



## ***What the Church expects from Catholic Universities***

H. E. Cardinal José Tolentino Mendonça  
Prefect of the Dicastery for Culture and Education  
Holy See

In December 2020, Pope Francis recorded a video message in which he paid tribute to a few academics involved in UNESCO's Mission 4.7 and in the Global Compact on Education. In this video message, the Holy Father used a sentence I now want to quote to begin my address. He said: "Education is an act of hope that, from the present, looks to the future."<sup>1</sup>

As you can see, our Pope's sentence could epitomize our subject of the day, namely, looking to what we would want our Catholic Universities to become in the future, starting from the present – without, of course, forgetting our legacy from the past. Starting from the present requires therefore that we broaden our vision and listen to other *points of view*, as with a polyhedron. In other words, we can't limit ourselves to looking at Universities solely on the basis of our own reality. As with a polyhedron, we need to have many perspectives reflect the distinctiveness of Catholic educational institutions through the convergence of all outlooks or points of view.<sup>2</sup>

Our scrutiny today should therefore be multipronged and pluralistic, because it has to encompass the current situation of the Church, that of our Catholic Universities, the commitment of so many men and women to the holistic formation of the person, the present circumstances of those disciples of Jesus who work in education and culture, and, last but not least, the commitment of those who support our institutions, in other words "the sum total of persons within a society which

---

<sup>1</sup> Pope Francis, video message for the launch of mission 4.7 and of the Global Compact for Education, Vatican City, 16 December 2020.

<sup>2</sup> See Pope Francis, *Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii gaudium*, 24 November 2013, n. 236.

pursues the common good, which truly has a place for everyone.”<sup>3</sup> If we start from a present that includes all of that, our vision of the future will go beyond routine programming. It will become an act of hope.

We have to strive for Catholic Universities to be good universities. But we must also bear in mind that this is not enough. In Pope Francis’s mind, Catholic Universities shouldn’t just deliver quality degrees and ensure the pursuit of ambitious careers for their students. As the Pope said in his World Day of Peace message of 2021, the Church wishes our institutions of higher learning to shine as world universities that, by offering their educational services, are in a capacity to “pass on a system of values based on the recognition of the dignity of each person, each linguistic, ethnic and religious community and each people, as well as the fundamental rights arising from that recognition.”<sup>4</sup> In short, our hope is that our Catholic education can provide more. That it can be more deeply rooted in the Christian *ethos* and therefore more daring in the pursuit of truth. More culturally creative. More tuned to society: “more open and inclusive, capable of patient listening, constructive dialogue and better mutual understanding.”<sup>5</sup>

And now, heeding the challenge issued to us by the Pope, I think it is appropriate for me to propose to explore a path toward the future. When looking to the future, I believe there are two essential dimensions that must be preserved and two other ones that it is incumbent on us to renew. There clearly are additional dimensions that we could discuss in this meeting or in another setting though. Reflection and participation for the good of our universities are welcome!

## **1. Identity**

The first dimension a Catholic University cannot dispense with, either today or tomorrow, is its own identity. Without it, the university would stray away from its educational mission in the footsteps of our Lord Jesus, and would become a degree factory. In this respect, the Apostolic Constitution *Ex corde Ecclesiae* defines a Catholic University as an academic community that is characterized 1) by a Christian inspiration, shared not only by each of its members but also by the university community as such; 2) by an ongoing reflection, enlightened by the Catholic faith, on the ever-growing treasure of human knowledge, to which the university seeks to contribute through its own research; 3) by its fidelity to the Christian message as

---

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Pope Francis, *Message for the World Day of Peace*, 1 January 2021, n. 8.

<sup>5</sup> Pope Francis, *Message for the launch of the Global Compact on Education*, 12 September 2019.

expressed by the Church; and 4) by an institutional effort at the service of the people of God and of the human family in their journey toward the transcendental goal that gives meaning to life.<sup>6</sup>

Nevertheless, though our universities have reflected on their identity through study groups, publications, conferences, etc., we must open our eyes even wider, all the more so in this changing and unstable world. A few sources of temptation beguile our institutions today, and if we are not careful, we run the risk of giving in to them without realizing what we're doing.

One source of temptation that pulls identity apart, and I'm referring here to Pope Francis's thinking, is the institution's pursuit of self-preservation – in other words, an excessive sense of introversion that hampers the educational impetus by turning away from reality. The pursuit of self-preservation transforms us into education civil servants, at the expense of the evangelizing action of the University, to the point that this enlarges the distance between professors and students, among professors themselves, among students themselves, and between the Institution, the Church and society. In other words, the works and gestures of daily life disappear and we no longer feel that we are brothers and sisters. It is so easy for the various components of a university to become separate islands, and for the university to become an archipelago of loneliness!

Another source of temptation that undermines identity is self-referentiality, as often discussed by Pope Francis. Catholic Universities practice self-referentiality when, ultimately, they only trust their own forces and, as institutions, feel a certain degree of superiority. In this respect, it is worth reflecting on a speech the Pope gave last year in May, in connection with the temptation of self-referentiality. Let me read an excerpt from that speech: "The myth of Prometheus, suitable perhaps for other epochs, is no longer so for ours. We do not need titanic heroism, but a meek and patient brotherhood among ourselves and with creation. Life and history show, in fact, that we cannot be ourselves without each other and without others. In a world in which everything is closely interrelated, [...] it is necessary to be creatively open to new, more integrated, shared itineraries, directly connected to people and their contexts."<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> See John Paul II, Apostolic Constitution *Ex corde Ecclesiae*, 15 August 1990, n. 13.

<sup>7</sup> Pope Francis, *Address to participants in the International Conference on the Protection of Biodiversity*, Vatican City, 21 May 2022.

## 2. The mission

The second dimension that a Catholic University cannot give up on, either now or in the future, is the mission that binds it to the great task of evangelization. According to *Ex corde Ecclesiae*, evangelization here should aim for “a public, persistent and universal presence of the Christian mind in the whole enterprise of advancing higher culture and educat[ing] all students to become people outstanding in learning, ready to shoulder society's heavier burdens and to witness the faith to the world.”<sup>8</sup>

In a Catholic University, such a presence expresses itself, first and foremost, in a continuous, scientific dialogue between faith and reason. Today and tomorrow, it will be necessary to consolidate a credible compatibility between faith and reason. “Precisely faith and reason, when they go hand on hand, are able to enhance the culture of human beings, to impart meaning to the world and to build more humane, more brotherly societies that are therefore more filled with God.”<sup>9</sup>

We have to be alert to two distinct dangers: fideism and autonomous reason. Both are suspicious of each other, despise each other and claim to be unique. A Catholic institution of learning must beware of the aspiration to become a parish or a devotion group. Likewise, it must distance itself from the presumption of claiming that only some sciences accept the presence of faith while others are exempt. Pope Francis rightly said that “faith awakens the critical sense... Faith broadens the horizons of reason to shed greater light on the world which discloses itself to scientific investigation.”<sup>10</sup>

I will close on this dimension by expressing the wish that our Universities accept, as soon as possible, the Pope’s invitation to embrace the principle of interdisciplinarity, “not only in its ‘weak’ form as a simple multidisciplinary approach [...] but also in its ‘strong’ form as cross-disciplinary, situating and stimulating all disciplines against the backdrop of the Light and Life offered by the Wisdom streaming from God’s Revelation.”<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> Pope John Paul II, Apostolic Constitution *Ex corde Ecclesiae*, 15 August 1990, n. 9.

<sup>9</sup> Pope Francis, *Address to members of the Fraternity of St. Thomas Aquinas Associations*, Vatican City, 30 September 2022.

<sup>10</sup> Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter *Lumen Fidei*, 29 June 2013, n. 34.

<sup>11</sup> Pope Francis, *Apostolic Constitution Veritatis gaudium*, 8 December 2017, Foreword, n. 3c; Post-Synodal Exhortation *Christus vivit*, 25 March 2019, n. 222.

Now that we've seen the dimensions that cannot be given up, identity and mission, I will briefly present those that need to be renewed today to sow the seeds of a promising future.

### **3. Dialogue**

The first of these dimensions is dialogue. If indeed we followed Pope Francis's magisterium, we could safely say that the invitation to dialogue pervades the entirety of his messages and addresses to all ecclesial communities and the world.

Dialogue is a part of the constitutive dimension of every human being. All anthropologists and sociologists agree on this. People need dialogue. Their entire physical and spiritual being and actions are geared towards communication. For the educator and student of a Catholic University, dialogue is grounded and develops in the dynamic of the trinitary dialogue, in the dialogue between God and man and in the dialogue between people themselves.

Hence Catholic institutions of learning, because of their ecclesial nature, are called upon to share dialogue as a constitutive component of their identity. In other words, they are invited to practice the grammar of dialogue, not as a technical expedient but as a substantive modality of relationship, as an expression of synodality. Catholic educational communities must be synodal. They must allow individuals to express themselves and humanly grow in a process of relationship of dialogue, through constructive interaction, through the demonstration of respect, through the acceptance of various points of view, through the fostering of trust in an atmosphere of genuine harmony.

Pope Francis has indeed provided essential guidance toward promoting dialogue. This guidance points to the duty of identity, the courage of otherness and the sincerity of intentions. The duty of identity because it is impossible to engage in genuine dialogue on the basis of ambiguity or by sacrificing the good just to please others. The courage of otherness because those who are different, whether culturally or religiously, are not looked upon or dealt with as enemies but are welcomed as fellow travelers, with the authentic conviction that the good for each person resides in the good for all. The sincerity of intentions because dialogue, as a genuine expression of what is human, is not a strategy aimed at grasping ulterior motives but the path toward truth, which it is worth following with patience in order to turn competition into cooperation.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> See Pope Francis, *Address to the participants in the International Peace Conference*, Cairo, 28 April 2017.

We know that the goal of the teaching dispensed in our Catholic Universities is the holistic formation of the person. Well, dialogue, when it is properly channeled, can reinforce what persons have achieved and open their horizon by enabling them to surpass themselves and by helping them to build the social friendship and universal brotherhood that we've been expecting. Let's not forget that if our educational institutions are not open to dialogue, they will inevitably become isolated, even if their educational project was inspired by Christian doctrine. Likewise, if our institutions busy themselves only with dialogue while forgetting their distinctive identity, they will end up as mere institutions that go where the wind blows. Virtue seeks for balance.

#### **4. University pastoral care**

Since the beginning of Pope Francis's pontificate, we have been invited to engage in a pastoral and missionary conversion. As a result, numerous episcopal conferences, religious congregations and various ecclesial institutions have promoted a reflection on the pastoral care conducted by each one of them. In some cases, structures have been renewed. In other cases, the message has been updated to reflect the sign of the times. Pastoral conversion, which we are called upon to engage in, aims to "make ordinary pastoral activity on every level more inclusive and open, to inspire in pastoral workers a constant desire to go forth and in this way to elicit a positive response from all those whom Jesus summons to friendship with himself."<sup>13</sup>

Yet not much has been done to promote university pastoral care. Some Catholic Universities still view pastoral care as just having a chapel, an image of Christ, of the Virgin or a saint. They see themselves as Catholic because they have a chaplain or a pastoral worker. In some other universities, signs of Christianity are simply absent. Therefore, if we want to see our future engaged in the fraternal society that we are calling for, we must reflect, while grounded in the kerygma, on what university pastoral care we need now that could shape the future.

At any rate, it would be commendable if our Universities were to encourage and promote a renewed pastoral activity, in which the faith is embodied through daily actions, with significant moments of prayer, of reflection and of cultural nurturing. Pastoral care should take into account the fact that young people today seek social commitment. Volunteering is a school of life within the school itself. "There are many young people who are ready to commit themselves to initiatives of volunteer

---

<sup>13</sup> Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*, 24 November 2013, n. 27.

work, active citizenship and social solidarity. They need to be accompanied and encouraged to use their talents and skills creatively, and to be encouraged to take up their responsibilities. Social engagement and direct contact with the poor remain fundamental ways of finding or deepening one's faith and the discernment of one's vocation."<sup>14</sup>

Another important element to keep in mind and deepen is the cultural dimension. Pope Francis's suggestion to create a new dicastery bringing together culture and education is a challenge we will have to respond to together, by looking for more synergies and by taking more risks.

Let me close with a wish for all the members of academic communities in our Catholic Universities. I hope that, starting from our present, with its advantages and inconveniences, we will be able to seriously think about the future. May all of us, as Pope Francis said in the video message I mentioned at the beginning, become the creators of "a new human beauty, a new fraternal and friendly beauty, as well as of the preservation of the earth we tread."<sup>15</sup>

**Paris, 16 January 2023.**

---

<sup>14</sup> Post-Synodal Exhortation *Christus vivit*, 25 March 2019, n. 170.

<sup>15</sup> Pope Francis, video message of His Holiness Pope Francis for the launch of mission 4.7 and of the Global Compact for Education, Vatican City, 16 December 2020.