

Pope expands scope of John Paul II institute on marriage, family

VATICAN CITY — To better prepare priests and pastoral workers to help meet the challenges families face today, Pope Francis is strengthening the Pontifical John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family and changing its name to the Pontifical John Paul II Theological Institute for the Sciences of Marriage and Family.

The new institution is to expand and deepen the types of courses offered as well as take “an analytical and diversified approach” that allows students to study all aspects and concerns of today’s families while remaining “faithful to the teaching of Christ,” the pope wrote.

The re-foundation of the institute was issued “*motu proprio*,” on the pope’s own accord, in an apostolic letter, “*Summa Familiae Cura*” (“Great Care for the Family”). Dated Sept. 8, the feast of the nativity of Mary, the letter was released at the Vatican Sept. 19.

The original institute for studies on marriage and the family was established by St. John Paul II in 1982, after the 1980 Synod of Bishops on the family called for the creation of centers devoted to the study of the church’s teaching on marriage and the family. While the central institute is based in Rome, there are branches around the world, including in the United States, Australia, Mexico and India.

Given the newer gatherings of the Synod of Bishops on the family, those held in 2014 and 2015, and their call for a more pastoral and missionary approach to modern family life, Pope Francis wrote there is a need for greater reflection and academic formation in a “pastoral perspective and attention to the wounds of humanity” while keeping the original inspiration for the old institute alive.

By amplifying the institute’s scope in making it a “theological” institute that is also dedicated to human “sciences,” the pope said, the institute’s work will study — in a “deeper and more rigorous way — the truth of revelation and the wisdom of the tradition of faith.”

The anthropological and cultural changes underway affect every aspect of human life, he wrote, and that calls for a new approach that is not limited to pastoral practices and mission “that reflect forms and models of the past.”

“We must be informed and passionate interpreters of the wisdom of faith” in a context in which individuals find less support than they had in the past from social structures, relationships and family.

“In the clear proposal of remaining faithful to the teaching of Christ, we must, therefore, look with the intelligence of love and with wise realism, at the reality of families today in all of their complexity, in their light and darkness,” the pope wrote. Meeting with reporters the same day, Archbishop Vincenzo Paglia, chancellor of institute, and Msgr. Pierangelo Sequeri, president, said the pope’s mandate to revitalize and strengthen the institute is a sign of how much he supports its work and wants it to make a greater contribution to the church and have a greater impact on society.

All new statutes, structures and programs will be needed to help the institute fulfill its expanded mission, they said. Current personnel and faculty will remain, but there will be new positions and new hires to offer the expanded course work necessary to better prepare students, said Archbishop Paglia. For example, Msgr. Sequeri said, a course that addresses “the family and economics” is critical when so many family problems stem from financial difficulties.

“There has to be a theology for the family that exists,” rather than just a theology of the ideal family, he said. The church must respond to all the contemporary issues people struggle with.

The church has such a long, rich patrimony of teachings that need to be “relaunched” to provide answers to new questions, he said, including gender theories and women’s issues.

“Mustn’t the church participate in some way with its reflections” by being positive and proactive and “not just pull back,” he asked.

When asked whether having a more expanded approach to human sciences meant

the institute would be hiring or collaborating with experts who have views not in line with church teaching, Archbishop Paglia said scientific reflection requires dialogue, including with those who are not Catholic.

“It’s obvious a scientific institute, precisely because of its nature, cannot be closed up in itself,” he said.

“Marriage is not a ‘Catholic’ question,” he said; it concerns all of humanity. “And we cannot responsibly not enter into dialogue” with all those who hold dear the whole human family.

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