



# The Holy See

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## **MESSAGE OF THE HOLY FATHER JOHN PAUL II TO THE CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY OF THE SACRED HEART**

*To Professor Sergio Zaninelli*

*Rector Magnificent of the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart*

1. Last 13 April I had the joy of meeting the great family of the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart, which had gathered in St Peter's Basilica for their Jubilee celebration. It was a deeply spiritual moment, a vibrant witness of faith and communion. Now the annual observance of Catholic University Day gives me another opportunity to address you, the Rector, and the whole community you represent.

I do so gladly, also remembering the significant dates of the 40th anniversary of the death of your founder, Fr Agostino Gemelli, and the now imminent 80th anniversary of the university's foundation: these occasions give the members of this prestigious institution a reason for special reflection and invite them to an ever more generous commitment in harmony with the expectations of the Church and of society. Thus, in once again expressing my sentiments of esteem and affection to the teachers, students and those connected with the university in various ways, I continue my dialogue on the difficult but exalting task entrusted to them: to combine, in the context of academic activity, the boldness of reason and the *parrhesia* of faith.

2. "Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth" (*Fides et ratio*). Faced with the crisis of reason, which characterizes much of today's culture, faith must make an even greater effort to become, in a way, the "Good Samaritan of reason", so that the latter may fully recover its own native metaphysical and sapiential capacity.

Looking at it from this perspective, one immediately perceives how precious is the work of believers committed to research through the cultivation of the literary and scientific disciplines which express man's irrepressible longing for knowledge of the truth. Through this research, open to ever new horizons, man does not only seek things but himself, and ultimately opens himself to

the mystery of God. Ever better knowledge of reality also benefits social life, as well as the practice of the faith, so that it will be more enlightened and mature. That is why in the Apostolic Constitution *Ex corde Ecclesiae* I recalled that part of university life is "the ardent search for truth and its unselfish transmission to youth", teaching them "to think rigorously, so as to act rightly and to serve humanity better" (n. 2).

3. Those who had the great merit of preparing this institution and making it a reality were well aware of this. I am thinking first of all of Ven. Giuseppe Toniolo, after whom the founding institution of the Catholic University is named. Today, as the Italian Church is involved in her "cultural project", it is worth remembering his missionary zeal in working to instill a Christian soul in culture. I also recall with special admiration Fr Agostino Gemelli, the fervent Franciscan who gave life and sound direction to this institution which so honours Catholic Italy. The memory of Fr Gemelli, on the 40th anniversary of his death, can only prompt a reflection on the nature and mission of the Catholic University, which is preparing to celebrate its 80 years of life. And this is all the more urgent in a historical situation like Italy's, in which the current reform of the entire university system makes it necessary to revisit the functions and *raison d'être* of universities as such.

4. Actually, the project of an independent Catholic university in Italy remains very timely. Through this well-qualified institution, Italian Catholics can be integrally involved, with their specific contribution, in the various areas of research, thus showing that rational argument is not opposed to faith, but actually finds an ally in it for its authentic and fruitful exercise. Besides, faith itself benefits from reason that is both strong and humble in avoiding the ever latent risks of superstition and magic, to become a faith which fully responds to the demands of Revelation and the authentic requirements of the *humanum*. It is therefore an indispensable duty of the Catholic University to cultivate the deep *solidarity* that must join faith with reason, bearing witness to it not only with regard to the universal questions of human existence, but also in the face of the epochal challenges posed at the beginning of the millennium by a multiethnic, multireligious and multicontextual society, with its continual frenetic changes.

5. Against this background, the importance of the theme chosen for Catholic University Day, "A culture of solidarity for our country", is easy to understand.

This theme opens on a complex scene which the teachers and students of the Catholic University are called to "read" in depth, contending of course with concrete social phenomena, but at the same time trying to go to the root of problems. It is up to them first and foremost to remember that a culture of solidarity, if it is to be authentic and profound, needs what could be called a "solidarity of culture", that is, a vision of knowledge which, although aware of its limits, will not be satisfied with fragments but will try to organize them into a true and wise synthesis. Nothing is so devastating in contemporary culture as the widespread conviction that the possibility of attaining truth is an illusion of traditional metaphysics. Activity that benefits culture, one which could be called a "work of intellectual charity", according to Rosmini's pregnant expression, is thus more

necessary than ever.

6. The Catholic University, precisely because of its Christian inspiration, has something significant to say in response to this appeal for solidarity made by the culture of our time. In particular, it is called to help overcome that stifling dichotomy between scientific progress and spiritual values which encourages materialistic habits, leading to an individualistic and competitive society that is often the source of injustice and violence, marginalization and discrimination, conflict and war.

The process of economic globalization, although not without positive aspects, is creating new gaps in the area of solidarity in Europe and in the world. The value of solidarity is in crisis, perhaps mainly because there is a crisis in the only experience which could guarantee its objective and universal value: that communion between persons and peoples which the believing conscience traces back to the fact that we are all children of the one Father, the God who "is love" (1 Jn 4: 8). In Christ, he brought us into the "fullness of time" (cf. Gal 4: 4), calling us to the genuine freedom of a life of love and solidarity.

7. The need for a cultural "refoundation" is therefore obvious, and it can only challenge the Catholic University in its research, which must be rationally rigorous, firmly rooted in faith and open to dialogue with all people of good will. It must aim at a culture which will assure the centrality of the person, his inalienable rights and the sacredness of life. It is necessary to foster a culture of acceptance, respect and sharing, while remembering that "man can fully discover his true self only in a sincere giving of himself" (*Gaudium et spes*, n. 24), by committing his own freedom to the common good, beyond individual or group interests and far from the search for profit at all costs.

This is solidarity, a particular expression of that "*being neighbour*" which in Gospel language we call *love agape*, and which must mark the lives of Christ's disciples.

Understood in this way, solidarity becomes the new name for peace, the criterion for any organization of civil society characterized by justice, the basis of every political democracy that does not want to be reduced to mere rhetoric. Like other countries, today Italy is fraught with the temptations of racism, introversion and selfish withdrawal: the most suitable historical-practical forms must be sought to ensure that solidarity does not remain at the level of principle but is carried out in real life.

8. For all this, the Catholic University can offer valuable theoretical-scientific support by making the most of that coordination of the branches of knowledge which characterizes it as a university. It must therefore feel obliged to bring the multiplicity of the sciences to a sapiential synthesis which can truly help man by guiding him to a just and peaceful civil society: a synthesis which remedies the radical fragmentation of knowledge, which is very different from the legitimate methodological autonomy of the individual disciplines. Indeed, such fragmentation expresses and aggravates that

disorientation in the perception of the meaning of life which for so many of our contemporaries is often the prelude to nihilism.

Faced with these challenges, the scholarly output of the Catholic University, already rich in so many areas, will have to continue expanding its horizons in the future, dealing in an ever more systematic way with those serious contemporary problems indicated in *Ex corde Ecclesiae*: "The dignity of human life, the promotion of justice for all, the quality of personal and family life, the protection of nature, the search for peace and political stability, a more just sharing in the world's resources, and a new economic and political order that will better serve the human community at a national and international level" (n. 32).

In this range of topics much depends on the joint action of the men and women of our time. It is the task of Christians to bring the light of the Gospel to them, as the witnesses of the One who in the Incarnation "in a certain way united himself with each man" (*Gaudium et spes*, n. 22) and showed by the gift of his life what solidarity with others means.

9. I therefore hope that the Catholic University, by remaining faithful to the Christian orientation of its well-established tradition, will increase its service of *teaching solidarity to the younger generation*, the hope of our country's future. It is an education to be offered through instruction, but also by creating an authentic climate of communion in the university's everyday life, since solidarity is learned through "contact" rather than through "concepts", and should permeate the sphere of being before that of acting.

May the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart persevere in its mission! May it be further renewed in its spirit and structures, rekindling the enthusiasm of its founder!

Trusting in the commitment that every member of the prestigious institution will make to these goals, I invoke the motherly protection of Mary, *Sedes Sapientiae*, on their projects and intentions, and I send a special Apostolic Blessing to you, the Rector, to the faculty, the students, staff and the whole great family of the university's supporters and friends. May the Lord give new vigour to the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart in this Jubilee Year, so that it will continue to be worthy of all the "witnesses", the teachers of knowledge and life who have honoured its history, and will thus be able to render ever more effective service to culture, to society and to the Church of God in Italy.

*From the Vatican, 5 May 2000.*

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