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Cardinal José Tolentino de Mendonca, prefect of the Dicastery for Culture and Education, spea

Cardinal José Tolentino de Mendonca, prefect of the Dicastery for Culture and Education, speaks at Rome's Pontifical Gregorian University March 31. He spoke recently at a conference on the Catholic imagination in Rome. (CNS/Justin McLellan)



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Portuguese Cardinal José Tolentino de Mendonça told a group of artists and storytellers gathered in Rome from around the world that they are responsible for the "life of Catholicism" through their creative work.

Tolentino, who is both a poet and theologian, said Pope Francis "imagines the church through images," adding that the church needs more poets to contribute to its mission.

The cardinal's remarks were delivered May 25 at a keynote address during a conference on "The Global Aesthetics of the Catholic Imagination," co-sponsored by the Office of Mission and Ministry at Georgetown University and the Jesuit journal La Civiltà Cattolica, along with support from Fordham University's Curran Center for American Catholic Studies and Loyola University Chicago's Hank Center.

The mission of a poet, he told some 40 writers from North and South America, Africa, Europe and Asia, is to believe in the "transformative power of images" and to "create new possibilities of encounter for humankind."

The 57-year-old cardinal — who heads the Vatican's Dicastery for Culture and Education — recalled when Francis elevated him to the College of Cardinals, he jokingly asked that pontiff: "What did you do to me?"

"You are poetry," replied the pope with a smile.

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Addressing the artists gathered in Rome, Tolentino offered a slight modification: "It is the church that is poetry, not a person."

Having plucked Tolentino from his native Portugal in 2018, first to run the Vatican's library and now to head its culture and education department, the cardinal said that the pope expects him to continue "to be a poet in the church."

"I think Pope Francis is a person who really values imagination and he believes that it is a form of communication," he said. The pope, he went on to observe, thinks more through images than he does through structured ideas or arguments.

Tolentino recalled Francis' 2019 visit to Japan when on the plane home a reporter asked the pope what he believed the West could learn from the country.

"A bit of poetry," Francis replied.

Reflecting back on his own formative years, the cardinal said he would have never become a priest had it not been for a dialogue he had with a Portuguese philosopher when he was only 14 years old.

The philosopher maintained that "God is dead" because of what he viewed as Catholicism's lack of inspired poetry, music and paintings.

Tolentino would soon become friends with the philosopher, saying that he had devoted his entire life to dialogue.

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charged the artists participating in the Rome conference.

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>
> — *Portuguese Cardinal José Tolentino de Mendonça*
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Throughout the three-day event, the artists both read from their own works and discussed the ways in which Catholicism has proven to be a formative dimension of their artistry.

On the second day of the conference, on May 26, Jesuit Fr. Antonio Spadaro, editor of La Civiltà Cattolica, followed up on the cardinal's remarks, saying that Francis believes that one of the serious problems faith has in today's world is that "we can not imagine the truths we believe."

Too often, he added, "we lack powerful images."

For this reason, he said Francis has peppered his own writings and official documents with literary references, including quoting from 17 writers and poets in his 2020 apostolic exhortation Querida Amazonia, writing an apostolic letter to mark the 700th anniversary of the death of the Italian poet Dante and even penning a foreword to a collection of poetry from a little-known young Italian poet.

Given that Francis is an avid reader of literature and poetry, Spadaro said that by paying attention to the artists the pope cites, "we can better understand his vision as pastor and perhaps even discover the roots of his way of understanding life and the world."