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Pope Francis listens as Maeve Heaney, director of the Xavier Centre of Theology at the Australian Catholic University, speaks to him on behalf of the International Network of Societies for Catholic Theology in the library of the Apostolic Palace at the Vatican May 10, 2024. (CNS/Vatican Media)

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Because faith in God is not abstract but impacts the way people live and interact with others, theologians must engage with experts in other fields of knowledge as they investigate and explain the Christian faith, Pope Francis wrote.

"Theologians, are like the scouting party sent by Joshua to explore the land of Canaan" in the Book of Numbers; "they are charged with finding the right paths toward the inculturation of the faith," Francis wrote in a message he handed to members of the International Network of Societies for Catholic Theology May 10.

The network, which includes the Catholic Theological Society of America and similar groups around the world, promotes collaborative research projects by theologians from different cultures and encourages dialogue with scholars from other churches, other religions and various scientific disciplines.

In his prepared text, Francis told members of the group that theology is "a significant and necessary ecclesial ministry," because "it is part of our Catholic faith to explain the reason for our hope to all those who ask."

But in "our increasingly multiethnic and mobile societies marked by the interconnectedness of different peoples, languages and cultural backgrounds," the pope wrote, theology helps Catholics and the church assess the changes and reflect on values needed "to help build a future of peace, solidarity and universal brotherhood, to say nothing of care for our common home."

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The pope used artificial intelligence as an example because, he wrote, it raises questions about "what it means to be human, what is worthy of our nature as human beings, what aspect of our humanity is irreducible because it is divine, that is, made in the image and likeness of God in Christ."

"Here, theology must be able to serve as a companion to the sciences and other critical disciplines, offering its specific sapiential contribution to ensuring that different cultures do not clash but become, in dialogue, symphonic," he wrote.

Theology, he said, must have a "creative fidelity to tradition, a cross-disciplinary approach and collegiality."

"Tradition is living" and not stagnant, the pope wrote, and it must continually shape and take root in every part of the world and in every culture.

And, he wrote, theology must be marked by charity "because 'whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love,'" as the First Letter of John says.