Biennial Congress of the European Society for Catholic Theology,
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Luxembourg School of Religion & Society

WHOM SHOULD WE TRUST – OR NOT TRUST?
SEEKING THEOLOGICAL RESPONSES THROUGH TRANSDISCIPLINARY METHODS

The 2027 Congress of the European Society for Catholic Theology (ESCT) has a twofold aim: to promote **a specifically theological study of trust** and to explore how this understanding of trust can inform **the practical question of whom to trust (again) or not to trust**. How does a theological perspective change the answer – or leave it unchanged?

This approach forms part of a renewed theological praxis articulated in the motu proprio "Ad theologiam promovendam", examined at the 2025 Congress in Dublin, which takes up the principal themes of the Foreword to the Apostolic Constitution "Veritatis gaudium". Pope Leo XIV reaffirmed this direction in his address of 13 September 2025, emphasising the sapiential dimension of theology. It should be noted that "transdisciplinarity" is by no means confined to the intellectual integration of contributions from different disciplines, or indeed from other forms of knowledge. Rather, it requires "situating and stimulating all disciplines against the backdrop of the Light and Life offered by the Wisdom streaming from God's Revelation"[1], and thus a specifically spiritual process through which a theological outcome is reached.

Whom to trust or not to trust: a complex question…

Trust is a familiar word. Experience shows that it is a fundamental dimension of human existence. We trust, we lose trust, and we seek to gain or regain it. It shapes our relationships with others, whether family, friends or colleagues, as well as our dealings with political, academic and religious institutions. We also place our trust in systems, organisations and technologies that structure our everyday lives. Some people have greater confidence in themselves than others. Trust also permeates our relationship with God. Christians thus pray with the people of Israel: "Our hearts rejoice in him; we trust in his most holy name" (Ps 33:21). When trust is lacking, relationships become fragile or even impossible. Some speak of a "crisis of trust": is this an exaggeration, or a reality? What can be done to restore trust? But in whom? And whom is it better not to trust?

To answer these questions, we must first understand what trust is, how it arises, how it dies and how it may, perhaps, re-emerge. What, then, are its constitutive elements? How should it be defined? What distinguishes trust from faith? And how should it be classified? Is it a faculty, and, if so, is it innate or acquired? Can it even be considered a virtue? Or is it merely an attitude, simply the product of psychological, social, economic, cultural or religious factors?

What can a specifically theological study contribute by bringing to light the distinctive dynamics of faith in the Triune God, as they appear not only in Scripture but also in the testimonies of Tradition, in liturgical celebrations and, more particularly, in the lives of the saints? How might such a study both change our understanding of trust and offer other ways of preserving or restoring it? What social and specifically religious imaginaries does it draw upon? What does it exclude?

A further question concerns the object of trust. Understanding what trust is does not suffice to determine who or what is trustworthy. Trust concerns not only persons; it also extends

[1] Francis, Apostolic Constitution "Veritatis gaudium", Foreword, 4c.

to institutions and to various products of the human mind, the arts, techniques and technologies, and, of course, artificial intelligence, including everything that underpins it and those who design and deploy it. It also has a role in politics and religion. In the face of radical political or religious movements and forms of populism, all these questions are especially pressing. Moreover, what constitutes healthy distrust? Is it not just as necessary as trust?

These questions have been the subject of numerous studies for several decades. As early as the 1960s, some psychologists were exploring interpersonal trust[2]; in the 1980s, sociology devoted increasing attention to impersonal and institutional trust[3]; from the 1990s onwards, management studies also entered this field of research[4]. In the meantime, *trust studies* has developed into an interdisciplinary field, with an approach centred on the Global North. Founded in 2011, the *Journal of Trust Research*[5] is the leading journal in the field, while FINT, the First International Network on Trust[6], brings researchers together. We may ask what role different types of philosophy[7] play in a field dominated by economics, finance and related disciplines. Yet theology[8] remains largely absent from discussions at this level. How might it broaden or transform the perspective? How might it also enable a critical discussion of commercial or managerial strategies for "creating trust"?

Trust & Society – The Global Network on Trust[9], a project of the Luxembourg School of Religion & Society, is developing with a view to extending this field of research to the Global South and giving due weight both to a philosophy that understands human experience as a whole[10] and to specifically theological reflection. During the 2026–2027 academic year, it will provide several resources to support preparations for the 2027 Congress, notably publications and lectures. All those working on trust are also invited to join the network (office@trustandsociety.net).

The Congress's focus

The organisation of the 2027 Congress proceeds from the premise that academic work cannot be confined to the publication of books and articles. A question such as whom to trust or not to trust touches the living fabric of our families, societies, religious communities, nations and the Church. This is why the Congress seeks to be **more than a conventional academic**

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[2] J. B. Rotter's article, "A new scale for the measurement of interpersonal trust", *Journal of Personality* 35, 1967, 651–665, is regarded as a landmark publication signalling research interest in trust.

[3] See N. Luhmann, *Trust and Power*, ed. by Michael King and Christian Morgner, translated by Howard Davis, John Raffan, Kathryn Rooney, Cambridge/Oxford/Boston/New York, Polity, 2015; see also S. Shapiro, "The Social Control of Impersonal Trust", *American Journal of Sociology* 93/3, 1987.

[4] See, in particular, the article by R. Mayer, J. Davis, D. Schoorman, "An Integrative Model of Organizational Trust", *Academy of Management Review* 20/3, 1995, 709–734.

[5] https://www.tandfonline.com/journals/rjtr20 (20.07.2026).

[6] https://fintweb.org (20.07.2026).

[7] In philosophy, see J. Simon, *The Routledge Handbook of Trust and Philosophy*, New York–London, Routledge, "Routledge Handbooks in Philosophy" series, 2020; M. Hartmann, *Die Praxis des Vertrauens*, Berlin, Suhrkamp, "suhrkamp taschenbuch wissenschaft" series 1994, 3rd ed., 2022; M. Hunyadi, *Au début est la confiance*, Paris, Au bord de l'eau, "La pensée élargie" series, 2020, and the author's other publications.

[8] Of note are the publications arising from a research project conducted at the University of Zurich by Ingolf U. Dalferth (Protestant) and S. Peng-Keller (Catholic), notably I. U. Dalferth, S. Peng-Keller (eds), *Gottvertrauen. Die ökumenische Diskussion um die fiducia*, Freiburg im Breisgau, Herder, "Quaestiones disputatae" series 250, 2012; iidem (eds), *Kommunikation des Vertrauens*, Leipzig, Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2012; idem (eds), *Grundvertrauen. Hermeneutik eines Grenzphänomens*, Leipzig, Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2013; and the thesis arising from this research project, A. Lassak, *Grundloses Vertrauen. Eine theologische Studie zum Verhältnis von Grund- und Gottvertrauen*, Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, "Religion in Philosophy and Theology" series, 2015.

[9] https://www.trustandsociety.net/home (20.07.2026).

[10] M. Hunyadi, *Faire confiance à la confiance*, Érès, Toulouse, 2023, Kindle Edition, 119.

event. It aims to contribute to **a collective endeavour of reflection** and, on that basis, to generate **momentum that will enable sustained reflection to have a real impact** rather than remain a merely symbolic gesture. It therefore also seeks to offer answers as to which concrete measures should or should not be taken when trust is lacking or in crisis.

The Congress approaches the theme of trust through **three specific dimensions**, reflecting its theoretical and practical aims in accordance with the recommendations of the motu proprio "Ad theologiam promovendam".

1) First, it seeks to **develop a specifically theological approach**, firmly rooted in the study of biblical sources and those of Tradition, within a decidedly transdisciplinary framework.
2) Second, the field of inquiry centres on the **practical question of whom or what to trust** (possibly again) or not to trust. This practical orientation calls for engagement with various initiatives developed to "(re)build trust". It opens up a field of research and discussion not only to other disciplines but also to other professions, including consultants, coaches and trust analysts. How can existing research and the initiatives proposed be reconsidered in the light of a specifically theological approach?
3) Finally, in response to the call for a contextualised theology, the Congress encourages **the presentation of different kinds of outputs** intended not only for academic audiences, or indeed for theologians, but whose *Sitz im Leben* lies in different social settings or sectors, such as a business, a hospital, a charitable organisation or a chamber of commerce, to name but a few. How might we develop, working closely with those concerned, a course in a non-theological faculty, a series of MOOCs for a non-Christian or professional audience, a series of social media posts, a play or a workplace training programme, for example, always accompanied by theological and scholarly grounding and reflection?

On the one hand, this approach makes it possible to show how theologians from different specialisms (biblical, historical, systematic and practical theology, as well as canon law) can understand the dynamics of trust and distrust and make a distinctive contribution to "trust studies".

On the other hand, it **requires meta-reflection on the theological act**, or on the act of doing theology through dialogue within particular relationships.

Visits to European institutions are planned during the Congress, with the possibility of holding working sessions there.

Congress format

The 2027 ESCT Congress will, of course, provide an opportunity to hear leading speakers and papers presented by members. In the spirit of the foregoing, however, it intends to place particular emphasis on meta-reflection on the heuristic, epistemic and relational dimensions both of research and of the preparation of papers.

The organisers now invite ESCT members, interested researchers, and also practitioners, departments, institutes, faculties and universities to engage critically in a research process that is both theological and transdisciplinary.

The following suggestions are not intended to be exhaustive. Their primary aim is to stimulate creativity rooted in research and accompanied by meta-reflection on the heuristic, epistemic and relational dimensions of the approach adopted. They **certainly do not preclude the presentation of more conventional work**.

1) **Individual research open to transdisciplinarity**. An academic could approach the theme of the Congress from within their own discipline while incorporating insights from other fields of knowledge. This would involve more than reading the work of colleagues outside

theology: it would entail entering into a genuine dialogue with them, leading each participant to make their thinking accessible to other disciplines.

For example, a biblical scholar could work with a sociologist and a literary scholar. Together, they would discuss hypotheses, compare their approaches and incorporate observations made in the course of their exchanges. The researcher would then choose the most appropriate form in which to share their work (a scholarly article, a course outline, a MOOC, a series of videos for the general public, etc.). The paper presented at the Congress would also include meta-reflection on this process of research and dialogue.

2) **Collaborative research involving researchers and practitioners**. Academics from different disciplines could develop a research project together, involving practitioners where appropriate.

   For example, a specialist in Catholic social teaching could assemble a team comprising a biblical scholar, an economist, a psychologist and a bank director, in order jointly to formulate a research problem and determine the form of the final output (a scholarly article, a corporate training programme, a MOOC, etc.).

   Each participant would then develop their contribution within their own area of expertise — which could also lead to publications within their discipline — while regularly comparing their findings with those of the other members of the group. The final output would thus bear the mark of genuine transdisciplinary collaboration. Its presentation at the Congress would incorporate reflection on the research process itself and could take the form of a jointly delivered paper or a panel.

3) **Research integrated into teaching**. The theme of the Congress could also provide the framework for a seminar or working group led by one or more lecturers, possibly through *co-teaching*, with the participation of doctoral students, other researchers or invited practitioners.

   Several forms of output would then be possible. Participants could, for example, write an article addressing the question posed by the Congress while also reflecting on their teaching and learning experience and on the research approach employed. This output could be discussed in a paper or at a round-table session involving colleagues who had read it in advance.

   Another possibility would be to form groups of students from different disciplines to develop a transdisciplinary output together. This could take various forms (an academic paper, a teaching resource, a digital output, etc.) and would be accompanied by reflection on the cognitive, pedagogical and methodological dimensions of the approach. The students could present their findings at a round-table session during the Congress.

4) **An initiative led by doctoral students**. Finally, a doctoral student or an academic could take the initiative to form a group of doctoral students from different faculties, which could also include practitioners. The group would jointly develop a contribution to the Congress, either as a conventional scholarly paper or as an output intended for a wider audience. Whatever form was chosen, the presentation would be accompanied by meta-reflection on the ways in which transdisciplinary collaboration had contributed to the development of the research.

Expected outcomes

- Contributing as theologians to research on trust
- Being better equipped to respond to a possible “crises of trust”
- A better understanding of what characterises the human being
- A collective publication of the Congress’s findings
- Developing and cultivating links between researchers

- Other outputs developed by participants
- Raising the profile of the European Society for Catholic Theology and expanding its membership
- Raising the profile of the Trust & Society network and expanding its membership

Activities planned ahead of the Congress

During the 2026–2027 academic year, Trust & Society – The Global Network on Trust @ LSRS will offer several opportunities ahead of the Congress to exchange ideas and reflect on the challenges, methods, ongoing projects and literature relating to transdisciplinary research on trust, both online and in person.

Initiatives already planned include:

- The publication of an article presenting a "laboratory" for work on the Church and trust
- The publication of a collection of theological articles on trust
- The international symposium "Trust & Society**"** at the Catholic University of Central Africa in Yaoundé, from 25 to 27 November 2026;
- A series of lectures on trust
- A dedicated Congress website: : https://www.lsrs.lu/events/ESCT2027.

From the start of the academic year, those whose proposals for papers at the 2027 Congress have been accepted may, if they wish, publish the title and a brief description of their project on the Congress website. This initiative will enable researchers to identify work in progress and make contact before the meeting to exchange ideas about their research, thereby encouraging collaboration and enhancing the Congress's academic value.

Call for papers

Applicants should submit a draft of their proposed paper of 2,500–3,500 characters, including spaces and bibliographical references. The draft must focus specifically on the Congress theme, state its central question or argument, indicate its theological grounding and methodological approach, and identify relevant sources. Please also provide your full name, academic or professional affiliation, proposed paper title, and a brief biographical note (maximum 300 characters).

Deadline: 30 March 2027 | Send proposals to: **2027@lsrs.lu**

Organisation

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