

## General Assembly of the European Federation of Catholic Universities

Cardinal José Tolentino de Mendonça,  
Prefect of the Dicastery for Culture and Education

# Catholic Universities as a Source of Inspiration

## Introduction

I would like to extend a warm greeting to all of you, expressing my profound joy at gathering here in Zagreb, at the Catholic University of Croatia, on the occasion of its twentieth anniversary. This conference fully reflects the mission of FUCE (the European Federation of Catholic Universities), which has always been committed to promoting the integral formation of the human person and fostering fruitful dialogue among faith, culture, science, and politics at the heart of the European project. Today we gather to reflect strategically on the theme *Inspiring Catholic Universities in Challenging Times*, with the aim of strengthening that network of cooperation which sees the university as a strategic sociocultural resource for the entire continent.

Our reflection takes place within a context of unprecedented complexity, marked by both shadows and lights that we can readily identify; a context shaped by challenges that define our age as “challenging times,” yet one from which we have a duty not to withdraw. These “challenging times” must not paralyze us in the search for new possibilities. In the *Letters to Lucilius* (Letter 104, 26), a classic text of the European tradition, Seneca writes: “We do not dare to undertake certain things because they are difficult; rather, they are difficult because we do not dare to undertake them.” Indeed, today universities need a renewed awareness of themselves, of their identity and mission, and perhaps more than in other periods of history they require a form of collective intelligence capable of daring to navigate the turbulence of the present, facing it not as an agency of decline, but as a delivery room for new beginnings.

Great and weighty difficulties stand before everyone’s eyes: from the demographic winter that threatens the sustainability of universities, to the drift of the technocratic paradigm that risks reducing the human person to mere data or a consumer. Added to this is the revolution of artificial intelligence—now described as the “fourth industrial revolution”—which poses anthropological challenges of epochal significance, risking the erosion of genuine educational relationships and the delegation of intellectual processes to technology, to the detriment of critical discernment and inner maturation. Alongside this is the social precariousness that particularly affects young people entering the workforce, as well as a widespread uncertainty about the future that undermines the confidence of new generations. And let us not forget wars, the arms race that diverts investment away from education, inequalities, and the dramatic conditions in which so many migrants and refugees live. But there are also signs of hope. In the Apostolic Letter on education, *Disegnare nuove mappe di speranza* (*Drawing New Maps of Hope*), Pope Leo XIV wisely recalls them:

- Universities are “living bodies that have consolidated a spiritual and pedagogical heritage capable of crossing the twenty-first century and responding to its most pressing challenges. This heritage is not rigidly fixed: it is a compass that continues to indicate the way and to speak of the beauty of the journey.” (1.3)
- “Educational charisms are not rigid formulas: they are original responses to the needs of every age.” (2.1) “Where educational communities allow themselves to be guided by the word of Christ, they do not withdraw, but move forward anew; they do not raise walls, but build bridges. They respond creatively, opening new possibilities [...], because the Gospel does not grow old but makes ‘all things new’ (Rev 21:5).” (1.1)
- “Education is an act of hope and a passion continually renewed because it manifests the promise we see in the future of humanity.” (3.2)
- “We are aware of the hardships [...]. And yet, precisely here, Catholic education can be a beacon: not a nostalgic refuge, but a laboratory of discernment, pedagogical innovation, and prophetic witness. Drawing new maps of hope: this is the urgent task of the mission.” (11.1)

Faced with this call to an urgent and unequivocal covenant with hope, establishing oneself as “universities that inspire” means, first of all, not losing one’s original nature as an institution “born from the heart of the Church” (*Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, no. 1). This link with *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* must not be understood as a merely legal fact, an administrative belonging, or an institutional label; rather, it represents a loving belonging that must also shape every scientific activity. It is a vital heartbeat that transforms the search for truth into an act of love toward humanity and toward God, preventing knowledge from becoming a cold manipulation of reality.

To be a “Catholic university” implies being a community of life and work in which Christian inspiration is not an added element, but the very source that permeates all action, constantly placing the treasure of human knowledge in dynamic dialogue with the light of faith. Only by courageously reaffirming this unity between scientific activity and a belonging that is rooted in life and love can we transform the present moment of crisis into an opportunity for renewal, continuing to be beacons capable of discerning the contradictions and aspirations of contemporary culture. Only in this way will the university increasingly become a privileged interlocutor between the Gospel and modern society, and will it be able to heal with intelligence and hope the intersections and wounds of history.

Our reflection will be structured around the three constitutive pillars of university life – research, teaching, and the “third mission” – understood as organically united dimensions which together give shape to the integral humanism that the Catholic university is called to embody and propose to the world.

## 1. Research: Discerning in Order to Build the Human

At the heart of the academic mission of the Catholic university, research cannot be understood merely as the collection of data or as an exercise in erudition for its own sake. Rather, it presents itself as a high and continuous exercise of discernment. *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* states that the Catholic university strives to discern and evaluate the deep core of the culture of its own time in order to make it more suitable for the integral development of the human person (cf. no. 45). Within Catholic universities, this task takes on a prophetic significance: they are called to an incessant effort, nourished by a fruitful restlessness, placing themselves in attentive listening to the heartbeat of the world. To research, in this sense, means to inhabit the world with a sapiential gaze capable of distinguishing what builds up the human from what fragments it, reaffirming the primacy of the production of authentic knowledge in an era sadly marked by post-truth and by the illusion of instantaneous communication devoid of depth. The poet Paul Celan stated that “only real hands write true poems.” Authenticity and truth are inseparably linked, presenting themselves to us as a duty.

### 1.1 Discernment, Truth, and the Primacy of Ethics

For research to be an authentic human exercise, it must have the courage to go into depth, investigating not only penultimate questions but also the ultimate roots of the phenomena and problems that afflict humanity and our society. We cannot be satisfied with describing surfaces; we are called to seek their causes and to map with rigour their existential, ethical, and spiritual implications. In this process, the Catholic university offers a fundamental contribution: it constantly brings the inexhaustible treasure of human knowledge into dialogue with the light of faith. This dialogue is grounded in the firm conviction that earthly realities and realities of faith share the same origin in God and therefore can never be in real conflict with one another. Faith is not an external limit to scientific freedom; rather, it acts as a driving force that provides an integral anthropological horizon, protecting research from mere immediacy, which risks making it a slave to passing interests. Saint Augustine already said in his philosophical dialogue *Against the Academics* (which was not truly meant to oppose them but to awaken the Academics) that we cannot “follow in life the likeness of truth” while ignoring “what truth itself is” (II, 19). In an increasingly pluralistic society, the fundamental certainty of faith does not suffocate thought; rather, it frees it, making it more dialogical and creative, more open to the possibilities of paradigms that are not satisfied with partial visions.

In a time in which technology seems to want to impose its own laws on existence, academic discernment must strongly reaffirm the primacy of the human. Research must integrate the ethical dimension within itself, evaluating every scientific discovery from the perspective of the totality of the human person: not everything that is technically possible is, for that very reason, humanly permissible or desirable. Our responsibility is to give profound meaning to discoveries, ensuring that they are always oriented toward the good of individuals and communities. This commitment asks us not to lose the sense of “wisdom-filled knowledge,” safeguarding the essential distinction between knowledge and love. Hannah Arendt’s words are striking: “Education is the point at which we decide whether we love the world enough to

assume responsibility for it and thus save it from that ruin which is inevitable without renewal." Love is our orientation, our most powerful driving force in research. As the Apostle Paul advised: "that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth" (Eph 3:17).

When the balance shifts too far toward research aimed at patents and economic applications, the university loses its nature as a place of "higher" and disinterested thought — this center of meaning that has historically been called *uni-versum*: a cosmos in which all forms of knowledge converge toward a single source of meaning. The university is not, nor can it be, a mere factory of skills.

## **1.2 Toward a New Humanism: Theology, Complexity, and the Educating Community**

The crisis of the modern academic model often lies in extreme specialization, which produces fragmented bodies of knowledge that are unable to communicate with one another, turning the university into a *multi-versum* lacking internal cohesion. Discernment today compels us to go beyond the boundaries of individual disciplines in order to address the systemic challenges of our time, from climate change to social inequalities. It is necessary to be able to achieve a wise synthesis between the inalienable qualities of human thought and the extraordinary opportunities offered by digital technologies. Research has the task of ensuring that innovation never loses sight of human dignity: we must build a relationship with AI such that it does not replace human thought, but rather complements it, enhancing not only convergent thinking — the search for correct answers — but also divergent thinking, made up of creativity, analogy, and intuition, which no machine can authentically replicate.

In this process, theology plays a vitally important role in discernment: it does not simply occupy one chair among others, but engages in dialogue with all the sciences in a spirit of reciprocity, offering them a horizon of meaning that empirical methods alone cannot provide (cf. *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, no. 19). Theology helps the other disciplines in investigating the meaning of their discoveries, orients them toward the integral good of the human person, and determines the place of each discipline within a worldview illuminated by the Gospel. In doing so, it counters the fragmentation of knowledge and promotes that higher synthesis which speaks to the human being in their wholeness, resisting the temptation to reduce all knowledge to mere function. Pope Francis wrote in the Motu Proprio *Ad theologiam promovendam* that «scientific reason must broaden its boundaries in the direction of wisdom, so as not to become dehumanized and impoverished. In this way, theology can contribute to the current debate on "rethinking thought"» (n.7).

All this effort finds its ultimate purpose in the promotion of a new humanism: a credible cultural proposal that firmly resists the reduction of the person to data, algorithm, or function. And it is here that the organic and inseparable link between research and teaching emerges: research must not remain a solitary activity, but it naturally "flows over" into teaching when the researcher becomes a witness to truth before the student. The teacher, the philosopher María Zambrano said, is not only

someone whom the student can question and to whom they can pose inquiries. They are, above all, someone before whom the student questions themselves. And here the essential role of the teacher as witness is established. Students must be actively involved in the pursuit of knowledge, so that the university may truly become a polyphonic community united by the love of truth. Discernment is not a treasure to be guarded, but a fire to be passed on.

## **2. Teaching: Relationships as a Place of Humanity**

If research is the fire that fuels the intellectual life of the university, teaching is the place where that fire is transmitted, shared, and becomes new life. Teaching at the heart of a Catholic university can never be reduced to the mere transmission of content; it is, first and foremost, the event of a relationship. We are called to prepare new generations to inhabit a radically changed world, not only through new skills, but through a renewed awareness of the profound meaning of humanity. This challenge requires us to transcend the logic of the technological paradigm, which tends to reduce education to the transfer of information *on demand*, to rediscover instead the beauty of learning born from encounter and the collaborative search for truth.

### **2.1 The Educating Community and the Role of the Student**

The Catholic university expresses its most authentic identity in the way it lives out community, an organism animated by a spirit of cooperation, freedom, and mutual respect, as *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* (no. 21) reminds us. The challenge today is to preserve this relational and communal dimension in a context in which academic institutions are becoming ever larger, increasingly internationalized, and distributed across multiple campuses. Christian education is never an isolated act, but a shared endeavour: it is a “we” in which teachers, students, and the entire university body converge to generate life and knowledge, because no one educates alone. The community is held together around the common goal of educating for knowledge and the pursuit of truth, and it acts as a safeguard against isolation and standardization.

The student, within this educating “we,” must never be perceived as a mere user or consumer of academic services: they are the subject of their own integral development and the essential partner in an authentic educational relationship. University education is not reduced to the simple acquisition of technical competencies, but aims at the full development of the person. To achieve this, it is essential to integrate the three languages indicated by Pope Francis: the language of the head, which pursues analytical rigour; the language of the heart, attentive to the affective dimension and the capacity for genuine empathy; and the language of the hands, which expresses creative action and service. When these three languages are harmoniously integrated, the university becomes an apprenticeship in trust and joy.

### **2.2 The Teacher and Artificial Intelligence**

In the digital age, the figure of the teacher acquires an even more decisive importance: they are not a dispenser of information, but a sapiential guide capable of

helping the student go beyond the boundaries of purely functional knowledge. Pope Leo XIV draws attention to the urgency of valuing the role of the teacher. The Holy Father says: “a current difficulty of our societies is that we no longer know how to sufficiently value the great contribution that teachers and educators make to the community in this regard. But we must be careful: undermining the social and cultural role of educators is to mortgage one’s own future, and a crisis in the transmission of knowledge brings with it a crisis of hope” (Address of the Holy Father Leo XIV to educators on the occasion of the Jubilee of the Educational World). No algorithm will ever be able to replace the beauty of human encounter: science must remain an activity rooted in the relationship between persons.

Today, artificial intelligence represents one of the most delicate frontiers of this educational relationship. Let us be clear: artificial intelligence can never replace the role of the teacher, because what is at stake is not the training of mere technicians, but of a generation of women and men who are aware and capable of constant ethical reflection on the technologies they use. We must move from passive adaptation to a form of use in which the machine is integrated as an auxiliary tool, without ever replacing thought. The integration of AI therefore requires solid digital literacy that develops alongside the study of the humanities, protecting humanity from the risk of becoming passive slaves to its own technology.

### **2.3 Learning to Think: Slowness, Interiority, and a Spiritual Gaze**

In a world in which skills risk quickly being considered obsolete, learning must rediscover a “slow and patient” mode, capable of opposing the logic of frenetic speed with one of wonder and resonance. Not everything must have an immediate practical purpose: the search for truth in itself is also important. Education ultimately means teaching how to think, developing a critical and conscious interiority capable of finding meaning in reality. As Pope Leo XIV emphasizes, forming the interior life of the person means adopting a “spiritual” gaze that enables them to inhabit the complexity of society with their own horizon of meaning, perceiving the connections and the deeper significance of events (cf. *Disegnare nuove mappe di speranza*, no. 10.3). In short, the Catholic university responds to today’s challenges by forming professionals capable of managing epochal change without losing sight of the centrality of the person—and this care for relationship cannot remain closed in on itself. If teaching has truly been able to speak to the human heart, it necessarily generates a movement outward. This pushes us beyond the boundaries of the university, toward that missionary conversion which is the beating heart of our third mission.

### **3. The Third Mission: Missionary Conversion**

A community that has learned to think together and to recognize itself as an educating “we” experiences an inner urgency, a prophetic impulse that leads it toward otherness. This “going beyond” is not a subsidiary activity or an institutional obligation, but the very fulfilment of our vocation: it is the missionary conversion of knowledge, which becomes gift and service to the common good.

### ***3.1. Identity and Diaconia of Culture***

The third mission of the university, often understood as the simple transfer of knowledge or the economic impact of research on the surrounding territory, takes on, in a Catholic university, the profound features of a true “missionary conversion,” as Pope Francis has recommended to Catholic institutions. It is not a matter of adding a marginal function to those already established – research and teaching – but of living a structural integration that reflects the very nature of the synodal Church. In this perspective, the university ceases to be an isolated entity within academic walls and becomes a vibrant and open “cultural laboratory,” where the inculturation of faith takes place and where research becomes incarnate in order to respond to the challenges of global society (cf. *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, no. 33). The specific contribution of Catholic identity lies in its capacity to unite the content of scientific inquiry with a passion for what is human, transforming knowledge into a generative force, into an act of safeguarding hope in a better world.

The first distinguishing feature of this mission is therefore the “*diakonia of culture*”: a service that arises not from a will to power, but from the desire to share the light of the Gospel with temporal realities. This *diakonia* is expressed in the prophetic courage to become companions on humanity’s journey: not custodians of a distant knowledge, but witnesses of fraternity who know how to sit beside the wounds of history and inhabit them with compassion. It is in this space of encounter that our identity is expressed as proximity: the university becomes an “indispensable presence within the territory,” capable of promoting not only professional development but also collective well-being and the integral development of complex ecosystems. Knowledge is not merely “handed down” from above, but co-constructed with social actors, in an engaged campus logic that regenerates social capital and local welfare.

### ***3.2. Integral Humanism, Constellations of Hope, and a Conversion of the Gaze***

In an age marked by the technocratic paradigm, which tends to reduce the human person to a producer or consumer, the distinctive contribution of the Catholic university is the defence of the human as an absolute good. Catholic universities foster social resilience because they position themselves as strongholds of values and identity within complex contexts. The third mission thus becomes an act of wise resistance against the commodification of life: we are called to reaffirm the primacy of the ethical over the technical, evaluating every scientific achievement in light of the inalienable dignity of each individual life. Educating for the third mission means forming leaders who are not only competent, but also capable of promoting democratic citizenship and intercultural dialogue, overcoming boundaries in order to build a society that is authentically more just, inclusive, and reflective.

The missionary conversion then urges us to look beyond our geographical and cultural boundaries. In a globalized world in which humanity faces problems of epochal scale, no institution can claim to find solutions on its own: collaboration among Catholic universities in Europe and around the world is urgently needed in order to form constellations. Pope Leo XIV states in the Apostolic Letter *Disegnare*

*nuove mappe di speranza*: “I speak of a ‘constellation’ because the Catholic educational world is a living and plural network... Each ‘star’ has its own brightness, but together they outline a path. Where in the past there has been rivalry, today we ask institutions to converge: unity is our most prophetic strength” (n. 8.1). Building networks among our universities means radiating a vision of the human person illuminated by the Gospel, offering bridges of dialogue where others erect walls.

Ultimately, the most distinctive contribution of our Catholic identity to the third mission is realized in that profound transformation of the gaze which leads students and teachers from mere “knowing” to empathetic and wise „thinking“. The third mission does not consist only in “doing” something for society, but in helping society itself rediscover the deeper meaning of reality and truth. In a “knowledge society” that often settles for the accumulation of data and functional skills, the Catholic university positions itself as a place of critical discernment, where truth is sought not as a possession, but as a horizon of communion.

In conclusion, we can summarize in a single image what we have tried to express: the Catholic university is called, today more than ever, to be a place where knowledge is not separated from life. Research, teaching, and mission are not three juxtaposed functions, but three aspects of the same vital act – three ways of living out that “*diakonia of culture*” which Pope Leo XIV has indicated as the proper vocation of these institutions in the contemporary world.

The times we are living through are demanding. The technocratic drift is not only an external challenge: it is a temptation that runs through our very institutions from within, whenever the logic of performativity prevails over the search for meaning, whenever the speed of the algorithm seems more reliable than the slowness of thought, whenever the student is treated as a user and the teacher as a service provider. Resisting this temptation requires institutional courage and clarity of identity.

This clarity comes to us from *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*: being a university “born from the heart of the Church” is not an honorary title, but a demanding programme. It means that every academic act – a piece of research, a lecture, a project in the field – is animated by that “loving belonging” which transforms knowledge into service. It means that faith is not an obstacle to scientific freedom, but the source of that fruitful restlessness which prevents knowledge from settling for itself. It means, finally, that the Catholic university is not afraid of the complexity of the world, because it knows it does not face it alone: it inhabits it with the certainty that reality has meaning and that this meaning is, ultimately, a gift.

It is our task and responsibility to preserve and transmit this fire. We owe it to the students who entrust us with decisive years of their formation. We owe it to European societies, which need institutions capable of thinking deeply and acting responsibly. We owe it to the Church, which has placed at the heart of the Catholic university a hope: that the dialogue between faith and reason may never be extinguished, and that from their fruitful union light, beauty, and renewed humanity may continue to be born. Let us strive to be universities that inspire.