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Audience with a delegation from the International Federation of Catholic Universities (IFCU)

This morning, in the Vatican Apostolic Palace, the Holy Father Francis received in audience a delegation from the International Foundation of Catholic Universities (IFCU), on the occasion of the celebration of the centenary of its founding.

The following is the Pope's address to those present:

Address of the Holy Father

Your Eminence, Your Excellencies,

Dear brothers and sisters!

I was planning to deliver a lengthy address, but I am a bit short of breath; as you can see, this cold is not going away! I am giving you the text so that you can read it for yourselves. I thank all of you for this meeting and for all the good that our Catholic universities do by communicating knowledge, the word of God and an authentic humanism. Never tire of persevering in the splendid mission of Catholic universities. It is not their confessional status that gives them their identity: that is one aspect, but not the only one. It is perhaps that clear humanism which makes people realize that human beings have values and that these need to be respected. This is perhaps the finest and greatest thing about your universities. Thank you very much.

I am pleased to take part in the celebration of the centenary of the International Federation of Catholic Universities (IFCU). One hundred years of growth and development is cause for great gratitude! I greet and thank Cardinal José Tolentino de Mendonça and Professor Isabel Capeloa Gil, the President of the Federation.

Pope Pius XI blessed the first association of eighteen Catholic universities in 1924, which, to cite a much later Decree of the then Congregation for Seminaries and Universities of Studies, came together “so that their Rectors... might treat together, with greater frequency, those matters... needing to be jointly treated in the pursuit of their lofty purpose” (29 June 1948). Twenty-five years later, in 1949, Venerable Pius XII established the Federation of Catholic Universities.

I would like to highlight two aspects of these historical roots of your Federation. First, the encouragement to cooperate through “networking”. Today there are almost two thousand Catholic universities in our world. We can imagine the potential of more effective and improved working relationships for strengthening the Catholic university system. At a time of great fragmentation, we must dare to counter the trend, and to globalize hope, unity and concord in place of indifference, polarization and conflict. A second aspect derives from the fact that, as Pius XII noted, the Federation was established “in the wake of a horrendous war”, to be a means of fostering “reconciliation and the growth of peace and charity among peoples” (Apostolic Letter *Catholicas Studiorum Universitates*, 27 July 1949). Sad to say, we are celebrating this centenary against the backdrop of a war, a third world war fought piecemeal. It is all the more essential, then, that Catholic universities be in the forefront of efforts to build the culture of peace, in all its facets, which need to be addressed in an interdisciplinary vision.

In his Apostolic Constitution *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, the Magna Carta of Catholic universities, Saint John Paul II begins by making the rather surprising statement that the Catholic university is born “from the heart of the Church” (No. 1). We might have expected him to say that it is born of Christian reason. Yet the Pope gave priority to the heart: *ex corde ecclesiae*. Indeed, the Catholic university, being “one of the best instruments that the Church offers to our age” (ibid., 10), cannot fail to be an expression of the love that inspires every activity of the Church, namely, God’s love for the human person.

At a time when, unfortunately, education itself is becoming a “business”, and great impersonal economic systems are investing in schools and universities as they do in the stock market, the Church’s institutions must show that they are of a different nature and act in accordance with a different mindset. An educational enterprise is not only based on perfect programmes, efficient equipment or good business practices. A greater passion must animate the university, as evidenced in a shared search for truth, a greater horizon of meaning, lived out in a community of knowledge where the liberality of love is palpable.

The philosopher Hannah Arendt, who studied the concept of love in the writings of Saint Augustine, pointed out that the great teacher described love with the word *appetitus*, understood as inclination, desire, striving. My advice to you, then, is this: Don’t lose your *appetitus*! Preserve the intensity of your first love! Don’t let Catholic universities replace desire with functionalism or bureaucracy. It is not enough to award academic degrees: it is necessary to awaken and cherish in each person the desire to “be”. It is not enough to prepare students for competitive careers: it is necessary to help them discover fruitful vocations, to inspire pathways of authentic existence and to integrate the contribution of each individual within the creative dynamics of the larger community. Certainly, we need to reflect on artificial intelligence, but also on spiritual intelligence, without which persons remain strangers to themselves. The university is too important a resource to live only “in step with the times”, setting aside the responsibility called for by the deeper human needs and the dreams and aspirations of the young.

Here I would like to mention a story told by the writer Franz Kafka, who died a hundred years ago. Its main character is a mouse who is frightened by the vastness of the world and seeks reassuring protection between two walls, one on the right and the other on the left. At one point, however, he notices that the walls are beginning to move closer together and he is in danger of being crushed. He starts to run but, in the corner, he catches a glimpse of a mousetrap waiting for him. At that point, he listens to the advice of a cat, who tells him: “All you have to do is change direction.” Desperate, he listens to the cat, who then gobbles him up.

We cannot allow fear to guide the management of our universities; unfortunately, this happens more often than we think. The temptation to hide behind walls, in a safe social bubble, avoiding risks or cultural challenges, turning our backs on the complexity of reality may seem the safest course. But this is sheer illusion. Fear devours the soul. Never encircle the university with walls of fear. Don’t let a Catholic university merely replicate

the walls typical of the societies in which we live: those of inequality, dehumanization, intolerance and indifference, or models aimed at promoting individualism rather than investing in fraternity.

A university that seeks protection within the walls of fear may well attain prestige, recognition and esteem, and achieve a high ranking in terms of scholarly production. Yet, as the philosopher Miguel de Unamuno once said: "Knowledge for knowledge's sake: that is inhumane." We must always ask ourselves: What is the purpose of the learning we impart? What is the transformative potential of the knowledge we produce? What and whom do we serve? Neutrality is a mirage. A Catholic university must make choices, choices that reflect the Gospel. It must take a stand and clearly show it in its actions, "getting its hands dirty" in the spirit of the Gospel, for the transformation of the world and in service to the human person.

Before this distinguished assembly composed of Grand Chancellors, Rectors and other academic authorities, I want to express my gratitude for all that Catholic universities are already doing in this regard. How much commitment, innovation, wisdom and care you bring to the triple mission of the university: teaching, research and giving back to the community! For this, I am truly thankful. I would also ask for your help. I ask you to help the Church, at this moment in her history, to shed light on the deepest human aspirations by offering insight and understanding, as well as the "reasons of hope" (cf. *1 Pet* 3:15) born of faith, and thus assisting the Church to engage confidently in dialogue on the great issues of our time. Help us to translate culturally, in a language open to new generations and new times, the richness of the Christian tradition; to identify the new frontiers of thought, science and technology and to approach them with balance and wisdom. Help us to build intergenerational and intercultural covenants for the protection and care of our common home, within a vision of integral ecology, and in this way respond effectively to the cry of the earth and the plea of the poor.

Dear friends, in many a chapel of your universities there is an image of Our Lady, Seat of Wisdom. I invite you to contemplate it lovingly and to keep your gaze fixed on her. What is the secret of Our Lady of Wisdom? It is that she brings us Jesus, the Wisdom of God, who offers us the criteria to direct every pursuit of knowledge. Look to the heart of Mary, so that she may accompany you, your academic communities and your future plans. I give you my cordial blessing and I ask you, please, not to forget to pray for me.
