LST AT THE FRONTIERS OF THEOLOGY: MISSION, MILESTONES, AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS[1]

Renato R. Repole, SJ

Your Excellency, Most Rev. Elias L. Ayuban, Jr., CMF, our bishop here in the Diocese of Cubao, Your Excellencies, Bp. Roberto Gaa of the Diocese of Novaliches, Bp. Jose Rapadas III of the Diocese of Iligan, and Bp. Noel Pedregosa of the Diocese of Malaybalay, Very Rev. Fr. Primitivo Viray, Jr., S.J., President of the Jesuit Conference of Asia-Pacific and my batchmate, Very Rev. Fr. Provincial, Fr. Xavier Olin, S.J., esteemed members of our Board of Trustees, Rev. Fr. Roberto Yap, S.J., President of the Ateneo de Manila University, and his administrative team, Superiors and Directors of Works of our Jesuit communities and institutions, Very Reverend superiors of our students from various congregations, dear benefactors and mission partners, dear faculty and staff of Loyola School of Theology and other institutions, dear alumni, dear members of my family and relatives, beloved former students, dear friends, beloved students of LST, brother Jesuits, good morning!

First of all, I am very happy and grateful for your presence today in this opening Mass of the Holy Spirit and academic convocation. Thank you very much for taking the time to be with the LST community as we begin another academic year. We are grateful to God for the blessings He has bestowed on LST

1. This article is the inaugural address of Fr. Renato R. Repole, S.J., delivered on 20 August 2025 at the Oratory of St. Ignatius, Loyola House of Studies, Ateneo de Manila University, on the occasion of his investiture as the 11th President of the Loyola School of Theology.

for the past 60 years as a theological school and 25 years as an ecclesiastical faculty. Today, we formally open not just another academic year but, indeed, a formation year, with the Mass of the Holy Spirit, invoking His guidance and grace. Today, I have been installed as the 11th President of this venerable institution. Honestly, I did not expect to be appointed to this mission since, as many of you know, I have been involved in formation work throughout my priestly life—not to mention gardening and raising chickens, on the one hand, and teaching Greek and St. Paul, on the other hand. But, as we all know, God surprises us and challenges us every so often to go into uncharted territories, to stretch our limits, and to make us grow. So, feeling humbled but also honored to have been chosen to carry this task, I accepted it wholeheartedly, relying on the grace of God and on the promise of prayers and support from my superiors and from all of you. This feeling of being supported I already experienced even before I formally took over last May 17, 2025, especially from my predecessor, Fr. Enrico C. Eusebio S.J., who has been patiently walking with me through the labyrinth of administrative and institutional tasks, and even sharing some of my responsibilities. The rest of the staff have also been quite solicitous of my needs and have been very generous in assisting me in my transition into this new role, making sure that I have all the support I need. Thanks to all of you.

Even as the task ahead of me and my team is enormous, I feel fortunate that the legacy I inherit from my predecessors is one that has reached many milestones through its 60 years as a theological school and 25 years as an ecclesiastical faculty. This past year, we celebrated these milestones, even graced by the presence of representatives from the Holy See. We held our annual International Conference on Ignatian Spirituality, Pedagogy, and Leadership together with the Gokongwei Brothers School of Education and Learning Design (GBSEALD)

of the Ateneo de Manila University, which was so well received and attended that most likely it will have a Season 2 this coming year. Moreover, from a small theological school originally intended only for Jesuits and Josefinos and a few other religious congregations, LST has grown much in number, reaching a total of 557 enrollees this semester, including affiliates—the highest so far in LST's history—representing some 45 nations. Another milestone is our sharing in the honor and prestige earned by Ateneo de Manila University in the QS (Quacquarelli Symonds) World Rankings for Theology, Divinity, and Religious Studies for two years in a row now, placing within the 101–140 bracket in 2024 and in the 101–150 range in 2025, out of more than 1,700 participating universities worldwide, with the Ateneo de Manila being the only Filipino university included in this worldwide ranking. Still another milestone worth mentioning is the growing internationalization of our faculty, thanks to the untiring efforts of past administrations to invite more international faculty, and thanks, too, to the generosity of those who have accepted our invitation, some of whom are already here with us. Moreover, in the area of instruction, ironically, the pandemic allowed LST to upgrade its facilities in order to accommodate the necessity of online courses, which, in the process, expanded our reach, as we now have several hybrid classrooms that can serve especially those who cannot attend face-to-face classes. To improve even more the quality of our program, LST has undergone the preparatory visit of the PAASCU for its Theology and Ministry Program under the School of Humanities of the Ateneo de Manila; and soon, we shall also be visited by AVEPRO, the Vatican's accrediting body for Ecclesiastical Faculties and Universities.

Over and above these, LST has continued to honor its Asian Mandate through our Asian Theological Program, that is, the mandate to pay particular attention to our Asian contexts by

offering courses contextualized in both content and method. Hence, for our monthly theological hours, our Student Council and the Administration have tried to identify topics or issues relevant to the Churches in Asia and, indeed, the world at large. To this same end, LST also tries, whenever possible, to offer courses conducted in Asian languages (like Vietnamese, Korean, and Indonesian) to cater to groups from these Asian countries. In addition, LST has greatly expanded its network with other institutions, not just local but also international. Within the campus alone, we collaborate with various institutions like the Ateneo de Manila, which grants our civil degrees for the MA in Theological Studies, PhD in Theology, Doctor of Ministry, and other masteral programs; the East Asian Pastoral Institute, Center for Ignatian Spirituality, Emmaus Center, Catholic Safeguarding Institute, Jesuit Communications, and the Center for Family Ministries. Consequently, LST and these institutes and centers offer a wide array of courses and programs that help develop skills and capacities for mission and ministry. Our latest addition to these programs—and a popular one—is the DIVAS (Diploma in Integral Vocational Accompaniment Towards a Synodal Church). We have also recently launched the Diploma in Integral Leadership and Community Development (DIL) in cooperation with Fondacio-Asia here in the Radio Veritas compound, Quezon City.

Another area worthy of mention is the affiliation with LST of some theologates, both local and international, for the purpose of granting the ecclesiastical degree Baccalaureate in Theology to their graduates: St. John Vianney School of Theology in Cagayan de Oro City, Philippines, and Saint Joseph Jesuit Scholasticate Theological Institute in Saigon, Vietnam. Then, there are the ongoing applications for affiliation of the St. Vincent School of Theology in Quezon City and the Durando

Institute for Philosophy and Theology of the Vincentians in Dalat, Vietnam. Internationally, LST is a member of the CTI (Collaborative Theological Initiative), the network of the seven English-speaking Jesuit theological centers in the world, for the purpose of helping one another in our parallel mission. Finally, we cannot fail to mention LST's vigorous efforts to promote publication and research from our own faculty and from outside sources, including student outputs—major papers, capstone projects, theses, and dissertations—that are published in our Loyola Papers, Loyola Monographs, and *Landas*.

Having reckoned the many milestones LST has achieved, what else is there for me, for us, to do? If the Lord is coming soon, then probably no more! Seriously, ahead of us is still a big challenge. The previous Strategic Plan of LST is expiring this year (2025), and so we need to craft a new one for the next 5 years, at least. But, as we know, contrary to what others think, this is not only the President's task. So don't expect to hear of my strategic plan here, because we shall do it together, starting with revisiting our existing Vision and Mission, out of which we shall identify probably 4 or 5 Strategic Areas to pursue in the light of our reading of the present and the anticipated future circumstances and needs of the Church and the world, not to mention the Universal Apostolic Preferences of the Society of Jesus, the Philippine Province Plan, and the directives and orientations from the Vatican document *Veritatis Gaudium* (VG), the Apostolic Constitution governing Ecclesiastical Faculties and universities. Definitely, given the many positive aspects of our theological program, we are determined to continue and develop them as much as we can.

Having said that, I want to highlight some issues or areas of concern that I think we need to consider as we begin to craft our plan.

To begin with, I would like to underline that, as I have said in my interview with *Tinig Loyola*, LST exists not just to teach theology or the content of the Faith but to train students to theologize or do theology in context; not just to memorize dogmas or teachings but to grapple with and make sense of the various issues that confront us believers, using the tools of Faith and Reason, and everything else that helps. An important aspect of this task is to develop our critical thinking, discernment, and communication skills. I hope we can really fulfill this aspiration.

A pressing concern we need to address is the burning issue of Artificial Intelligence (AI), which our present Pope, Leo XIV, describes as "humanity's critical challenge"—a very helpful tool, along with other forms of digital technology, but with serious implications for human dignity, labor justice, and social ethics, not to mention its impact on the quality and integrity of our students' academic projects and outputs. Actually, AI is just one aspect of the whole challenge posed by the technological or digital explosion: there is the grim truth of addiction to gadgets that has taken captive practically all of us, if we are to be honest. And we know what this means in terms of our physical and mental health, and the quality of our relationships, compromising depth and personal encounters.

Equally significant is the reminder of *Veritatis Gaudium* that theological endeavor must not only remain abstract and academic, but also pastoral and missionary, impacting the lives of the poor and marginalized and other societal issues. This implies that theology and theologizing must not only happen and end in the classroom but must speak to and impact the lives of, especially, the disadvantaged. Is our theology and theologizing here at LST already on this level?

Closely related to this is the call of *Veritatis Gaudium* for greater interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity in theology—interdisciplinarity understood as disciplines or fields working together but staying distinct, and transdisciplinarity as knowledge and methods being blended into something that transcends the original fields, often including non-academic or practical perspectives. This means, therefore, that we have to invest more in Faculty and Staff Development to better equip ourselves for a more demanding task.

In addition, in the area of organizational capability, *Veritatis Gaudium* strongly encourages ecclesiastical faculties to network or collaborate with other institutions, both local and international. I believe this is one of the strengths of LST, given the growing number of institutions that are now networked with us both within campus and outside, and even internationally, as I have mentioned earlier. Still, there is room for more collaboration among us and other related institutions.

Another global concern that deserves our attention is the promotion of Integral Ecology, which also features in the Ateneo de Manila's strategic plan, in the Philippine Province, in the four Universal Apostolic Preferences of the Society of Jesus, and Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato Si'*.

Furthermore, in the light of the recent Synod on Synodality, one of the most significant legacies of the late Pope Francis, LST needs to see how it can concretize the summons and the invitations contained in the final document, which emphasizes conversion on various levels, structural reforms, women's leadership, enhanced lay participation, accountability, transparency, and healing.

Finally, given the various factors and influences that may endanger the safety and well-being of our community members,

we need to come up with well-thought-out safeguarding protocols to promote a culture of safety and protection, as all other institutions have been mandated to do.

All of these holy desires and aspirations, as I have mentioned, cannot be the work of the President or his team alone. In my Paul class, especially on the theme of the Church, I underline the Apostle's teaching on the Church as a living or organic body with many members, each with distinct functions, all of which must work together for the proper functioning of the body. At the same time, I remind them of the charisms or gifts of the Holy Spirit with which each member of the Church is endowed—gifts that are not to be hidden under the bed or bushel basket, as our Lord reminds us, but to be discovered, cultivated, and used for the building up of the Church. Often, a person is endowed not only with a single gift, but with a few, even many, gifts. Imagine, therefore, what a community can become if everyone contributes or shares the gifts they have! St. Paul exhorts the Thessalonians in 1 Thessalonians 5:19: "Do not quench or extinguish the Spirit" (*to pneuma mē sbennute*). Yes, it is possible to extinguish the Spirit, to prevent it from inflaming us to love and service. But that is not what a disciple of Christ is. And that is not the Ignatian way, which is the way of *magis*, the way of giving greater glory to God.

It is in this light, therefore, that I invite all of you, friends and partners of LST, to join me and my team in accepting the challenges and invitations I have enumerated above. We pray and hope that we can indeed come up with a Strategic Plan that addresses the major and pressing concerns of LST. We are still in the Year of Hope, which our beloved Pope Francis declared last year. As members of the Church, we are pilgrims on a journey to the Kingdom of God. And we journey with and in hope, knowing that, as St. Paul says in his *Letter to the*

Romans, "hope does not disappoint or put us to shame, for the love of God has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us" (Rom. 5:5).

To end and to summarize, perhaps we can ask: what does it mean for LST to be a Jesuit theological school in these times? It is, first of all, to be a school rooted in the service of God and the Church, forming ministers and theologians who are deeply spiritual, doctrinally sound, and pastorally effective; second, a theological school at the frontiers—a laboratory of theological discernment that dares to engage the pressing spiritual, social, and cultural challenges of the Philippines, Asia, and beyond; third, a hub of global and local collaboration, a community of discerners and companions, its members bound together by a shared mission, listening to the Spirit, and fostering collaborative leadership rooted in spiritual freedom; and, finally, a place of formation that sends wise, loving, and courageous ministers, who are not only trained in orthodoxy but also capable of reading the signs of the times and reforming structures for God's work and mission.

These are bold aspirations, but much of this is already happening. Still, we aim for more—walking together, relying on God's help, and using our human, material, and spiritual resources. We journey together in hope, with St. Paul's words from *Philippians* to reassure us (4:13): "I can do all things in him who strengthens me." Yes, we can do all things in Him who strengthens us. Once again, thank you very much for your presence and support of LST, and may the Good Lord bless all of us and the long journey ahead. *Kalemera*, good morning!