

Ivan Šaško
Auxiliary Bishop of Zagreb

Introduction and Homily
at the Eucharistic Celebration
on the occasion of the Session of the
General Assembly of the European Federation of Catholic Universities (FUCE)
("The Mission of Catholic Universities in Challenging Times," May 20-22, 2026)

St. Mark's Church (Upper Town), Zagreb
Thursday, 21 May 2026, at 6:00 p.m.

Dear Rectors and Representatives of Catholic Universities,

Dear brothers and sisters,

the Spirit of God has gathered us in this oldest parish church in Zagreb, a church that is deeply symbolic for us in Croatia and yet easily remains alive in the eyes and hearts, in photographs and memories, of all who visit it.

The occasion of the *General Assembly of the European Federation of Catholic Universities* prompts me to draw your attention to the location of this church among the seats of our principal state institutions: a location that speaks not only of the past but also reveals challenges for the future that profoundly concern the mission of universities as well.

Indeed, this church is surrounded on every side by the buildings of Parliament, the Constitutional Court, the Government of the Republic of Croatia, and even the Assembly of the City of Zagreb. This reveals its centrality, its focal significance, and therefore, especially for us Christians, its orientation toward the source of meaning for legislative, judicial, and executive authority.

That connection was once conceived, understood, and lived in precisely this way. Today, we face many forms of distancing, searching, and restructuring, yet for us believers, it still offers a stronghold that speaks to our vocation, especially within European society.

The great door of this church, its portal adorned with images of our Lord, Blessed Virgin Mary, and the other saints, open toward the south, toward the light and warmth that point to the mystery of salvation through Christ and to the power of the Holy Spirit. That space must never be closed, lest inspiration and the beauty of eternity grow dim.

As we stand immediately before the celebration of the Solemnity of Pentecost, let us pause before the heavenly Father in thanksgiving for Catholic universities, striving that they too may become a visible sign of the Gospel in the world. Let us bring forward our intentions and sincerely repent for the sins and limitations that we have placed as obstacles to the action of the Holy Spirit.

At the beginning, let us ask to recognize him as the Light of Hearts (*lumen cordium, lux beatissima*), the Sweet Guest of the Soul (*dulcis hospes animae*), and the Forgiveness of Sins (*remissio peccatorum*), who grants us joys that never end (*perenne gaudium*).

Homily

Liturgical Readings:
Acts 22:30; 23:6-11; Psalm 16:1-2a, 5, 7-11;
John 17:20-26

Brothers and sisters in God's love!

1. It is always beautiful to discover the power of the proclamation of the Word of God in harmony with the moment and occasion in which we celebrate as participants in the mystery of Christ. There are many inspirations that directly or indirectly concern Catholic universities, our vocation and mission in the Church and in society, as well as the challenges that call for an explanation of the deepest truths and ultimate meaning.

Thus, the *Acts of the Apostles* speak to us of the inevitability and necessity of discussion in which the connection between Paul's knowledge and wisdom is revealed, together with the courage to bear witness to the truth of Christian hope and the Resurrection.

We responded with the words of the Psalm, full of trust in the Lord: "Keep me safe, O God; you are my hope." He is our strength; in him is our peace. Keeping him before our eyes, the path to life, fullness of joys and delights, forever open before us.

2. This interweaving of fundamental themes: from the longing for fullness, through the search for security and joy, to eternal life – is summarized in Jesus' words to the heavenly Father in the prayer that we may all be one. And how can we fail to notice that the very word *university* (*universitas*) may be another name for 'unity'?

In the Gospel concerning 'oneness' and unity, Jesus mentions the word 'one' as many as four times (*be one, are one, perfection as one*), extending this communion further through expressions concerning glory and love. Yet we should not overlook that this prayer is borne by another word that reveals giftedness! Unity is not chiefly the fruit of our own efforts, but the fruit of the gift that the heavenly Father gave to Jesus so that he, in turn, might give it to us.

Christian culture, from which Catholic universities were born, is a culture of gift, self-giving, the union of the eternal and the temporal, and communion among people through the gift of love.

Alongside the repeated use of the verb 'to give,' the English translation contains a particularly striking expression: "Father, they are your gift to me." This is truly Good News. We are the Father's gift to Christ, who prays that we may be with him and behold His divine glory.

3. The fact that we are using English in this celebration encourages me to emphasize the distinction between the two words: 'present' and 'gift'. In everyday speech, as you know (here took from *Catholic Daily Reflections*), a 'present' is usually understood as something expected from another person, whereas 'gift' carries a richer meaning.

A 'present' speaks of presence, of making present some respect, and generally concerns individuals, whereas a 'gift' speaks of enabling something to be received and does not depend solely on an individual's will, but concerns a greater good. A 'gift' is something for which no return is expected and, therefore, more clearly points to freedom and generosity. It is not merely an exchange of material goods, but a reciprocity of love between giver and recipient, of love that is the work of the Holy Spirit.

As Saint Augustine writes: "And so he intimates to us a mutual love, wherewith the Father and the Son reciprocally love one another" (*ideo communem qua inuicem se diligunt Pater et Filius nobis insinuat caritatem, De Trinitate XV,17.27*). It is wondrous that in this way we become participants in the unity bestowed by the love through which God lives, for he lives by loving.

It is therefore no surprise that every prayer in today's Mass Proper (*Collect, Prayer over the Offerings, Prayer after Communion*) mentions gifts, revealing the reciprocity of receiving, offering, and giving. Moreover, the entire Eucharistic celebration - at nearly twenty points - is permeated with words concerning gift, giving, and unity.

4. For this reason, it is important to see our universities first and foremost as a gift. From this also flows the manner of building unity, of relating to others, of approaching questions in contemporary society, and ultimately, of striving toward one goal (*ad unum vertere*).

Certainly, one of the most frequently used words in current reflections on the future of universities is 'competitiveness.' We know that a healthy spirit of competition is good and that there has always been an effort to cultivate a striving for excellence and better results. Yet we also know that education for competitiveness easily reveals a darker side, one that views others as opponents and enemies. Today, this can be seen in the realm of science, the marketplace, and international relations alike.

Here it is good to return to the root of the word 'competere' (*cum+petere*), which originally means 'to seek together toward a common goal', precisely what 'universitas' originally signifies. Thus: striving toward a goal together, seeking together, and attaining something together.

Yet we know that this can also acquire the meaning of opposition, domination, control, and conflict.

Seen through Christian eyes and hearts, 'competitiveness' is closest to the image of the race of the Apostles Peter and John on Easter morning toward the tomb of Jesus, where the power of the Spirit is evident: the Spirit who awakens questions, gives strength, and amid confusion rekindles hope and wonder. It was the gift that, after the Ascension, became the gifts of the Spirit for a new communion.

Let us rejoice that we are the Father's gift to Christ, while together with him we pray in the Eucharistic Prayer: "Grant that we... filled with his Holy Spirit, may become one body, one spirit in Christ."

Amen.