

“THE ROLE OF THE CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY IN THE 21ST CENTURY”
ON THE OCCASION OF THE CONFERRAL OF THE DOCTORATE “HONORIS CAUSA” UPON
ARCHBISHOP CHRISTOPHE PIERRE, APOSTOLIC NUNCIO
SACRED HEART UNIVERSITY, FAIRFIELD, CONNECTICUT
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I wish to thank Dr. Petillo and Sacred Heart University for this honor. As the Apostolic Nuncio, the Holy Father’s personal representative in this country, I wish to express the spiritual closeness of the Holy Father and all gathered here on this occasion. I would like to speak to you this afternoon about the role of the Catholic University in the twenty-first century.

The Constitution governing Catholic universities (*Ex Corde Ecclesiae*) contains an important lesson that must always be kept in mind:

Born from the heart of the Church, a Catholic university is located in that course of tradition which may be traced back to the very origin of the University as an institution. It has always been recognized as an incomparable center of creativity and dissemination of knowledge for the good of humanity. (*Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, 1)

The Heart

I am interested in two words from this paragraph: “heart” and “tradition. The term heart can be understood in two ways. First, it could mean charity or love that the Church has toward the world. Second, it could mean the center of the person, just as St. Luke speaks of the Virgin when he says, “and she held all these things in her heart.” (Luke 2:31)

A university is the fruit of a larger educational experience. At the origin of a university is not a decree or a doctrine, rather there is an experience of the encounter with reality in all its wideness and richness, an educational experience of handing on and freely seeking the truth.

We find ourselves living in a period of many crises and deep changes in society and in the culture, changes that have profoundly modified the style of life and the understanding of people in the world.

Even though we live in a period of profound change, the fundamental questions of the human person remain. It is not that the responses of the past have necessarily outlived their usefulness; rather, it is that these questions must be examined by every generation. In the past, the responses that were given were abstract and did not pertain directly to the life of society and of persons. The university, before it can seek to transmit responses, must seek to raise the questions that every man holds in his heart, even if he or she doesn’t know how to adequately express them in a given moment.

As the Holy Father says, “This is one of the challenges of our time: transmitting knowledge and offering a key for vital comprehension, not a heap of notions unconnected to one another. There is need of a true evangelical hermeneutic for better understanding life, the world, and humanity.” (ADDRESS TO THE COMMUNITY OF THE PONTIFICAL GREGORIAN UNIVERSITY, 10 APRIL 2014)

What are some of the life experiences that are at the origin of the existence of a Catholic university? In the first place, the experience of love or the desire for truth - to know that seeking is not useless and that the journey for knowledge, which is not without failures, leads to the question for everything: the question of the Absolute which illuminates all of reality and our own existence.

In the second place, the experience that human intelligence is capable of knowing reality and penetrating its meaning; that is to say that the human being grows in humanity when he moves from phenomenon to foundation or principle.

Tradition and Formation

When these experiences are realized in community and are communicated and continue for a number of generations, they give rise to “tradition”, our second word. Through the tradition, knowledge is widened and deepened, and eventually the knowledge and experience become a patrimony, transmitted and appropriated for the benefit of others.

This knowledge must be “rediscovered”. That is, new generations are invited to verify the truth of this tradition by reason. To transmit, to receive, to know through rediscovery, and to mature in the love that comes from the truth - all these form part of the experience that is at the foundation of a university. It is this experience which is called education.

In Catholic education, teaching is not enough; formation is necessary. To form another is to help the person to be a better person: a conscious subject, free and responsible, open to the good, the true and beautiful; capable of entering into deep relationships with others - *of being with others and for others*. As Pope Benedict XVI says: “Education is not and must never be considered something purely utilitarian. It is about forming the human person, equipping him or her to live life to the full – in short it is about imparting wisdom.” (BENEDICT XVI, ADDRESS TO TEACHERS AND RELIGIOUS, ST. MARY’S UNIVERSITY COLLEGE, TWICKENHAM, 17 SEPTEMBER 2010)

The Catholic university exists as a place where a person can be formed, coming to knowledge of the truth using both faith *and* reason. The Catholic university is born from the idea of joining a wise, ordered vision of knowledge with a discipline like theology, bringing about a unity in diversity. This is the soul of a university, its proper seal, distinguishing it from other institutions of higher learning.

The Catholic University and the Challenge of the Twenty-First Century

Today, the Church finds herself in a suffocating context in which an ideology seeks to restrict faith to private life. When faith is not replaced by ideology and when faith works in accordance with its nature in the conscience and hearts of men and women, it becomes a light that allows a person to judge reality in a distinct manner.

The twentieth century was marked by rationalist ideologies. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, we find people are less explicitly ideological. They are apparently tolerant but actually live according to a subtle and pernicious relativism that ends up sacrificing the weakest members of society. This mortal virus can invade and seduce, even in the womb of universities. Relativism and fundamentalism threaten the freedom of humanity. The Catholic vision of the person rejects these extremes, understanding that every human being is rational and free, deserves to be respected in his dignity and rights of conscience, even those who do not think the same way. Each person has a right to seek the truth in freedom.

A true university must not yield to the trends underway. The only things it should surrender to is love and truth. The reference point by which everything should be judged is love for truth and the truth to courageously propose the primacy of love and of goodness. The criteria for judgment could not be more clear, and without them, education collapses.

What then is the goal of education at a Catholic university? The end of education is not to respond to the demands of the market; rather, it is to help future generations grow in humanity, trusting in the educational proposal left to them by their elders. “To grow in humanity” means to

grow in intelligence and goodness, in the capacity for being just and for solidarity, and, principally, in being open to and desiring to live and to receive Him, who is the definitive meaning of life.

Study, which at its heart is a search for and encounter with the Truth, ought to help a person grow in his or her humanity; it should be “integrated with personal and community life, with missionary commitment, with fraternal charity and sharing with the poor, with care of the interior life in relationship with the Lord.” (ADDRESS TO THE COMMUNITY OF THE PONTIFICAL GREGORIAN UNIVERSITY, 10 APRIL 2014)

Conclusion

I end by recalling a brief but important teaching of Benedict XVI which helps summarize what I have been presenting: “Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea; rather it is the encounter with an event, with a Person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction.” (*Deus Caritas Est*, 1)

While this is valid for our private life, it seems to me that it is a great truth for a Catholic university in the twenty-first century: the university is not Catholic as a result of an ethical decision or by mere doctrinal adherence; rather, it is Catholic because of “the encounter with an event” with the Person who is Christ from which all academic life can discover new horizons and receive a decisive direction.

What is the role of the Catholic university? To facilitate this encounter! Only in this manner, will faith contribute to culture and culture place itself truly in the service of the people! Thank you.