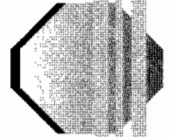


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The Place of the Catholic University in a Multi-Cultural Society

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Président de l'ACISE

*Catholic Universities are islands of personal peace and reconciliation
in a sea of social turmoil and indifference.*

INTRODUCTION

We are assembled here from Catholic Universities across Europe, and indeed the world. This is the first occasion when we have met outside Europe in the beautiful setting close to the cradle of Christian civilisation. There is a feeling of peace, friendship and harmony in an association marked by its joys and its family atmosphere. It is my pleasure to welcome all of you to the ACISE conference this year, and it is good to welcome friends, both old and new. Those who have come long distances are particularly welcome.

Our common agenda is one characterised by a genuine concern for the education, formation and transformation of our students in the service of a better world and a more harmonious society. Ours is a ministry of hope in the service of the young. Catholic Universities are places where in higher education Christian values are alive among us.

We live in the real world, and we live in the world which we have, and not the one which we wish we had. We have to ensure that we are rooted in a society which recognises all the pressures and tensions of the world, but which reconciles the individual to God in all that is done. Through our baptism we are asked to live life to the full, and to use our gifts in whatever way these best serve God.

In this way we become fully developed and fully formed. Through this we have created a mosaic of ethnic patterns, an amazing set of social patterns, a diversity of faith, and a variety of spiritual outlooks and practices. Yet in all of this the Catholic Church is not seeking a monolithic unity, but a reconciled diversity.

The Church consists of communities of change set in a world of change. There are, however, certain fixed points, and certain messages which are not determined by time and place. These are the timeless messages from the Gospel, and the values of faith and hope and love. These are the unchanging truths in a society often too slow to acknowledge the values of the true Christian message.

the catholic university

The Catholic University is an institution which is concerned with :

- * Teaching and learning in Higher Education.
- * Research and consultancy activities.
- * Formation of students.

In regard to teaching and learning, the role of the Catholic University has to be considered with care. Any University will be engaged in an education which provides courses for undergraduates, usually offering a « Bachelor's » degree, perhaps taken by some 30% of the population (currently 37% in Scotland, and planned to increase to 40% by AD 2000). These courses offer not only a body of knowledge, but just as importantly, a way of knowing and behaving which characterises the Christian message. The Catholic University might also be expected to offer certain kinds of courses which are consistent with the Christian message. Typically these would be in the areas

of Theology, Education, and/or Health Studies. We have to be conscious of the increasing fragmentation of knowledge as a consequence of greater knowledge and specialist investigation. The last person who « knew everything » lived and died in the 18th century. This fragmentation has led to a change of values.

The central issue for the Catholic University is therefore not only what is taught, but how teaching takes place. It is the pedagogy, or the teaching methods which carry the essential values of the institution. It is these which develop the relationships and the values which characterise the work of the Christian message. The significance of this is that it is entirely reasonable to have a Catholic University in a multi-cultural society demonstrating its witness and its place in contemporary society by the ways in which teaching takes place. The Catholic University has a duty to develop a pedagogy of freedom within which each student finds dignity and a recognition of the talents which are to be formed and educated. This comes from the duty to be optimistic — to be that island of peace in a sea of indifference.

It is this pedagogy of freedom which urges us to recognise the necessity for reconciliation in all that we do. The truths which we seek are not determined by privatised beliefs and by individualised preferences.

This argument for the centrality of pedagogy or method, is not to deny the value of « content ». It is, however, to challenge the supremacy of an aspect of education which is so fragmented, ephemeral and transitory. Education will inevitably become increasingly influenced by specialisation and by technological change, and by the ways in which technology will be used to assist learning. The Catholic University is expected to maintain a real commitment to such applications for more effective learning. It would fail to convince the onlooker that a Catholic University could conduct all of its tuition by the use of technology alone. It is a question of « high tech and high touch ». Where there is an emphasis on technology there is a need to put in place appropriate pastoral systems. These must be there to counteract the moral atomisation when feelings are given a dominance over beliefs, and where right and wrong are considered secondary to the « feel good » factor.

These observations are made in the knowledge that in different societies Catholic Universities consider themselves to have quite different purposes. In some countries a Catholic University exists to educate Catholic population ; some see the university as an agent of evangelisation of the students ; in others the university is thought to be the witness that the Church values

education as a service ; in yet others the Catholic University is there as an historical entity, sometimes not having a clear mission in the contemporary world. In short there is such a variety of reasons for the existence of the Catholic University that little can be taken for granted about the collective purposes of these institutions, although all seem to promote the values of the Gospel, and these are carried in the dynamic methods of teaching and in the relationships of the learning and teaching processes.

This emphasises that the Catholic Universities are not concerned to establish a monolithic unity, but to create a reconciled diversity through the approaches which they take to learning and teaching.

The work of Catholic Universities in relation to research is to pursue truth in all its forms. This has brought its own problems and tensions over the years, trying to understand a world which is confronting the fundamental issues of life, the very meaning of life itself, and the ways of thinking of all that is created. This is research not only in fields of philosophy and theology but in areas such as human genetics, and genetic engineering. It should be understood, however, that the pursuit of knowledge, and the advancement of scientific thinking are not ends in themselves but means to an end. They are the means to reconciling our thinking with a creation which the human condition wishes to understand.

It is the function of the Catholic University to expose all thinking to the cleansing light of truth. To know what that truth is, and how we come to discern it is a vital part of our tradition of scholarship.

Regrettably in too many countries the pursuit of truth has been subjugated by a concern for a volume of publications in research.

It cannot be the case that truth is to be sacrificed for the pursuit of « volume output ». This is not an issue in society, but rather a society which has become excessively concerned with an accountability at the expense of other more powerful qualities of scholarship and learning.

In their internal organisation the Catholic universities are faced with the same kinds of problems as other institutions. Characteristically they attempt to resolve these problems by recognising the influence of the Spirit in the community ; developing problem solving strategies with faith, hope and a concern for the individuals ; and by expressing extending the values of the university. If they are to serve as Catholic universities they must work through the discomfort of alienation created by holding firm to the values of the Gospel.

the multi-cultural context

Catholic Universities are in the world and of it. They are not institutions immune from the constant indifference of a society which is overwhelmed by individualisation and secularisation. Of course there are positive features of this society, and certain features which operate against the values of the Christian message.

The aspects of society which indicate a disregard for Gospel values are those which reduce the dignity and respect of oneself, of others, of the environment, and of our heritage and learning in our society. The facets of these conditions vary considerably and range in scale from the widespread political policies which affect individuals, to the local personal behaviour which is a feature of all of our lives. Yet there is much to be grateful for in our communities.

There can be no time when young people were conscious of the plight of their friends and colleagues. The general poverty of society in all its forms is the focus for much action in our Universities. In Britain the increasing debt of the student population, and the consequent increase in tension and stress, reflected in reduced completion rates on university courses, is a current source of social action by the student body itself. The power of this form of social action should not be underestimated as an influence on students, and not uniquely in Catholic Universities.

FORCES ON THE CATHOLIC UNIVERSITIES

In a multi-cultural society there are a growing number of forces on the Catholic University. In a culture where accountability is so obviously a feature of all that is done in education and the social services generally, there is a need to be accountable in all areas of work. Yet it is vital not to allow this to become a mechanistic, unthinking and routine part of professional behaviour.

In a multi-cultural society it can be difficult to maintain Faith, Hope and Love as the ends to be achieved through education. These are the qualities which are the lifeblood of all that is to be sought in education by teachers and students alike.

If these are to remain as the central purposes of the Catholic University attention needs to be given to the ways in which the institution addresses these concerns in terms of being accountable for them. There are ways in

which it is possible to reconcile the inner accountability with the emphasis from governments or quasi-government agencies on external accountability. Much attention has to be paid to this if universities are to witness their freedom and their own sense or responsibility. This is not the time or place to talk too overtly about policies in education among the Catholic Universities, but some thought might be given at some stage to the possibility of setting out indicators of performance of Catholic Universities largely concerning the ways in which they operate, rather than what is taught. Their accountability is not to be measured by some direct output measure, but by the discernment of professional people concerned with :

- * truth in a kaleidoscope of change
- * beauty in a utilitarian society
- * environmental sensitivity in a materialistic world
- * technology in the service of humanity
- * and learning in the pursuit of harmony and peace.

The Catholic Universities are part of systems of education, and not some added irrelevance to the State system of education. In some countries, such as Scotland they are state institutions, whereas in other countries they are part of an independent sector. Whatever the system, there are certain similarities of function and often of operation. They are institutions built on supporting people to live lives of honour and trust ; of justice and service ; and of love and the care of others.

The Catholic Universities might have a distinctive role to play in matters such as

- * the contemporary family
- * the inner city, and other « urban » contexts
- * those who feel marginalised in society.

In a multi-cultural society it only serves to illustrate that the Christian message is not capable of being institutionally confined. The message is in the world with all of its realities and opportunities, hopes and fears.

The Catholic University is a place distinctive in so many ways, and part of an educational service which seeks to make people more suited for life. In the multi-cultural society it has to show tolerance and dignity. It has to bring its central message to society within the University, and crucially to those who are outside of it. It is too easy to talk of « challenges » and to ignore the vital work needing to be done at all levels in the current society which needs a spiritual dimension.

It is my pleasure to thank Fr George Hobeika for the warm welcome given to us in the University of Saint Esprit, and for his kind words. I have no doubt that the preparations which have been made will keep us materially comfortable, and intellectually challenged in the few days we shall enjoy together.

On behalf of all delegates here, I would ask the President to accept this little memento of our presence in Lebanon.