

Words of Welcome

H. E. Archbishop, Vincenzo Zani,
Secretary of the Congregation for Catholic Education

Your Excellencies,
Distinguished Civil Authorities,
Esteemed Presidents, Teachers and Representatives of Catholic Universities,
Members of the International Federation of Catholic Universities,

It gives me much pleasure to greet you all. In particular, I offer my best wishes for the greatest success of this, your twenty-fifth General Assembly. I bring also the best wishes of the new Prefect of the Congregation for Catholic Education, His Eminence Cardinal Giuseppe Versaldi.

First of all, I should like to thank the Federation – and, in particular, its President, Father Pedro Rubens, and its Secretary, Monsignor Guy-Réal Thivierge – for the generous, unfailing collaboration that it has given throughout the years to the Congregation for Catholic Education. We can see how the links between us, established on various occasions, have developed our mutual esteem and have strengthened the good relationships between FIUC and our Congregation. In the history of our respective institutions, there has perhaps never been such a productive moment, rich in promise for the future.

Our collaboration has become even more close as we prepare for the celebrations that will take place in Rome this coming November, to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the Second Vatican Council's Declaration *Gravissimum Educationis* and the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Apostolic Constitution *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*.

The aim of this event, which is being organized by the Congregation, is to create a framework of principles and values, to guide the educational activity of our Catholic institutions in the coming decades. Our starting-point is the two fundamental documents I have mentioned, and, in particular, the rich experience that our educational institutions live each day. To achieve these goals, we must understand the extent to which our plans for education face major challenges. This is the context in which we must read the theme of your Assembly, "Times Change: Values Endure" – a theme closely linked with that of the Congress to be held in Rome, "Educating Today and Tomorrow: A Renewing Passion". I should now like to offer three points for your consideration.

1. The Message of the Council regarding Catholic Education, 50 Years after *Gravissimum Educationis*

In this first point for consideration, I wish to recall the invaluable suggestions provided by *Gravissimum Educationis* for our institutions of higher education.

In the first place, the document asks Catholic universities to nurture the individual academic disciplines, each according to its own method and with the freedom proper to academic research (cf. n. 10). It also invites Catholic universities to investigate the questions that emerge from our evolving situations, so that faith and reason may meet in the one truth.

A second aspect regards the universities' effort to ensure a public, constant and universal presence of Christian thought, thus promoting and spreading a top-quality academic culture.

In the third place, the document recommends that Catholic universities form their students to be men and women who are truly distinguished for their knowledge, and who are prepared to take on the most demanding roles in society, as witnesses to the faith within our world (cf. n. 10).

Therefore, a dedication to promoting higher culture means placing centre-stage the whole human person, in whom the values of intelligence, will, conscience and fraternity should excel.

Following the principles articulated by the Council, John Paul II, twenty-five years later, published his Apostolic Constitution *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, on Catholic universities. This document clarified the identity and mission of institutions of higher education that are based on a Christian perspective.

What is the nature of a Catholic university? Every university, as a university, “is an academic community which, in a rigorous and critical fashion, assists in the protection and advancement of human dignity and of a cultural heritage through research, teaching and various services offered to the local, national and international communities” (ECE n. 12)

As Catholic, it must have: a Christian inspiration not only of individuals but of the university community as such; a continuing reflection in the light of the Catholic faith upon the growing treasury of human knowledge, to which it seeks to contribute by its own research; [...] and an institutional commitment to the service of the people of God and of the human family” (ECE n. 13).

2. Research perspectives for university institutions

My second consideration focuses on the research perspectives on which Catholic universities are continually invited to reflect, taking into consideration the deep crisis that knowledge is witnessing. In his book *After Virtue*, McIntyre states in this respect: « A catastrophe, that interrupted the transmission of moral knowledge and even more so its foundations, has appeared ». This break in the transmission processes bides the question of authority and freedom, as they are experienced in educational contexts. I shall not dwell here on the list of challenges we face, but I would like to propose three basic perspectives on the « added value» that Catholic universities can offer in the landscape of university institutions in these historic times.

2.1. A first perspective is to «reform thought», to quote Edgar Morin¹. Today, one risks no longer knowing what thinking, reflecting mean and not being taught to experience this. The cultural and social situation in which the young generations are immersed is characterized by an ever growing distance between two poles: on the one hand, disconnected, fragmented knowledge, bound in separate disciplines, on the other ever more pluridisciplinary, transversal and transnational problems. The challenge of our epoch is *globality* and at the same time *complexity*. The different elements (economic, political, sociological, psychological, scientific, philosophical, religious) that make up the whole, although distinct, are led towards this articulated unity, in the service of the integral promotion of each person and the common good that they are called upon to build.

However, one sees that knowledge becomes ever more esoteric (only accessible to specialists), anonymous (quantitative and functionalist), fragmented and disappointing (so dispersed that one cannot reach either the perspective nor the synthesis). Moreover, the capacity to confront truth, the transcending values, the theological knowledge which, in our universities, cannot be left aside but must dialogue with other knowledge to illuminate reality and the path to be followed, seems lost.

For us, knowledges are conjugated and open so as to nurture a thought that takes on the tasks and the drama of existence, both personal and social, in the context of history and the ecosystem in a responsible way and can therefore confront the major challenges of our epoch with hope and efficiency.

The 50th anniversary of *Gravissimum educationis* represents a favourable opportunity to question ourselves and open up new perspectives. Education inspired by the values of the Christian Revelation has always been in the vanguard. Today again, it is called upon to meet the challenges thanks to new paradigms.

2.2. A second perspective, which follows on from the first, is that the *unity of knowledge* is closely linked to the *unity of the person*. Many feel the need for a reunification of knowledge within the framework of academic work. Already in the past, there had been several attempts in this direction. But the dialogue between science and the disciplines is not automatic; it can only occur in an extrinsic way and requires a deep foundation. At this level, it does not only occur at the level of the method or content, but also operates within the person because unity is not a sum but a *habitus*.

To move one's attention to people who must be trained in their integrality can help to clarify if and to what extent specialization is a source of fragmentations. Did we lose the unity of knowledge when disciplines started to be different or when a person lost his own centre? Concerning the subject, unity is given when there is no separation between intelligence and will, between theory and practice. And unity is organized around the action of the subject, incited by the ordered possession of all knowledge that is judged important and significant. There is a hierarchy between the ends that are capable of producing intellectual unity. One of the basic ends is, without a doubt, the

¹ E. MORIN, *La tête bien faite. Repenser la réforme, réformer la pensée*, Paris, Seuil, 1999.

wish to serve efficiently the common good, but more especially, the purpose of study and research is to shed light on the existential questions of the human person, on the motives of his life when this research is guided by love and is the fruit of love: the love of he who knows how to open up to the reflections of others, thus developing a *habitus* of listening, of dialogue, of enhancement, without which there could be no unity of knowledge.

2.3. A third perspective is the contribution of universities to social progress and the *culture of solidarity*. Today more than ever, one must make clear the social purpose of knowledge by purifying it of any risk of utilitarianism and ideologism. The academic communities have the responsibility of building and disseminating a «culture of universal solidarity». The future of humanity mainly depends on two factors: the capacity to put the question of progress in planetary and global terms and the awareness that, in order to encourage the economic development of the poorest, an efficient distribution of the riches is no longer sufficient, there must also be cultural and ethical values. In this perspective, the Catholic universities have a duty to promote solidarity under the banner of *gratuitousness, generosity and service*. One must prepare future leaders who know how to disseminate a culture of peace, which is against fratricide wars, a culture of work that is founded on an anthropology that respects freedom and the value of a person. The great challenges of the future, of the peaceful coexistence to the protection of the environment – as Pope Francis reminds us in his recent encyclical –, of the respect of human life and the family, the correct use of the new technologies, are lost or won *together*, if one creates a culture of solidarity.

The reform of thought, the unity of knowledge and the social dimension of the university are three important and urgent perspectives for university studies. This attention becomes real if we are able to warrant in our institutions the presence of leaders and professors who are well prepared not only at the professional level, but also in the personal witnessing of Christian values, as the *Ex corde Ecclesiae* Constitution reminds us: «Christian teachers are called to be witnesses and educators of authentic Christian life, which evidences attained integration between faith and culture, and between professional competence and Christian wisdom» (n. 22).

3. Towards a renewal of educational commitment

The third consideration is linked to the importance of renewing the commitment of the Church in academic institutions. Here, we note with enthusiasm that Pope Francis did not limit himself to underlining the social dimension of education and the importance of the dialogue between faith, reason and science exclusively in the Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*, but that he stressed this in many other encounters with the academic and cultural world. This is why I would like to take up several passages of the speech he delivered at the University of Cagliari in Italy², and which, to my mind, could enlighten us in our present tasks.

Basing himself on the passage of the disciples of Emmaüs, the Pope elaborated an «existential» reading, applying the feelings of suffering, resignation and

² Cf. FRANCESCO, *Discorso al mondo della cultura*, Cagliari 22 September 2013.

disorientation of the two Biblical figures to those who are living in different situations today and integrating the educational dimension. One cannot live in resignation, wash our hands or «shut oneself off»: one must seek paths of hope. What then are the tasks of the University in such a context?

The University as a place of discernment. It is important to interpret reality, but also to live this reality without fear, without fleeing, without catastrophism. « A crisis can become a time of purification and a time to re-think our socio-economic models and of a certain understanding of progress that fed illusions, in order to recover what is most fully human. Discernment is neither blind nor improvised: it is carried out on the basis of ethical and spiritual criteria, it involves asking oneself about what is good, it entails thinking about our own values regarding man and the world, a vision of the person in all his dimensions, especially the spiritual and transcendent [...] The University as a place of «wisdom» has a very important role to play in forming students in discernment in order to nourish hope».

A second element would be: *The University as a place where the culture of closeness develops.* Isolation and withdrawing into one's own interests are never the way to restore hope and bring about a renewal. Closeness and encounter are necessary. « The University is a privileged place where this culture of dialogue is promoted, taught and lived, this culture which does not indiscriminately level out differences and plurality [...] nor does it take them to the extreme, causing them to become causes of conflict: it opens to constructive dialogue. This means understanding and esteeming someone else's riches, it means not seeing him with indifference or fear, but as an opportunity for growth ».

The third element is the *University as a place of formation in solidarity.* This is not just a Christian value, but also a term that belongs to the human vocabulary. « There is no future for any country, for any society, for our world unless we are able to show greater solidarity. Solidarity, then, as a way of making history, as a vital context in which conflicts, tensions and even those who oppose one another attain a harmony that generates life». Hence, the University has the important task of training the young and accepting its responsibilities in the different domains of public life in order to contribute to the solution of problems and conflicts by disseminating a culture of encounter.

Times are changing and challenges are accumulating but we must not be afraid. The Council, in addition to indicating to us the important principles that are still valid, recommends that the Catholic Universities must collaborate in full communion and in close links with each other by promoting initiatives, keeping informed and communicating the new discoveries (cf. GE, n. 12).

This is the mission that IFCU has been carrying out for years and it is also the orientation I wish you at this 25th Assembly so that the network of Catholic Universities becomes even closer. The next world Congress in Rome will be a unique opportunity to develop these themes. That is why I renew my invitation to all those present to participate in this event, which is considered, let it be said, as extremely important by

Pope Francis and during which he will communicate a new message to the world
Catholic education.

We must face the changes and challenges together!

May your work be fruitful.