

Word from the Rector

23 September 2024

THAT MAY COST A BIT

Prof. Dr. Jos de Kock, Rector ETF Leuven

Dear attendees.

Remarkable increase in the number of theology students. These and similar headlines have appeared above various newspaper articles in recent times. The articles mention rising student numbers at Dutch theological faculties. Here in Flanders, at our ETF Leuven, we are also seeing a growth in student registrations. That growth already started last year. For years, the number of new students was stable at around sixty, but in the last two years there have been eighty, 44 of whom will start their bachelor's this year. In addition to articles that draw attention to the numerical growth, articles were published that let starting students have their say. They explain what motivates them to start studying theology. There are also starting theology students in this room: I would say: ask them about it: why are you starting your studies in theology and religious studies?

We should embrace all this positive media attention for theology. All too often, attention is focused only on people's declining loyalty to the church. But then it's easy to overlook another reality. The growth in student applications shows that there are still many people, young and not so young, who have a heart for the church. A large group of students who want to serve in positions of responsibility in church and society.

What newspaper reports often don't draw attention to is what it all costs. Training theologians is not free. Costs are incurred for this and these must be covered by income. A theological faculty is also a normal organization with a double responsibility: on the one hand, to provide high-quality theological education and research; and, on the other hand, acquire sufficient resources to finance that core mission. At the start of this new academic year, I would like to briefly but emphatically reflect on this second responsibility: to acquire sufficient resources to finance the core mission of an academic theological institution.

That responsibility is just as much part of our vocation at ETF Leuven. On the one hand, rising student numbers mean even more opportunities to fulfill our mission: to equip students academically and theologically to ultimately share the good news of Jesus Christ in the world. On the other hand, rising student numbers: that also comes at a cost. And that may cost something. And so the calling that comes our way is also this: how do we make that financially possible? Because the necessary resources do not come by themselves.

If you compare the annual accounts of different theological faculties, you will see major differences. Differences in available budgets and also when it comes to different sources of income. What is striking about ETF Leuven is that our institution works with a relatively small budget and is facilitated by a relatively limited government contribution. This observation means two things. In the first place, it is this: if you compare it to the number of students we train, we achieve an awful lot with very few resources. I am immensely proud of how the entire team of colleagues here at ETF Leuven

delivers this exceptional performance year after year. Do you want to see how you can achieve a lot with few resources? Then come and spend a day with my colleagues here in Leuven. In addition to talented colleagues who use available time and resources wisely, you will also see a lot of voluntary commitment and contributions from, for example, missionaries who can do their work with us through support from their own personal supporters.

Second, this observation means the following: if a government contribution is relatively limited and you want to keep your budget in order, sufficient resources must be obtained in other ways. Of course, there are the tuition fees that students pay; but that's not something very special; although very important of course. I would like to mention two important ways that are special; and both are close to who ETF Leuven wants to be in its deepest essence.

The first is to generate income from renting out student accommodation. On the one hand, offering housing to students on campus is a source of income for ETF Leuven (and of course the necessary costs are also incurred for this). On the other hand, it is conditional for who we want to be as an institution: a stimulating place, a learning and living community where academic theology goes hand in hand with personal and communal faith. Beyond the church walls. A community without a place to live is unthinkable.

The second way is to acquire income from fundraising. About twenty percent of the costs incurred by ETF Leuven must be covered by donations from our supporters. On the one hand, the relationship with donors is crucial for financial contributions to ETF Leuven. On the other hand, the relationship between donors and ETF Leuven embodies a shared love for the church: we want to encourage everyone who has a heart for the church to contribute financially to the work of our ETF Leuven. Because every donation, small or large, has an important impact: enough well-equipped pastors for the church today and tomorrow.

The ETF Leuven is a crucial link in this. I say that somewhat immodestly. And I do that because we don't just offer place to high school leavers who start studying theology at a young age; But also to offer a truly studyable program, unique in its kind, for people who want to study theology out of interest, because of a career change or because of a vocation as a lateral entrant. In view of the current and imminent shortages of pastors in various churches and denominations, this is an unprecedentedly important contribution of ETF Leuven to the field of churches in Flanders and the Netherlands and worldwide.

The new academic year 2024-2025 will be a year in which the responsibility for acquiring sufficient resources to fund our core mission weighs heavily on us. The importance of income from fundraising is increasing. In concrete terms, this means that in the coming months a special appeal will be made to the generosity of our supporters. All this under the motto: *Heart for the church? Help us with a donation*. The goal: 250,000 euros in donations before the end of the year. In this way, we will be financially healthy at the start of the year 2025.

In addition, at the end of 2024, we will lay down a new multi-annual strategic policy plan for the period 2025-2029. An important choice we face has to do with the operation of our campus and keeping renovation costs manageable: will we succeed in finalizing a plan to add another 100 or so student rooms in our buildings? A plan that should immediately strengthen the heart of ETF Leuven: to be a learning and living community where not only employees and our own students with many, many nationalities, but also other students from other programmes in Leuven can get a taste of the Christian spirituality that we want to cultivate in this special place.

This concrete place of theological practice has been entrusted to us, for decades. We have a responsibility to preserve this place for the future: a place of theology, a place of heart for the churches; a place where the good news of Jesus Christ is lived and experienced and passed on.

And that may cost something.

I wish this lived faith, this shared experience, for everyone who is in this place in the 2024-2025 academic year that has now begun.

Thank you.