

## **Renewal and awareness: thinking about the future of Catholic Universities**

*Keynote Lecture by Cardinal José Tolentino de Mendonça*

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The Apostolic Constitution *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* offers Catholic universities a rich impulse of encouragement on which it is worth dwelling. It is, moreover, in keeping with what the Second Vatican Council affirmed, since *Gravissimum Educationis* had already set it as the horizon of Catholic colleges and universities to investigate carefully «questions that are new and current» aroused by the progress of the modern age, so that «there may be a deeper realization of the harmony of faith and science» (No. 10). The spirit of the Apostolic Constitution *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* is certainly to root Catholic universities in the «heart of the Church» (No. 1) and its mission, in the «ardent search for truth» (No. 2), in «fidelity to the Christian message» (No. 13), and in «institutional commitment to the service of the people of God and of the human family» (No. 13). But it likewise challenges the university to consider itself as «an incomparable center of creativity» (no. 1), to feel called «to continuous renewal» (no. 7), especially «in the world today, characterized by such rapid developments in science and technology» (no. 7). Constant renewal, in an institution that makes the search for truth and its disinterested transmission its mode of existence, must therefore be considered a normal fact. Catholic universities must indeed dialogue with the new, work unsparingly on current questions and issues, and establish themselves as great laboratories of the future. Catholic universities are expected not only to actively guard the noble memory of past days, but also to be the probes, and the cradles, of tomorrow. However, this renewal that characterizes them must be accompanied and, as *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* reminds us, sustained by a «clear awareness» (No. 7) of their nature and identity. For this reason, in the various historical and

cultural turning points that Catholic universities have faced, including the current one, which is so challenging, it becomes essential to always combine two terms: «renewal» and «awareness».

On «renewal» and «awareness» Pope Francis has been insistent, even shedding light on the theme of the scientific conference now opening: *The Future of Catholic Universities in the AI Age*. These words of his are indeed appropriate: «We are all aware of how artificial intelligence is increasingly present in every aspect of daily life, both personal and social. It affects the way we understand the world and ourselves. Innovations in this field mean that these tools are increasingly decisive in human activity and even compelling in human decision-making.»<sup>1</sup> And the path he points us towards is that of dialogue and discernment, which clearly stand in the line of «renewal» and «awareness». Indeed, the Holy Father expresses «the conviction that only truly inclusive forms of dialogue can enable us to discern wisely how to put artificial intelligence and digital technologies at the service of the human family.»<sup>2</sup>

There is no question that the future requires an interactive vision, a multifaceted “maturation” of reality and the audacity to take risks. Risk, we know well, is inseparable from an educational context worthy of its name. Pope Francis passionately reminds us of this: «An educator who does not know how to take risks is not needed to educate... You are confident at this point, but this is not definitive. You have to take another step. Maybe you slip, but you get up, and go forward... The true educator must be a master of risk, but of reasonable risk.»<sup>3</sup> Reasonable risk is, for example, in the present context, to keep priorities duly safeguarded: «the priority of the ethical over the technical», the «primacy of the person over things», «the superiority of spirit over matter» since «the cause of man will be served

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<sup>1</sup> Pope Francis, Speech To Participants in the “Rome call” meeting promoted by the Renaissance Foundation (10 January 2023)

<sup>2</sup> Pope Francis, Speech To Participants in the “Minerva Dialogues”, meeting organized by the Dicastery for Culture and Education (27 March 2023)

<sup>3</sup> Pope Francis, Speech at the World Congress on Catholic Education promoted by Congregation for Catholic Education (21 November 2015)

only if knowledge is united with consciousness»<sup>4</sup>. Thus, there is a need to strengthen an integral anthropology that “inscribes” the human person at the heart of the major processes of civilization. The great investment to be made can only be a human one, that is, an investment in the formation of every member of the human family so that they may develop their cognitive, creative, spiritual and ethical potential and thus contribute, in a qualified way, to the common good. The big question behind artificial intelligence continues to be anthropological. The challenges posed to education cannot be other than those posed, today, to the human person.

Universities and, even more so, universities which share the Church’s mission, stand at a crossroads of cultural, scientific and social possibilities. They do not live for themselves, as if they were impermeable bubbles of reality. On the contrary, they develop to the extent that they become capable of listening, capable of co-responsible exercise of collaborative practices, and of a generative encounter of people and cultures. This requires creative intelligence, but also discernment that cannot be partial, nor improvised, but solidly based on one’s values. At the beginning of his pontificate, stressing the decisive role of universities in the dynamics of the cultural transition we are experiencing, Pope Francis thus urged, «It is important to interpret reality by looking it in the face. Ideological or partial interpretations are useless; they only feed illusion and disillusionment. It is important to interpret reality, but also to live this reality without fear, without fleeing, without catastrophism. Every crisis, even the present one, is a passage, the pangs of a birth that involves struggle, hardship and suffering, but which bears within itself the new horizon of life, of a renewal, that carries the power of hope. And this is not a crisis of “change”: it is a crisis of “the change of an era”. It is an era that changes. These are not superficial changes of an era [...]. The University, as a place of “knowledge”

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<sup>4</sup> Pope Francis, Speech at the World Congress on Catholic Education promoted by Congregation for Catholic Education (21 November 2015)

has a very important role to play in forming students in discernment in order to nourish hope.»<sup>5</sup>

In relation to the «change of an era» we are experiencing, I am reminded of the manner in which Plato in the *Phaedrus* describes the cautious reaction to the transition from societies based on orality to societies in which writing becomes dominant. Opinions were divided. For some, writing makes human beings wiser and is a medicine that comes to the aid of their memory. For others, the dangers outweigh the advantages, and they argue that the new form of communication «will bring about forgetfulness in the souls of its learners from the lack of practice in use of their memory, inasmuch as through their reliance on writing they are reminded of things as a result of alien impressions which are from outside, and not from within, themselves by themselves.... having become widely read without teaching, they will think they are very knowledgeable, while for the most part they are ignorant».<sup>6</sup>

Undoubtedly, the entry of Catholic universities into this new historical era represented by the transition from analog to digital and the impact, to a large extent yet to be discovered and regulated, of artificial intelligence, obliges us to a delicate exercise of responsibility. The reflections of Pope Francis, which we are called to embrace, appear to be of particular relevance. Says the Holy Father, «We are faced with a task involving the human family as a whole. In light of this, mere training in the correct use of new technologies will not prove sufficient. As instruments or tools, these are not “neutral”, for, as we have seen, they shape the world and engage consciences on the level of values. We need a broader educational effort. [...] There is a political dimension to the production and use of artificial intelligence, which has to do with more than the expanding of its individual and purely functional benefits. In other words, it is not enough simply to

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<sup>5</sup> Pope Francis, Meeting with the academic and cultural world gathered in the Lecture Hall of the Pontifical Theological Faculty of Sardinia in Cagliari (22 September 2013)

<sup>6</sup> Plato. *Lysis. Symposium. Phaedrus*. Edited and translated by Christopher Emlyn-Jones, William Preddy. Loeb Classical Library 166. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2022, pp. 514 -515. Inizio modulo

trust in the moral sense of researchers and developers of devices and algorithms. There is a need to create intermediate social bodies that can incorporate and express the ethical sensibilities of users and educators. [...] We are beginning to glimpse a new discipline that we might call “the ethical development of algorithms” or more simply “algor-ethics” [...]. The complexity of the technological world demands of us an increasingly clear ethical framework, so as to make this commitment truly effective».<sup>7</sup>

Curiously, a theme that is never missing when Pope Francis talks about universities is hope. Almost making us think that they are synonymous terms. It is an exhortation not to be discouraged by the difficulties of this historical period and to face it, rather, enlightened by that confidence that the Christian promise radiates. Instead of globalizing fear and certainty, Francis urges us to «globalize hope». Hope is not an accessory or an eventuality: it has an ontological root. When hope is missing, life is missing. There is no life without hope. Those who inhabit the university world cannot afford not to have hope. Hope is our mission. It is not superficial optimism, but it is knowing how to risk in the right way. May our Catholic universities, with the tools of «renewal» and «awareness», always move forward in the right way.

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<sup>7</sup> Pope Francis, Speech to Participants in the General Assembly of the Pontifical Academy for Life (28 February 2020)