

Inspiring Catholic Universities in Challenging Times

Elena Beccalli, President FUCE

Zagreb, 20 May 2026

Your Eminence, Your Excellencies, Distinguished Rectors, Honored Guests, and Dear Colleagues and Friends,

a very warm welcome to the General Assembly of the European Federation of Catholic Universities. It is with a profound sense of responsibility and hope that I address you for the first time in my capacity as President.

Before we begin our formal proceedings, I wish to extend my deepest gratitude to His Eminence, Cardinal José Tolentino de Mendonça: Your Eminence, we are profoundly honored by your presence. We thank you for your constant guidance and for the wisdom you bring from the Dicastery for Culture and Education. Your support strengthens the vital link between our academic missions and the universal mission of the Church.

A deep gratitude to our hosts, the Catholic University of Croatia in Zagreb, to its Rector Željko Tanjić and to its Vice-Rector for International Relations Jasna Ćurković Nimac. We are immensely grateful for your warm hospitality and for providing such a distinguished setting for this meeting. The Catholic University of Croatia, celebrating 20 years, is a miracle of growth in a time of contraction.

Finally, a warm welcome to FUCE Members and Friends: I want to thank each of you - representatives of our member institutions and guests from across the continent. Your presence here today testifies that Catholic universities are not merely a place of instruction, but a community.

Before we begin, I would like to pay tribute, with deep sorrow, to our dear friend and colleague Josep Antoni Rom Rodríguez, Rector of Ramon Llull University, who passed away on November 8, 2025. His smile, generosity, and profound intelligence remain vivid in our minds and hearts. He combined academic rigor with a deep sense of humanism, promoting a vision of higher education grounded in cooperation, social responsibility, and a firm belief in the transformative power of education. Thank you Josep for being such an inspiring person.

Finally, a special thought goes to our Lebanese and Ukrainian friends. In a world marked by uncertainty, polarizations, conflict and wars, sometimes directly affecting our institutions, our commitment is to strengthen solidarity among our academic communities.

Let me now introduce the topics of our General Assembly on “Inspiring Catholic Universities in Challenging Times”. We actually meet at a time when Europe faces many complex challenges, among them the demographic change, the digital transformation, and resilience and fragility of young people. In this context, our Federation serves as more than a network; it is a communion of minds. An image that explains my idea of FUCE is that of an orchestra. Our Federation - like all educational institutions - is a community in which each university plays its own instrument with dedication and passion. As in a symphony, not everyone is a soloist, yet every part is essential to the success of the performance. In great orchestras, some musicians stand out prominently while others remain in the background, but all have an irreplaceable role and contribute to the harmony of the sound and the balance of the melody. This is us, with a strong responsibility - to ensure that our universities remain pillars of integral humanism, fostering a dialogue that overcomes borders and disciplines.

As we open this General Assembly, let us be guided by a vision of the university rooted in its very origins: an open space, capable of engaging with society, with public life and with the world of work, a place where free and respectful encounter can flourish. In this context, the challenge before us is twofold: on the one hand, to respond promptly and effectively to the needs of new generations; on the other, to foster the critical thinking required by the complexity of our time.

In doing so, we face three key and interconnected complexities.

The first concerns the demographic change and its impact on our universities, including the risk of declining enrolments and the very intergenerational nature of our society. A single figure is enough to grasp the scale of the change: Europe is expected to lose approximately 32.8 million young people over the course of the century (Eurostat: 2026, *Population projections in the EU*). On the contrary, Africa is experiencing rapid demographic growth and, with 70% of its population under the age of 30, is the continent with the highest proportion of young people in the world. These trends call, on the one hand, for a rethinking of our educational offerings not only for younger generations but also for adult professionals in lifelong learning, and on the other for strengthening alliances with African universities.

The second dimension addresses the digital transformation. Emerging evidence suggests that while general-purpose GenAI tools can enhance students’ performance on tasks, they do not necessarily lead to learning gains. Offloading cognitive tasks to chatbots creates risks of metacognitive laziness and disengagement that may deter skill acquisition in the long run. Several studies indicate that although students with access to GenAI tools produce higher-quality outputs than their peers, this advantage disappears in exams when access is removed. In contrast, GenAI tools used with an intentional pedagogical purpose tend to show sustained improvements in learning (OECD, *Digital Education Outlook 2026. Exploring Effective Uses of Generative AI*

in Education, 2026). This validates the Catholic focus on “whole person education” as a practical, career-ready advantage. Thus, universities are challenged to rethink the very experience of knowledge: not encouraging a passive use of artificial intelligence, but fostering in students the ability to generate new ideas, cultivate critical thinking, and engage creatively with rapidly evolving technologies.

The third dimension focuses on the resilience and fragility of young people in today’s global context. According to the European University Association, 40% of students in the European Union are experiencing difficulties relating to their well-being or mental health, and one in five students is thought to be suffering from a mental health problem (Nightline Europe, *La santé mentale des étudiantes en Europe: Mieux comprendre pour mieux agir*, 2025). The well-being of students becomes an urgent priority. Here it is a strategic point: the identity and mission of a Catholic campus provides a “social anchor” that secular/online-only models lack.

To address these three complexities, education must be understood as a coral enterprise. It follows that the educational community stands in opposition to every form of individualism. Relationship is the primary educational space. In the apostolic letter *Drawing New Maps of Hope*, Pope Leo XIV encourages us to “seek together” and to face any new challenges. The human person is inherently relational: one is born, grows, and is saved within *communio*. Consequently, Christian education cannot be an individualistic or solitary path.

Truth is communicated through relationships. Pope Leo XIV strongly emphasizes this point, affirming that “relationship comes before opinion, the person before the program”. In an age where everything is measured by statistics and performance, he invites us to educate by building relationships.

Within this vision lies a *maieutics of experience*, that is, education as a relational event in which the person becomes the protagonist of an encounter that opens onto reality. This recalls Romano Guardini’s reflection: “What, then, does it mean to educate? [...] To educate means that I give this person courage toward himself [...] that I help him to achieve his own freedom” (*La credibilità dell’educatore*, in *Persona e libertà. Saggi di fondazione della teoria pedagogica*, La Scuola, Brescia, 1987/1993). The educational act, therefore, resists any reduction to mere instruction, in line with Pope Leo’s invitation not to regard the student as a “container” to be filled with information.

We, at the Catholic universities, are called to undertake a change in our educational paradigm. It involves understanding universities not as places where knowledge is merely transmitted, but as places where knowledge is experienced. Our task is not only to convey techniques or notions, but to communicate knowledge through lived experience, thus bringing out the cultural value of education. No ranking can fully

measure the impact of this new educational paradigm, yet its effects on society are clearly visible.

In this context, a crucial point becomes evident. Catholic universities cannot compete with secular institutions simply by outspending them, nor should they seek legitimacy by imitating increasingly secular models of higher education. Their challenge is of a different nature: as I will argue in my speech tomorrow, the challenge is to *compete on value grounded in values*, rather than to compete on scale.

Within this framework, the new initiatives we intend to pursue as FUCE are grounded in the strong and extensive network of our 61 member universities and approximately 595 thousands students. First, the creation of FUCE dual degree programs, enabling joint degrees among member universities so that students can experience learning across Catholic institutions. Second, the launch of a series of opportunities for dialogue with the European institutions - from the Parliament to the Commission - in order to bring our voice into the institutional arenas where policies on European higher education and research are shaped.

Let me conclude. Eight hundred years after his death, Saint Francis can still inspire us in navigating these complex times. He was an extraordinary and innovative educator - remarkably modern even today. Unlike the typical medieval abbot who ruled from above with authority, Francis introduced a new way of understanding the relationship between teacher and learner.

Francis' pedagogy can be described as horizontal, maternal, and grounded in coherence, with its core in fraternity as a space for generating relationships. His educational style is marked by several distinctive elements: the primacy of example (living before teaching), authority understood as care and service (like a mother), personal attention to each individual, education toward true freedom beyond individualism, and a commitment to simplicity over abstract intellectualism.

Keeping in mind the modernity of Francis's pedagogy, I hope this Assembly will be not only a moment to seek inspiration as institutions, but also an opportunity to become a source of inspiration for others.

Thank you.