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Globality, universality and Catholicity Catholic Universities today

Cardinal Giovanni Lajolo, Eminenza,
Magnifico Rettore,
Eccellentissime ed illustrissime autorità,

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è, per me, un privilegio trovarmi in questa prestigiosa Istituzione Italiana in occasione delle celebrazioni per suo ottantesimo anniversario. Proprio per questo motivo, nonostante il mio discorso proferito in lingua inglese, non posso non prestare omaggio à l'Università e à Roma, la città simbolo della Cristianità che ci ospita, con una breve introduzione "nella lengua di Dante". Lo farò, usando alcune parole del papa Giovanni XXIII (ventitreesimo) che, nel 1960, definì Roma, in una lettera al Monsignor Traglia, presidente della commissione sinodale, come "annuncio di redenzione e di pace, presidio di vera civiltà, ornamento ed arricchimento della persona umana, delle famiglie e dei popoli." Mi sembra che queste parole possano fare da premessa al tema di oggi, il ruolo delle Università Cattoliche in un Europa globale.

One of the recurring tropes of contemporary thought is that place is inextricably connected to our vision of the world. That, in fact, one thinks where one is, as the Argentinian theorist Walter Mignolo claims. Yet, this attention to place, to the local, must not forego global interconnectedness, that in fact our lives are deeply entwined with the experiences of our sisters and brethren across the globe. The Holy Father reminds us in the Encyclical *Laudato Si* that precisely this sense of globality inevitably "obliges us to think of *one world with a common plan*." (*Laudato Si*, 164) and to accept the world as a "sacrament of communion" (*Laudato Si*, 9). More than a promise, this is the experience and the practice, that a scholar must pursue. Science,

research require a mutual recognition and an ability to transform and transcend, in communal and collaborative engagement. Equally, as St. Ignatius of Loyola suggests in one of the *Ejercicios Espirituales*, that is remarkably inspiring in this regard, the discernment that comes from reflection demands the person meditating to be able to see the wide diversity of the world. Let us hear from exercise 106: “El primer puncto es ver las personas, las unas y las otras; y primero las de la haz de la tierra, en tanta diversidad, así en trajes como en gestos, unos blancos y otros negros, unos en paz y otros en Guerra, unos llorando y otros riendo, unos sanos, otros enfermos, unos nasciendo y otros muriendo, etc.” With this observation, comes the demand to put oneself into the scene and assume a role in this imaginary situation. The exercise suggests that a necessary stage of discernment is precisely this seeing, imagining and engaging with the other. In the vocabulary of today, it speaks of an engagement with a global community of which universities are part of, and most specifically Catholic universities by mission and identity. Communion, collaboration and cosmopolitanism are the 3Cs of the professional path to knowledge as conceived at universities.

The aim to absorb, understand and further ‘universal’ knowledge which the very idea of the *universitas* pivots around, demands this movement of extrication, of stepping outside one’s comfort zone, be it for the researcher or for the institution. The goal of the university is to be a place of continuous reinvention, integrating diversity – of ideas, experiences, practices -, building bridges – across disciplines, research communities, geographies; projecting a global program to improve ‘man’s estate’, as Francis Bacon wrote in the 17th century, clearly advancing knowledge for the common good and the sustainability of our common house. This is why, as Johann Wolfgang Goethe argued, “there is no such thing as patriotic science”. And that is why, the idea of the global from the last century onwards, or of international interactions in earlier centuries, is deeply inscribed not only in the heart but also in the soul of the university.

It has become an *idée reçue* to speak of our inevitable global condition. Technology has brought the world closer, we are deeply entwined economically, socially, politically, emotionally. Technology will disrupt our operation no matter where we are, we are all connected, continuously and vigoursly online. The fall of the twin towers reshaped our vision of the world, different communities of viewers wept

together in the face of horror, conflicts and wars are no longer circumscribed to regional actors, financial crises affect our unequal world in ways that increase unevenness. Global warming is here and will affect us all. And yet, more often than not, this condition becomes a discursive device to abolish the rich and motley diversity of our humanity. Hannah Arendt perceptively discusses the mapping of the globe in the wake of European expansion and laments what it has come to. As she writes in *The Human Condition*: “They went to enlarge the earth not shrink her into a ball” (1998: 250).

Other than culture and nature, global is arguably one of the most loaded words in academic vocabulary. The global is both a condition and strategy, it is a source of anxiety and a project of expansion, it speaks of a desire for recognition and of exclusion. In effect, from a philosophical point of view, the global recalls that which Heidegger called ‘the gigantic’ (*Das Riesige*), (*Holzwege*), which was defined by the abolition of distances and the representation of daily life in unfamiliar and distant worlds. But one must beware from effacing precisely the diversity of the global conditions, when the term globe is uttered, lest we subsume the unequal reality of the world to the oblivious lightness of the balloon globe, Charlie Chaplin played around with in the film *The Dictator*. To speak of the global, or for the global, is an ethical commitment that must be undertaken from a respectful stance vis-à-vis the difference of the other. For truly, the principle of the culture of encounter, Pope Francis so strongly defends, is global in nature and substantiates the cosmopolitan humanism structuring the very idea of a Catholic university. In other words, a global – international – soul is a defining trait leveraging the strength of one of the most resilient institutions in the world: the university, a European endeavor.

Notwithstanding, the existence of structured centers of knowledge is not a European idea. The Library of Alexandria was part of the *Musaeum* of Alexandria that resembled a modern university campus, because it included lecture theaters, meeting rooms and eating areas. The Academy of Sciences in Baghdad, in the 9th century, was a center of learning, in Beijing, in the 3rd century, there was an academy for the training of imperial officials, the Taixue. Some Buddhist centers in India, such as at Nalanda and Taxila gathered large numbers of students till around 1200, reaching circa 10.000 residents (Palfreyman, Temple: 2017). And yet, though from the Greek *akademos* to the

Arab Bayt-al-Hikma, in Baghdad, centers of knowledge had surfaced throughout the known world, the inception and the specific model of the university is a European one, developed almost 1000 years ago from the halls of the cathedral schools and then the academies in Paris, Bologna, Oxford, Lisbon and other places.

Even before Europe opened up to the exploration of unknown geographies, widening to "all the variety" of experiences and forms of living, St. Ignatius was so strongly aware of, the university was already an international endeavor. The idea that the internationalization of HEIs is a political instrument to the national projection of power is a flat assumption that derives from the modern transformations of the university in Prussia in the first decades of the 19th century. The reform of Wilhelm von Humboldt and Friedrich von Hardenberg produced the modern research university set on establishing the unity of teaching and research, as well as on defending the freedom of teaching (*Lehrfreiheit*) and learning (*Lernfreiheit*). The modern university then was devised in the wake of the so-called 'dawn of the people's age', and set on empowering the nation state as the dominant political formation and on implementing a new economic order arising out of industrialization, as Bjoern Wittrock has compellingly argued. This (modern) university – to which we are heirs – was strategically limited by the boundaries of the political nation.

The modern national university brought about a limitation to the original university model, that of the medieval university, the strong cosmopolitan academy where students from all the walks of Christendom converged. The medieval university was not yet global, but it was international, an eclectic and motley hub of learners and teachers. The transformations in Higher Education that have occurred in Europe since the Bologna Declaration are revisionist, in a sense. A strong commitment to internationalization, refracted in the creation of the European Higher Education Area, the astounding success of mobility programs, such as the Erasmus program, the development towards promotion of international networks and research hubs, the sponsoring of Big Science, such as the International Graphene Project, the Black Hole photograph and the recent institutional move towards problem-based European University hubs, take us back to the cosmopolitan medieval model, as Umberto Eco

insightfully argued. Then again, it is also to the medieval model that we owe the professionalization drive of our Bologna reform.

The early university model was created by the Church for the professional education of its members, as it grew, the model was expanded to the secular realm. It was much later, in the modern age, that knowledge for knowledge's sake, the university without conditions, made its way. John Henry Cardinal Newman's *The Idea of a University* (1858) speaks to this epochal transformation and provides the model of the university as an institution deemed to cultivate knowledge for its own end, but not as a haven of acritical emulation. He champions the idea of the university as a community of thinkers, engaging in intellectual pursuit not for any outside purpose but as an end in itself, ultimately forming individuals that through a broad, transversal, liberal education would be able "to think and to reason and to compare and to discriminate and to analyse". He speaks against the narrow specialization and stipulates that students should be taught on a wider, broader dimension.

In sum, through change and transformation, the European university today is perhaps - controversially and unawares - returning to its roots, to its Catholic roots: in the fostering of an international community, in the commitment to quality and professionalization, without foregoing legacy and tradition, and always defending the autonomy of discerned reasoning and research. Despite the secular attacks on the idea of a Catholic university, that George Bernard Shaw, in his controversy with Cardinal Newman, named a contradiction in terms, the resilience of the very idea of a university is deeply entwined with Catholic values. I would venture that the erasing of this living memory challenges the very idea of the university, so that Catholic universities should see themselves as strategically better equipped to integrate in their mission and identity these values that truly were always theirs from the start.

Following the demands of Pope Francis for a Church that goes forth, Catholic higher education must fulfill its mission of going forth, acting collaboratively to further the advancement of knowledge for the common good, to provide high quality teaching articulated with the needs of society aimed at transforming potential - which is the matter our students are made of - into astute, creative and ethical professionals;

and adopting internationalization not as a simple cash cow and power projection of the university but rather as a strategic element of the mission. This requires understanding the global as the communal, rather than as a tool of economic globalization. It is no doubt the hardest of positions.

Though the university is precisely built as the bulwark of respectful divergence – this is after all the driver for every scientific revolution – the experience of difference is the hardest anthropological experience to muster, not least when it confronts faith-based universities with different value systems, or even simply with different cultural experiences. And it is easier to build walls than to strengthen the bridges. The same goes for the current discursive – not institutional – shift from an organizational model structured around disciplines to one structured around problems. Yet, I contend that it is precisely here, at the limits, of science, culture, that our mission is fulfilled. It is when universities question the boundaries, without giving away their values, that they renew their universal mission. The same goes for our geocultural location: Europe.

Like the university, Europe was built as an honest broker of diversity. Rome, Athens and Jerusalem were lively places of exchange. But there is another narrative, that stresses the construction of borders. For instance, a geography of limits also articulated the imperial discourse of Rome from myth to politics. Rome's founding myth, the story of Romulus and Remus, enunciates the violence that both structures and protects a demarcation practice. The process of culture, then, begins with the setting of boundaries and it is precisely at the border, the savage and unhomely space of the *limes*, that culture is ultimately affirmed. In his reflection on the philosophical idea of Europe (*Europe and Empire*), Massimo Cacciari argues that identity is ingeniously produced at the limits. Becoming occurs *in limine*. Consequently, the space that substantiates and co-produces the idea of Europe only becomes what it purports to be at the edge, when the limits are reached. One might say that Europe becomes Europe in Lampedusa and Callais.

[...] one recognizes the place only when the threshold, the limit, is reached, that is, there where place turns into its own border (*cum finis*), near, close, contiguous to the other from itself – where it reveals something

‘in common’ (*cum-munus*) with the other. Europe is there where it ‘touches’ the extraneous, the stranger. Europe does ‘know itself’ only there, where it encounters, in every sense, the wonderful and frightening face of the stranger. [...] Until it reaches its ‘extreme’ (*stremo*), which can change over time, Europe is not. (Cacciari, 2016: 57-58)

Becoming *in limine*, on the cusp of the line of demarcation, the idea of Europe is informed by the boundary, and it is immersed in the hybridity and untidiness of the cultures meeting there. Hence, Europe is not, if not in the face of its contestation. The limits that produce its identity are precisely the porous opening convoking its contestation.

The same goes, I would argue, for the Catholic university, that is reaffirmed whenever it pursues the task of advancing the boundaries of knowledge. When it reaches the edge. As the former Bishop of Porto, His Excellency António Francisco, once said, ‘the Catholic university fulfills its goal when it is placed at the vanguard.’ That is, when it is recognized as excelling no less, never less, than its secular counterparts, continuing to affirm the substantial spirit of exploration, freedom, dialogue, in society and for society, that structures the model of Christian humanism.

The work of the International Federation of Catholic Universities and its longstanding vision of the role of Catholic higher education is precisely set on advancing those principles. Founded in 1924 through the engaged work of leading European universities (KU Leuven, Univ. Sacro Cuore, Milan, and Univ. Nijmegen) IFCU has consistently worked to support the quality, autonomy and relevance of the work of Catholic higher education institutions in light of the Gospel’s revelation. 53 years ago, ‘The Land O’Lakes Declaration’, which substantiated a vision for the work of Catholic universities, and was drafted under the direction of IFCU’s then President, father Theodore Hesburgh, clearly stated that the mission of Catholic universities was to pursue academic excellence and intellectual rigor, that is, focusing on developing sustainable top-notch research and teaching institutions. One of its guiding principles is the following:

The Catholic university today must be a university in the full modern sense of the word, with a strong commitment to and concern for academic excellence. To perform its teaching and research function effectively the

Catholic university must have a true autonomy and academic freedom (...).

To this day, many of the critics of this Declaration, that is clearly inspired by the legacy of the Second Vatican Council, see this opening statement as a naïve departure from the grounded principles of Catholic identity. The fact of the matter is that research excellence, autonomy and Catholic identity are not, can never be, opposites. The Declaration further argues that in the guarantee of research excellence Catholicism “is perceptibly present and effectively operative.” The group of university presidents who gathered in Land O’Lakes sought to render their institutions effective intellectual leaders supporting the development of a dignified world in accordance with the Christian values informing the intellectual life of their academic communities, and this cannot do away with free reasoning and inspection.

Despite the challenges, never before in the past ,have we had such amazing possibilities of cultivating science to defend human dignity. The challenge of our global condition is precisely that of using this power to move towards ever more inclusive universities, and robust societies, enriched by the motley attraction of world talent, and picking up on Hannah Arendt’s metaphor, to work to widen our ball, the globe, not shrink it.