠV. JUOZAPO KUNIGŲ SEMINARIJA**)

1. *Introduction*

On 20 January 2015 the external evaluation Team appointed by AVEPRO visited the Vilnius St. Joseph Seminary (Lithuania). The Team was composed of: Prof. Lubomir Žak (Chair), Prof. Artūras Grickevičius, Prof. Benas Ulevičius and PhD. Dalia Stražinskaitė (student).

As provided for in AVEPRO's rules of procedure, the team members received in advance and studied the *Self-Evaluation Report* prepared by the internal SER preparation Team, coordinated by LTh. Žydrūnas Vabuolas, Rector of the Seminary. This Team was composed of: LTh. Andžej Šuškevič (Vice Rector of the Seminary), Dr. Kęstutis Dailydė (Prefect of Studies), Dr. Ingrida Gudauskienė (teacher), Dr. Saulius Rumšas (teacher), Dr. Vladimiras Solovej (teacher) and the students Gabrielus Satkauskas and Žilvinas Treinys.

The External Evaluation Team was able to gather sufficient information to gain a general picture of the academic situation in the Seminary and draw up this final Report through: its reading of the SER; interviews with the Seminary's authorities, the people in charge of the study programme, teaching and non-teaching staff and students; and its visit to the facilities used for teaching, study and research. This report is divided into eight sections: general remarks on the SER; the current academic situation of the Seminary; a summary of meetings that took place during the site visit and relative comments; the Seminary's mission, aims and strategic plan (from an academic viewpoint); the results of teaching and research; governance, management and autonomy; strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT); and the improvement plan.

2. *General remarks on the SER*

The SER is the result of a process of internal evaluation that began on 9 September 2014, when the Seminary's first internal Team meeting was convened, and ended on 24 October 2014 with the approval of the definitive version of the text (which was translated into Italian over the following days). Thus, the self-evaluation phase was conducted in a very short space of time, given that the Seminary's authorities were only informed on 6 August 2014 that the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Lithuania had asked AVEPRO to conduct an evaluation of its study programme, to be organized between the end of 2014 and the beginning of 2015. This short space of time did not allow for internal consultations to be conducted in a very extensive manner to achieve a more detailed self-evaluation, and made the involve-

ment in the self-evaluation process of a broader range and greater number of people, especially invited/external teaching staff, somewhat unfeasible.

It should be pointed out that the previous external evaluation of the Seminary's study programme by the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Lithuania was successfully completed in 2010, and that the Seminary – in particular the theological part of its study programme – was also evaluated positively in 2012 by the Faculty of Theology of the Pontifical Lateran University (Vatican City) on behalf of the Congregation for Catholic Education, obtaining *ad decennium* recognition of affiliation to that Faculty.

Concerning the SER, the Seminary's internal Team structured it in nine sections: 1. Introduction; 2. Vision, mission, aims; 3. SWOT, strategic plan; 4. Teaching and learning; 5. Research; 6. Contributions abroad; 7. Resources; 8. Management and organization; 9. Quality assessment. Moreover, the main document was accompanied by twenty annexes, further integrating the information contained in it.

The SER was found to be written carefully, seriously and clearly, with the intention of highlighting the real situation of the Seminary's academic (university) life, including its weak points and criticalities. In *some passages* there was a tendency to over-emphasise the spiritual training and pastoral aspects of the institution, finding it difficult to clarify them and describe their dimensions and specific university value (which are the true subject of the external Team's evaluation).

The external evaluation team suggests that, in a subsequent evaluation experience, the Seminary's internal evaluation Team should stick more scrupulously to the model SER structure prepared by AVEPRO and available on its website (cf. module 6, slides 2-7). This would make it easier for a future evaluation Team to consult the self-evaluation document. Moreover, it is recommended that everything possible be done to ensure that future SER be read and discussed by all of the Seminary's teaching staff, both fixed and visiting, taking advantage of the possibility of communicating via internet.

### 3. *Current situation of the Seminary*

The St. Joseph Seminary is a historical academic-ecclesial institution, founded in 1582 as a second university school after the University of Vilnius in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. Despite its closure in 1945 by the communist regime (and the transfer of its students to the seminary in Białystok), it reopened in 1993, receiving the necessary accreditation from Lithuania's Ministry of Education. In 2002, with the consent of the Holy See's Congregation for Catholic Education (Vatican City) the Seminary's programme of theology studies (the "theology quadrennial") was affiliated to the Pontifical Lateran University's Faculty of Theology, *ad experimentum*, for a five year period. Thus the Seminary entered into the type of academic-institutional relationship that entails permanent supervision – according to the criteria defined by the Congregation and the Bologna Process – of the quality of contents and provision of its theological study programmes by the affiliating Faculty. As the experience of collaboration was positive, this affiliation was renewed *ad quinquennium* in 2007 and *ad quinquennium* in 2012.

Concerning teaching/study and research, the Seminary is equipped with modern, functional and adequate facilities and instruments. The library contains over 52,000 volumes and documents (mostly in foreign languages) regarding the various areas of philosophy and theology, and holds a wealth of specialist journals. It also has access to some theological and scientific databases and has an electronic catalogue connected to that of the Lithuanian libraries.

The academic situation at the Seminary is characterised above all by the number of students, which has shrunk in the last few years from 33 (in the academic year 2009-2010) to 15 (in the year 2013-2014). However, it should be mentioned that this reduction in the number of students has nothing to do with the quality of teaching, but is simply a consequence of the fact that the Seminary's study programme is only attended by candidates for the Roman-Catholic priesthood. As the candidates are few, so are the attendees of the Seminary's study programme.

The gradual decrease in the number of students has forced the Seminary's authorities to opt for a cyclic course structure: on the one hand, this slightly increases the number of participants in individual courses, but, on the other hand, it groups together students of different classes (years) and, therefore, also different levels of preparation. This also has a significant impact on the use of teaching staff, many of whom do not teach every year, but only when their course is run, which cannot but represent a serious challenge to the maintenance of internal cohesion among the teaching staff, and also implies financial situations that push some, even "full-time" staff (but with a low number of hours of *effective* teaching per year), to seek other employment in order to ensure a dignified monthly income.

The Team is convinced that the future of the Seminary's academic activity depends above all on the evolution of the situation regarding new enrolments. If their numbers continue to shrink, the seminary's authorities would find themselves in serious difficulty. For this reason it is recommended that real and credible solutions – capable of safeguarding both the name of this historical academic institution and the level of teaching and learning of its staff and students – be sought straight away, with some urgency.

#### *4. Summary of meetings that took place during the site visit and relative comments*

During its visit, the external evaluation team was able to speak at some length with the Seminary's Rector, Vice Rector, internal SER preparation Team, and the community of students, also meeting privately with the librarian and seven teachers. Unfortunately, it was not possible to meet the Prefect of Studies, due to illness, although the Chair of the Team spoke to him on the telephone.

The interviews highlighted the SER's correspondence with the real academic situation in the Seminary. No contradictions emerged in the teaching staff and students' recognition and interpretation of the positive and problematic aspects of the situation. Almost all topics (concerning teaching and study) dealt with during the interviews were connected to the problem of the number of students and the question of the search for the best solutions to safeguard the high level of teaching and learning.

The Team noted that all those who participated in the interviews were constructive, open and willing to be engaged in dialogue, and especially appreciated the lively and interesting exchanges it had with the students.

##### 5. *The Seminary's mission, aims and strategic plan*

Both the SER and the on-site interviews described the Seminary's mission, aims and strategic plan as being conceived and formulated almost exclusively in relation to students' preparation for the priesthood. This is entirely understandable and legitimate, given that the only "users" of its programme of philosophical and theological studies are candidates for the priesthood, and that the primary *raison d'être* of the Seminary and its academic activities is to act as a training centre at the service of the Roman Catholic Church in Lithuania (and in particular the archdiocese of Vilnius and a few other dioceses). For this reason the abovementioned description appears necessarily limited, placing the figure of the future minister of the Church and his personal, intellectual, spiritual and pastoral training at the centre of the mission and the goals to be achieved.

It seems to the evaluation Team that this description implies an institutional self-awareness that struggles to grasp *other aspects* of the Seminary's mission and aims, considering it as a university institution *as well*, although, in reality, some such aspects are already included in the teachers' activities. This means everything that qualifies the Seminary as a centre for intellectual research, capable of helping the Church in Lithuania to successfully foster dialogue with modern/post-modern society: a centre that, despite its modest proportions, has the potential to contribute to debate on the great topical issues of ethics, social policy, etc., with the intention of promoting a culture of respect and tolerance. Indeed, some of the Seminary's teaching staff, as well as taking part in radio programmes, are the authors of respected monologues and scientific articles on these and other similar issues, while the publication of the (generally triennial) periodical *Bibliotheca Sancti Josephi* is a promising initiative from the point of view of closer scientific and cultural cooperation between the Seminary's teaching staff and that of other Lithuanian academic institutions.

The Team recommends that the Seminary – its authorities, teaching staff (especially those who are "full-time") and students – *should foster its awareness of its own intellectual potentials* and the need to boost them in order to achieve a broader cultural impact, no longer limited exclusively to the tasks and project of training for the priesthood.

The same improved awareness would also be desirable in relation to the preparation of the Seminary's strategic plan. As it was presented in the SER and during the interviews, it is conceived in a rather limited manner (in the sense already explained above). Instead, while remaining with its feet firmly on the ground, it should be reconsidered with a vision of the Seminary as a place that not only prepares students for a specific profession, but also favours a valid and fruitful university experience, i.e. as a place that is home to a qualified teaching staff capable of intellectual and cultural activity that transcends the limits set by the unfavourable situation of the low number of students.

## 6. Results of teaching and research

The “Religious Science/Theology” programme is the only programme (spread over six years) run by the Seminary. It culminates in the qualifications of the “Master of Religious Sciences” and the “Bachelor in Theology”. The modes of teaching and learning, the (interdisciplinary and thematic) structure of the courses, and the number of credits provided for by the programme satisfy both national and international requirements (Bologna Process), as well as having full ecclesiastic approval. The programme is annually supervised and *guaranteed*, from the point of view of the State of Lithuania (concerning the programme’s correspondence to the criteria established by the Bologna Process) and the Holy See (Vatican City), by the Faculty of Theology of the Pontifical Lateran University.

The programme is provided by a teaching staff with a good level of scientific competence and a mean age of about 50 years. The teaching and learning of individual subjects takes place in the usual ways, i.e. through courses, seminars and traineeships (or a combination of the three). The figure of a *tutor* has recently been introduced in order to help students more.

As for the teaching and learning outcomes, among the students, this is checked continuously through interviews (*midterm exams*) and especially exams (written and/or oral). The final exam (Master and Bachelor) takes place in accordance with the State regulations for Lithuanian universities and in line with the rules of the Bologna Process, whose application is guaranteed by the Faculty of Theology of the Pontifical Lateran University. In fact, this Faculty undertakes to send the Dean or another member of the teaching staff to oversee the exam. When this is not possible, the Dean still sends a person he trusts as a supervisor.

The students themselves can express their opinion on the quality of teaching and on the results achieved solely and exclusively through individual interviews with the Seminary’s authorities and their teachers. It is quite serious that no formal and anonymous form of control is provided for.

The research result of the Seminary’s teachers are published, as underlined above, in the periodical *Bibliotheca Sancti Josephi*, although some of them collaborate, as authors, with many other Lithuanian and foreign journals and publishing houses. The Seminary’s initiative of periodically organizing scientific conferences is positive: between 2009 and 2014 seven took place, with the participation of both internal and external teachers (also from abroad).

It should be highlighted that the teachers’ research, especially that of “full-time” ones, is also stimulated by the affiliating Faculty, which organizes a seminar or conference of a high scientific profile once every other year at its premises in Rome, and seeks to involve the teachers of its affiliated institutions, including those from the Seminary in Vilnius.

Alongside these numerous positive aspects, the remarks made above must again be underlined, along with the observation that the problem with the teaching/learning and their results is especially the low number of students, in whose experience courses are not introduced in the gradual manner that would suit the progressive growth of their thematic and methodological knowledge, but “jump around”, which many of the students and teachers interviewed saw as making learn-

ing more difficult. Nonetheless, the same problem also has another, more positive, side: the low number of students allows for greater interaction during lessons with the teachers, who can devote themselves more to those who need most help.

The Team encourages the preparation of a small *Yearbook* (even if only in electronic format) for students and anyone interested in the academic courses in the study programme, providing a brief presentation all of the course contents and objectives, the suggested reading list (mandatory and optional) and other useful information.

It also hopes that the teachers of the basic philosophy and theology courses offer students their own lecture notes or a study text (even in electronic format), which, when supplemented by the notes taken during lectures, can help them gain sound knowledge of the principal notions of the subjects studied and, thus, prepare them better for the exam: obviously, the appropriate checks and controls need to be provided for, to ensure that such texts do not become the subject of plagiarism.

The Team also suggests increasing the hours of foreign language lessons, so that students are capable of reading in at least one of them.

The Seminary's authorities are encouraged to dialogue with the affiliating Faculty regarding the need to adopt the type of methodology considered *standard* for Lithuanian universities in the preparation of Master/Bachelor theses (above all, the number of pages needs to be increased). Furthermore, the Team recommends that the choice of topics to be examined in the theses should take into consideration all the main disciplinary areas: from biblical exegesis to systematic theology, from moral and liturgical theology to the history of the church.

Lastly, the Seminary's authorities are urged to do everything possible to help the students express themselves anonymously (to guarantee their freedom of expression) regarding the courses/seminars taken, their quality, the effectiveness and clarity of the teaching methods, teaching materials, the difficulties encountered etc. The current practice of only holding personal meetings between the students and those in charge of the Seminary, or with individual teachers, cannot be considered adequate, especially because some teachers also have the role of trainers, with the task of accompanying and supervising the students from the point of view of their personal and spiritual growth.

## 7. Governance, management and autonomy

The governance of the Seminary as an ecclesiastical university institution is structured on different levels and characterised by certain necessary relationships, which define the spheres and levels of decision-making autonomy of its main components. The figure of the Archbishop of Vilnius, above all, is decisive, as the opening and closure of the Seminary, as well as the selection and appointment of the Rector and the Prefect of Studies and all the Seminary's trainers, are within his field of competence. He confirms the appointment of all teachers, giving them the necessary permit (in the form of a *missio canonica* or *venia docendi*) each semester, and gives the final consent for the admission of new students, in certain cases deciding the temporary or permanent interruption of their studies. The Rector's responsibility for the governance of the Seminary and the way this is put into practice are part of this

broad profile of governance. The Rector effectively manages the Seminary, coordinates its various sections and represents it as an ecclesial scholastic institution in relations with State institutions. Alongside (and under) him, the Vice Rector, General Secretary and Prefect of Studies also take part in the governance of the Seminary. The Prefect of Studies is in charge of the academic part of the Seminary's life and functioning, its organization and quality, and maintains relations with the affiliating Faculty. The Vice Rector's competences concern the functioning and activities of the Seminary as a place of personal and pastoral training, while the General Secretary deals with intellectual education. The fact that the latter two positions are currently filled by a single person should be considered a provisional solution, to be resolved as soon as possible, in order to avoid sacrificing the principle of active participation and dialogue in governance, which is already restricted to a few figures.

The Seminary as a university institution has no permanent collective body (such as a Scientific Council) that the teaching staff (both "full-time" and "part-time") and student representatives could belong to, together with the authorities, and that could play some sort of role – at least a mandatorily consultative one, concerning certain aspects of academic work – in the academic governance. Three times a year an assembly is called, known as the *Institutional Council*, which the Seminary's authorities (Rector, Vice Rector/General Secretary and Prefect of Studies) and all teachers participate in, but which has no influence on consultation or decision-making processes.

The students have a representative body called the *Council of Representatives* (previously *Council of Delegates*), which has the opportunity to meet with the Seminary's authorities once a month to discuss issues relating to their life as students and seminarians. These meetings have recently involved only the Vice Rector/General Secretary in the majority of cases. The Prefect of Studies should also be obliged to attend these meetings if the *Council of Representatives* is to be considered of some significance in academic life.

As for the study programme, the Seminary's governing bodies are required to encounter the authorities of the affiliating Faculty each year, submitting to their supervision all details about courses and teaching staff, and asking for their consent every time a new Prefect of Studies is appointed. The Faculty is then required to prepare a written report regarding the academic situation in the Seminary for the Congregation for Catholic Education, when the renewal of the affiliation needs to be approved.

The situation presented leads to the observation that the governance of the academic part of the Seminary has the typical characteristics and dynamics of an ecclesiastical institution, due also to the modest numbers of teaching staff and students. On the one hand this facilitates management of the Seminary, given that its direct and effective governance functions according to a very streamlined and agile hierarchical structure, having the Rector as the ultimate point of reference and, beyond him, the Archbishop of the diocese of Vilnius (who, according to Vatican norms, occupies the role of *Moderator of Institute*). As this is a small academic entity, this form of governance is perceived – by the Seminary's authorities themselves – as necessary and satisfactory, and as being imposed by the Seminary's specific profile, current situation and peculiarities.

The Team cannot ignore this, and understands the reasons for this view, but asks whether, in the name of the *university* nature of the Seminary, it would not be appropriate for its authorities to take a step forward and confer upon the ordinary governance a more *participative* dimension, which could protect the consultative and decision-making processes (regarding the Seminary as a university institute) in relation to the arbitrary nature of individuals and all the dynamics that necessarily tend to arise, especially in small academic institutions, when the “family atmosphere” (characterised by mutual respect, trust and transparency) disappears.

#### 8. *Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT)*

The issues indicated in the title of this section are dealt with clearly and openly in the SER (at pages 5-6). Therefore it is sufficient at this point to highlight only the aspects that emerged during the interviews with the Seminary’s authorities, teaching and non-teaching staff, and students.

The important *strengths* of the Seminary are without doubt its modern and efficient structure, excellent library and the presence of a teaching staff of high academic standing. Another significant strength is certainly the institution’s affiliation to the Lateran Faculty, not only because it is an authoritative international guarantor of the quality of the Seminary’s academic activity, but also due to this opportunity to relate to the over 40 Seminaries, Institutes and Faculties around the world that are supervised by the same Faculty, with the precise aim of fostering comparison and shared and participative growth.

The *weakness* of the Seminary’s academic activity is undoubtedly the low number of students. Apart from the abovementioned impact on the mode of teaching and study, it tends to seriously weaken cohesion among the teaching staff, both because the cyclic system of courses places some of them “on standby” for long periods, and because the low number of enrolments forces the Seminary to adopt a policy of cost cutting.

The *opportunities* to discover and take advantage of are related, above all, to the fact that the Seminary is located in the city of Vilnius, the lively centre of Lithuanian university life and culture. The Seminary also has the opportunity not only to export its experience and the fruits of its research activity throughout the international and intercontinental space of the “Lateran academic family” – bringing to the attention of scholars in other nations original themes peculiar to the (historical, geographic, cultural...) context and sensitivity of Lithuanian theologians and historians – but also to import new, stimulating and enriching academic topics and experiences.

The real, and by far the most serious, *threat*, which all the components of the Seminary are well aware of, concerns the current trend of a progressive decrease in the number of students. The low number of enrolments and the cyclic nature of the courses make it impossible to offer the teachers sufficient stability and academic or financial gratification, thus creating a situation in which those who manage to find more favourable conditions, and job and research opportunities, in other academic institutions leave (some teacher-priests have been forced to take on other commitments in order to earn a dignified wage: these are most frequently of a pastoral nature, which obviously penalizes their research). Another threat – typical of all Semi-



naries as academic institutions, especially small ("family-sized") ones – lies in the type of student: as they are candidates for the priesthood ("seminarians") and few people choose this vocational/professional route, the conviction spreads among some of them that they will be successful in their studies and be able to obtain the qualification of Master or Bachelor independently of the quality of the results they achieve.

### 9. *Improvement plan*

The Team does not feel it needs to add any further significant suggestions or recommendations for the improvement of the Seminary's *academic* situation.

One action that could improve the situation would be a type of plan that also favours the spread of a culture of work and governance based on the principles of active participation, sharing and dialogue, taking care to avoid reliance on an inward-looking institutional perspective and tending towards a "monological" style of governance. Amongst others, the introduction of an evaluation – by students – of the quality of teaching and studies will represent an important step in this direction, as will the diversification of the role and the figures of Vice Rector and General Secretary.

In any case, the question of an effective and credible improvement plan is intrinsically linked to the (positive or negative) evolution of the situation regarding the number of students. A further fall in their numbers would clearly represent a great challenge to the maintenance of the current quality of all teaching and learning processes.

As regards the solution of the cyclic nature of the courses, given its practical and, above all, problematic implications, the Team hopes that the Seminary's authorities will see it as a merely provisional choice, made with a view to finding a better solution as much for the teachers as for the students.