# Cardinal Tolentino to Lasallians: “Universities Must Be Laboratories of Critical Thinking in the Age of AI”

Participants in the 2026 Rome Program, the **International Lasallian University Leadership Program coordinated by the International Association of Lasallian Universities (IALU)**, were received on June 2 at the Dicastery for Culture and Education at the Vatican by Cardinal José Tolentino de Mendonça and members of his team.

The audience brought together 46 university leaders and educators from 30 institutions across 14 countries for a wide-ranging and substantive dialogue on **the role of Catholic and Lasallian higher education in a world increasingly shaped by artificial intelligence**.

**Commitment to those most in need**

Cardinal Tolentino opened the encounter by acknowledging **the historic and ongoing contribution of the Lasallian movement to education worldwide**. He emphasized that the Lasallian global community occupies a distinctive and valued place in the Church’s educational mission, and that its collective experience, reach, and charism position it to make indispensable contributions to the broader discourse on the future of education. The Cardinal’s words were received as a recognition not only of the network’s size, but of the depth of its commitment to those most in need.

In a moment that resonated deeply with those present, Cardinal Tolentino conveyed a special message to Bethlehem University, the Lasallian institution serving students in the West Bank. He reiterated that the Dicastery for Culture and Education stands ready to provide accompaniment to Bethlehem University in whatever form may be needed, **a gesture of solidarity that underscored the Church’s commitment to the presence of education – and hope – in one of the world’s most difficult contexts**.

## The human dimension of education at the center

The conversation then turned to one of the most pressing questions facing universities today: the rise of artificial intelligence and its implications for the mission of higher education. Cardinal Tolentino offered a vision of education rooted in the full development of the human person, warning against the reduction of learning to technological efficiency. In an age of accelerating AI, he stressed, **institutions of higher learning must resist the temptation to substitute humanity with artificial intelligence**, and instead place the human dimension of education at the very center of their mission.

Participants and Vatican representatives alike addressed the profound disruptions that AI is bringing to labor markets, noting that many jobs may become obsolete and that **universities bear a responsibility to help students anticipate and navigate these transformations** and not merely react to them.

## To reduce global inequalities

A recurring theme was equity. Cardinal Tolentino and his team emphasized that technology is not inherently harmful, but that **the critical question is *how* it is used and *for whom***. Education, the group agreed, has a decisive role to play in ensuring that AI and other emerging tools serve to reduce global inequalities and support the development of countries and communities that are most in need, rather than further concentrating advantage among those who already possess it.

The dialogue also turned to the interior lives of students. Alongside the rise of AI, participants acknowledged a parallel and troubling rise in mental health challenges among young people, a reminder that **human connection, lived experience, and genuine relationships cannot be outsourced to algorithms**. Catholic and Lasallian universities, it was noted, are uniquely positioned to hold that space.

## A call for patience and depth

Cardinal Tolentino concluded with a call for patience and depth. While AI accelerates the pace of change, education must slow down, making room for reflection, experimentation, and growth. “Education is like planting a seed”, he observed: once planted, time must be allowed to take its course. **Universities, he urged, must serve as places where students learn not only how to use powerful technologies, but how to think carefully, act responsibly, and remain fully human in doing so**.

The Rome Program, now in its 2026 edition, is designed to strengthen Lasallian identity and leadership capacity among university administrators and faculty from across the global network. The visit to the Dicastery for Culture and Education reflects the program's commitment **to engaging the Church's highest educational bodies in dialogue about the future of mission-driven higher education**.

* *Article written by IALU. Photos: IALU.*