

**Meeting of Catholic University Rectors and Authorities as Part of the
V Uniservitate Global Symposium.**

**Address by Cardinal José Tolentino de Mendonça, Prefect of the
Dicastery for Culture and Education.**

Vatican City, 8th November 2024

(Translation of the audio in Italian)

John Paul II, in the Apostolic Constitution of Catholic Universities, [Ex Corde Ecclesiae](#), states a truth that you all embody perfectly: the University lies at the heart of the Church. So today is a day to celebrate the central role of the heart, its importance, and to thank you all, your people, your institutions, families, dreams, dedication, all that is challenging to tackle, and that you face with courage every day. I want to begin by expressing my gratitude for this because the university is an act of love, not abstract but concrete, born from our shared love.

That is why my first words are to thank you for all you are and do, and the communities of knowledge and hope you all represent, in your universities — whether smaller, larger, older or newer— across the globe. This is the beauty of the Catholic or Christian-inspired network of universities that are part of the Catholic educational system. I thank you from the bottom of my heart.

Distinguished rectors, vice-rectors, representatives, and leaders of the Uniservitate Network, thank you for gathering to celebrate the *V Uniservitate Global Symposium*. Though unable to attend the sessions of this important Symposium, I was eager to join you here today.

This meeting this morning is a key moment for me. You are rectors and representatives of the rector's office from special universities, because your universities are truly special, for years committed to combining knowledge acquisition with service to others. It is a hallmark in your educational communities.

This service-learning approach not only addresses the methodological, didactic aspect of learning, but above all, the human aspect; it places individuals at the centre. The binomial 'service-learning' in this Symposium is connected with another term, the 'Global Compact on Education', which emphasizes the importance of networking and being with others in the great mission of educating. We cannot educate in isolation, educating is always a relationship process. It is always a community task; it is always a community that educates. Even if there are only two of us, there is always a community behind us. We are all called, through the Global Compact on Education, to forge alliances between all educators to educate new generations in the great value of universal fraternity, endangered by the constant fratricidal wars that still besiege the world today.

We, as heads of universities, are well aware that wars are great wounds, great obstacles. Here we have the rector from the Catholic University of Ukraine, our solidarity with tormented Ukraine, and with all the countries—in all scenarios— currently undergoing severe and deep crises. We also have professors from Palestine. We know that peace is essential and that is why universities are great workers for peacebuilding which we always want. I dare to say that the Global Compact on Education is even more necessary today than it was five years ago when it was launched. We need a Compact that engages all human beings in the great mission of peace and fraternity to avert the risk of an imminent disaster.

Catholic educators, in particular, are called to provide continuity and new life to the Christian *paideia*, the traditional teaching of the Church dating back to the earliest times, a *paideia* anchored in the great values of tradition, but at the same time open to present and future challenges. We must merge these two words: tradition and education. We need to innovate to be faithful to tradition; we need to seek our roots to innovate. These two words help us think about the future. As educators, we are called upon to rewrite together a pedagogical dictionary, a new grammar of the human that knows how to combine the keywords of the education of our time.

Uniservitate's pedagogical approach embraces three other terms that have become an indissoluble trinomial in Pope Francis' educational insights: mind, hands and heart. So many times in his addresses has Pope Francis returned to this holistic model of education that envisages mind, heart and hands united. Only together is there harmony of the human being in every dimension. They are terms that must always be united because reflection—the mind— must necessarily lead to action—the hands—, the power of the hands to shape the world and to arouse a passion that makes the heart beat. How important the heart is!

Your universities are among those that, over the last five years, have contributed to building the *Uniservitate* Network as a global and multifaceted community, with each region bringing the richness of its cultures and openness to learn, from one another, fraternally. And it is very important that cultures also be a school of dialogue, curiosity for others and openness to the world.

It is precisely in the heart that true identity is rooted. A university ruled by the social friendship Pope Francis speaks about begins—it must begin—in our educational communities. An educational community, a university where social friendship and fraternal service prevail, not only in the community-engagement programmes but transversally, in the heart of teaching, in the research practices, is a university that "become, in a complete and luminous way, the [university] we are meant to be" (*Dilexit Nos*, 21).

Pope Francis has recently published his latest Encyclical Letter, [*Dilexit Nos*](#), where he calls us to think about the centrality of the heart. And this has a consequence for our universities. We should welcome the Holy Father's words as a challenge to think about our universities: Are they places where hearts

beat, or are they places without a heart? Is the heart healthy in our universities? These questions are vital for us. For they are questions about our institutions' identity and vision.

The Holy Father said this week at [the Pontifical Gregorian University](#): "It is necessary to transform the academic space into a house of the heart". A home of the heart. It would be very important that our institutions receive and creatively appropriate these words. What do these words mean? They mean that a university clearly must be a home of the heart. We need universities where one learns to bring head, hands and heart together. A place where people learn and research how to address in solidarity the many complex problems facing humanity and the planet today. "And indeed, brothers and sisters, to do this, it is necessary to transform the academic space into a home of the heart. Caring for relationships needs a heart that dialogues," said Pope Francis.

A university is a story of ties. The foundation for the quality of the extraordinary research that we promote in all scientific fields is the quality of relationships. It is all rooted in the quality of the ties, the investment, the time we spend fostering relationships, getting to know each other and listening to each other. Our heart needs to speak to the hearts of others. "The heart unites the fragments and, with the hearts of others, a bridge is built where we can meet. The heart is needed by the university, which is a place of research for a culture of encounter and not of a 'throw-away' culture." This is very important because, in the university, we see reason as intelligence, but we know that there are multiple intelligences. There is indeed reason as intelligence, but a person with reason but no literacy of the heart will never be a person who makes a valid contribution to society. We must fight against the illiteracy of the heart and also put the heart at the core of our educational and university dynamics.

In his [address at the Gregorian University](#), Pope Francis introduces a binomial to translate his way of seeing into a concrete image. He joins these two verbs, educate and love, which should be synonyms. "Formation is above all about care for the person and therefore a discreet, precious, and delicate action of charity. Otherwise, educational action turns into arid intellectualism or perverse narcissism," says His Holiness. And we know to what extent our universities can become archipelagos of loneliness. There is this loneliness, we are many —10,000; 15,000; 5,000— but we are islands; together we do not shape a beating heart because we are in our own world, with our own suffering or ambition. We should not think of a university as a box full of egos, with just personal desires, since a university is the place where the pronoun "we" is truly learned. If students spend from 3 to 5 years in a university and do not make this transition from "I" to "we", they have not understood the purpose of the university, which is to truly understand the sense of the common good, and how each one of us is called to contribute with our education, knowledge and talent. We are all protagonists in building the common good.

In this sense, the Symposium you are holding is an excellent and necessary opportunity to remind us of the purpose of education, and what education is for. Organizational and didactic meetings are important, but more important are meetings like this one that seek to discuss what we are doing as educators. This is utterly important because a university does not move by inertia or routine, it has to move based on a vision built together regarding what we are doing.

Pope Francis was insistent on this question, which is not an easy one because it challenges each one of us: what are you doing, what are you looking for? And there is no easy answer; it is not a comfort question, but a necessary and decisive one, because it is not merely routine that drives our universities but a full awareness of our education and mission. Pope Francis pointed to our heart, asking "where I am going and for what" and, above all, "where I am going and facing whom". These are fundamental questions to welcome the freshness of time, the beauty of humanity that renews itself, because the university has the great advantage of being an age-old institution, although it also has an obstacle because our strengths can also be our stumbling blocks. So we need questions and the power of questions. In a university we believe in questions; we know that answers are points to support a path that must continue, but questions are also our research engine from the spiritual point of view. Therefore, we should not be afraid to ask questions, those that others do not ask, those coming from students, society and the Church. Many ask: Is this university Catholic? What is it for? It is an important question, even if it seems a bit aggressive or uncomfortable. Let us accept the strength of questions.

And the Pope continues: "I am addressing you, who have the administration and lead this university's mission before God and the students: Have you asked yourselves where you are going and why you are doing the things you are doing?" He is addressing us, who have the university governance today: why are we doing what we are doing, and for whom? These questions introduce prophetic realism, a conversion movement, a movement of de-installation, which sets us in motion also from the spiritual point of view because we no longer have the answer. Universities always need this conversion dynamism, which must be continuous because this is how we grow: from the roots, but also with this desire to blossom to meet the challenges of individuals of each era, of the culture. It is a continuous movement and that is why it is so important to start from questions. These issues raised by the Holy Father, dear rectors and representatives, are also addressed to you, who are part of important academic institutions. May we welcome these moments of reflection on educational action.

The great danger for a university administration is pragmatism and utilitarianism, which become a sort of autism: we no longer listen to anything or feel anything, because authority —power— can be a way of isolating ourselves from reality. Normally, we are in the rector's office, high up, the sound of the street does not reach us, the doors are closed, there is so much to do in the office... No wonder, we have so much work that we can spend

entire days listening only to the sound of papers, documents and emails, and it immerses us into a loop. How long has it been since we walked around our university? Since we have gone to the refectory, the cafeteria with the students, or stopped to listen to a collaborator or a staff member, showed up in unusual places in the university, sat at the back of a classroom... We can say "I don't have time, I am the rector, I can't do these things," but from time to time, we have to do them precisely to continue being rectors because, otherwise, only the administration knows that we are rectors. After all, the community has its own life, its dynamics; it is a "body" that goes on its own way. This is why we must fight against pragmatism and utilitarianism and live the Christian *paideia* as an education that engages us all around the fundamental question of the meaning of life. In our task of compiling a pedagogical vocabulary, we can identify here another inseparable binomial: to educate, to love. We also find here another binomial: education, meaning.

In addition to the fundamental theoretical reflection, it is also important that the action encourages us to open up to others and network. Here, different words are also used, but in essence, they convey the same reality. Words like compact, partnership, networking, walking together. Finally, we have the word synod, to walk together. The synod dynamic is interesting; the final document of the Synod acknowledges the central role of schools and universities in the mission of the Church today, in the modern world. It praises all those who work in this world. For example, it points out that women hold a position of leadership in our institutions today and are an inspiration to the whole Church. Women can be in other Church government bodies because they are credible. We see women who are in the university, give credible testimony of its administration, of the great advantage of having women in our educational network, and universities can also offer this advantage to the Church. Women can do more because what they already do is outstanding.

The *Uniservitate* network is an example of an educational alliance, concerned with the richness of each people's cultural diversity. When Pope Francis launched the Global Compact on Education a few years ago, he did it in the spirit of that African proverb that underlines the importance of community in education: "It takes a whole village to educate a child." Our universities cannot be islands. Our universities have a kilometre zero that we need to consider, a kilometre one, a kilometre one hundred, a kilometre one thousand with which we must have ties, a life. On the occasion of the launching of the African Education Compact —and I am very happy to see here our universities in Africa—, Pope Francis said that it is wonderful to count on the African pedagogues and philosophers and centuries-long educational tradition. Pope Francis reinforces this in [Querida Amazonia](#). The Church has a cultural aspect; the university has a cultural aspect as well. Our universities must be "glocal": they need to be global because they have to train for the world; they are universities, and the universe of knowledge must be present, but they need the context, they must also speak the local language, even when teaching or research is in English, it is necessary to know the cultural ways and enhance the cultures where the university stands. This is very important: the dialogue with culture. Opening ourselves to many forms of knowledge,

because the university cannot live only from its traditional curricula, but must open itself to new languages. The image in the canvas must be the image of building a university.

For instance, last August, the Holy Father published [a letter on the role of literature](#) in understanding people and cultures, to understand each other. In his speeches, he frequently quotes texts by poets, by authors from the world of literature like Virgil, Homer and Borges; and in the already mentioned speech to the Gregorian University, he quoted Quevedo, an important poem by Quevedo about Rome, which we call the "eternal city" because, when we come, we see a two-thousand or more years' timeline. We see things that the Apostle Paul saw when he visited Rome; but as Pope Francis said, this is also an illusion, because, in Rome, perhaps the most eternal thing is the Tiber, symbolizing the passing of time because we cannot think that our institutions are frozen in time, can we? It is important to listen, to listen to the flowing river of time; that is why we must seize the moment, make fundamental choices, understand the *kairos* —the educational *kairos*—, and realize that this is the right time to make fundamental choices.

To conclude, I would like to invite you to look forward to the imminent Jubilee that begins next Christmas when the Pope will open the Holy Door of St. Peter's Basilica, and then all the doors of the world will be opened for the Holy Year. How beautiful it would be if the idea of the door, the Holy Door, could be implemented in our universities! Of course, the city has the door of the cathedral to grant indulgences, but it would be important for our universities to think about the idea of the door, to value the door as a symbol, perhaps in dialogue with the chaplaincies, the campus ministry, but also with the arts, the artists; but remember, remember the words of Jesus who says in the Gospel of John: "I am the door". The university is also a door, what does it mean to go through that door, to build that door?

Next year, from 27th October to 2nd November, there will be a Jubilee of the World of Education here in Rome, and we would like Rome to be the capital of education in the world because it is a home for everybody. We want to invite all rectors to a global meeting that will unite the authorities of Catholic and Christian-inspired universities with the rectors of state-run universities. It will be a great meeting to show that universities are a resource for the future on which society needs to count. It would be wonderful if this gesture could serve as an inspiration for what we are trying to do in our own realities!

The idea of pilgrimage is fundamental to university life. Pope Francis called the university students of the Portuguese Catholic University "pilgrims of knowledge" in [His address on the occasion of the XXXVII World Youth Day](#). Through the metaphor of the pilgrim, the Pope underlined the way a pilgrim represents the human condition of searching, the sense of overcoming one's limits. The academic journey, like the spiritual one, requires facing deeper questions and avoiding ready-made answers. It is an invitation to walk, to follow the true path of hope. It is an invitation to continually question oneself. Desire should be seen as a positive impulse not to rest content with easy answers. A healthy restlessness, a healthy desire, helps us to overcome

narcissism and self-sufficiency, reminding us that we are *in* the world, but we are not *of* the world. Addressing the young students at that university, the Pope encouraged them to be protagonists of change. He told the university students: "Bring about a new 'choreography'." Let us think of new possible dances, new forms, new paradigms, to organize the world: "A university would have little use if it were simply to train the next generation to perpetuate the present global system of elitism and inequality, in which higher education is the privilege of a happy few." A university would have little use if it existed to keep the *statu quo*. "Unless knowledge is embraced as a responsibility, it bears little fruit." The fruitfulness of our university projects is also this capacity to think of new paradigms, new worlds, new solutions, new forms and new choreographies. This is why His Holiness constantly reminds us of the idea of social justice and encourages us to step out of our comfort zone and act for the common good.

In the same address, the Pope also stressed the urgency of caring for the common home through the need for innovative ways of understanding economics, politics and spirituality, overcoming polarized approaches and working for a truly progressive society: "Keep in mind that we need an integral ecology, attentive to the sufferings both of the planet and the poor. We need to align the tragedy of desertification with that of refugees, the issue of increased migration with that of a declining birth rate, and to see the material dimension of life within the greater purview of the spiritual." We know that, without the spiritual dimension, without the horizon of religious experience, even the educational experience remains incomplete.

In conclusion, the Holy Father indicated the Compact on Education as a guide to educate in acceptance, the care for our common home and the full participation of women, and invited young people to study and be passionate about the seven principles of the Compact on Education, which, of course, can spiral in different ways. For example, yesterday the Vice Chancellor of the Catholic University of Milan said that we need a compact on digital education. That's right, it's true. It is a further elaboration that we can make within the Global Compact on Education.

I would like to finish by greeting you once again, with the same enthusiasm with which Pope Francis greeted the university students, with these words: "At this moment in time, we are facing enormous challenges; we hear the painful plea of so many people.... Yet, let us find the courage to see our world not as in its death throes, but in a process of giving birth, not at the end, but at the beginning of a great new chapter of history." We are giving birth, not dying, but being born. We are not at the end but at the beginning of a great choreography, a great dance, a great show. We strongly believe that we are at the beginning of this great choreography in which each one of us, playing our instruments, contributes to the making of a great concert.

This is also my wish for each of you, thanking you once again for your work, your mission, and the opportunity I have been given. Thank you, thank you very much and good job.



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