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The Catholic University and the Church
On the occasion of the celebration of the 100th anniversary of IFCU
18.01.2024

Your Eminence, Dear Cardinal José Tolentino Mendonça, Eminences and Excellencies,
Ambassadors to the Holy See,
Chancellors, Rectors, Presidents and Vice-Chancellors of Catholic universities,
Dear colleagues, dear sisters and brothers

We are gathered in Rome today to celebrate an anniversary. We are gathered in Rome to honor the vision of those who came before us and dared to create a coalition of goodwill amongst distinct partner universities, diverse in their mission and reality, united in their pursuit of knowledge and commitment to the advancement of science and education. We are gathered today to celebrate the future.

1924 was a watershed moment. Barely rising from the ashes of the first World War, Europe was reeling from the political, social and economic aftermath of the conflict, as some already anticipate the smoke of future clashes. But this is also the year when Astronomer Edwin Hubble announces the discovery that ours (the Milky Way) is just one of many galaxies that composes the universe, when Thomas Mann publishes his tour de force novel, *The Magic Mountain* and André Breton announces the first *Surrealist Manifesto*. In Brazil, the poet Oswaldo de Andrade publishes the Manifesto da Poesia Pau Brasil, where he calls for a new poeticization of the world drawn from the vernacular aesthetics of Brazilian poetry, no longer a space of import of European trends but a poetic outlet of export of a distinct Brazilian and South American sentiment. These events are cases in point of a time of seismic transformation and tensional anxiety, pivoting around political instability drawn from the rise of authoritarianism (in Russia, Italy, Germany – this is the year of the Bier Hall Putsch), coupled with tremendous creative energy of the many Modernist movements around the world. An unavoidable sensation of transition was epitomized in William Butler Yeats' 'Second Coming' 'Things falls apart; the centre cannot hold/Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.' It is not anarchy that springs forth on August 11, 1924, the date of the constitutional Assembly that may be broadly defined as the inception of what is today called the International Federation of Catholic Universities.

“Born from the heart of the Church, a Catholic University is located in that course of tradition which may be traced back to the very origin of the University as an institution. It has always been recognized as an incomparable centre of creativity and dissemination of knowledge for the good of humanity. By vocation, the *Universitas magistrorum et scholarium* is dedicated to research, to teaching and to the education of students who freely associate with their teachers in a common love of knowledge(1). “ (ExCorde, 1).

The opening statement of the Apostolic Constitution *ExCorde Ecclesiae* (1990) entails a proposition that most of us know by heart. Allow me to dwell briefly on the meaning of this expression. Disparaged by recent strands of avantgarde pedagogy, learning by heart represents an affective attachment, rather than an oblivious and unreflective repetition of a formula or statement. An attachment that is not simply emotional but cognitive as well, binding the learner to the wisdom of what is learned. It is no small thing then to learn by heart. And particularly so, when what is learnt refers to a reality, the university, cultivated from the very heart of the Church, in St. John Paul II’s felicitous formulation. Born from the heart of the Church, the Catholic university is inalienably bound to the mission of the universal Church as an instrument to advance the cause of humankind through the pursuit of knowledge. The university convenes the pilgrims of knowledge, as Pope Francis so wonderfully said in the address to the students in Lisbon during World Youth Day. It shapes a journey that is freely embraced by the joyful community of students and educators, joined together in the common purpose to work for the betterment of society, laboring for social justice and promoting the capacity to aspire.

There is tremendous wisdom in an Australian aboriginal creation myth that tells how the ancestors, the *Wandjina* walked the surface of the earth and created the landscape as they went. Creation entails movement, dislocation. Universities support the movement of creation, they are platforms that prepare for the journey of transformation.

And what a tremendous journey it has been. The birth of the European university almost 1000 years ago marked a significant turning point in the history of education, paving the way for the development of institutions that would shape the intellectual landscape for centuries to come. Guided by the principles of faith, universities played a crucial role in this transformative journey. Throughout history, Catholic universities have been at the forefront of scientific, literary, and artistic advancements. If legacy institutions like the University of Paris, the University of Bologna, Oxford, Coimbra and the University of Salamanca became

renowned centers of learning, nurturing generations of scholars who made significant contributions to various fields, it is wise to remember that they were all at one stage Catholic, both in terms of values as of the breadth of disciplines cultivated. *Katholikos* – Universal. Catholic universities have played a pivotal role in preserving and advancing knowledge. Renowned thinkers such as St. Thomas Aquinas exemplified the synthesis of faith and reason, contributing to the development of a sophisticated intellectual framework that builds the cornerstone of Catholic intellectual tradition.

The establishment of the International Federation of Catholic Universities (IFCU) in 1924 is a landmark in the commitment to fostering intellectual and spiritual growth on a global scale, during a period past the long pity of war and anticipating the imminent disaster that would arise barely 15 years later. In response to the changing global landscape in the early 20th century, leaders of Catholic universities recognized the need for collaboration and solidarity. The idea of an international federation that would unite Catholic universities across borders took shape, culminating in the establishment of the FCU, initially. The founding members envisioned an organization that would promote dialogue, exchange, and cooperation among Catholic universities worldwide and create a framework for peace.

Today, we celebrate the future of Catholic universities by honoring the tremendous career of a venerable institution, celebrating 100 years of work to foster a ‘closer entente between the various catholic universities’, as mentioned in the letter sent in February 1924 to the Rectors of existing Catholic universities in 11 different countries (from Leuven to Lublin, Beirut to Angers, Paris to Tokyo and Washington to Rome) by two of the founders, the visionary Fr. Agostino Gemelli, Rector of the Università Sacro Cuore in Milan and the first Rector of the recently created Univ. Nijmegen (now Radboud University), the philologist Msgr Josef Schrijnen. The constitutional assembly finally took place at the KU Leuven on August 11, 1924, hosted by the Rector, Msgr Paulin Ladeuze, who would become the first FCU President. With the blessing of His Holiness, Pope Pius IX, who found it ‘most fitting’ that Catholic universities should meet to find ‘appropriate means for conducting all their activities through generous cooperation’ (Card. Gasparri, Letter 6-8-1924), the first meeting was a success, gathering representatives from 15 universities across 3 continents: Antwerp, Leuven, Lille, Milan, Nijmegen, Lublin, Santiago de Chile, Paris, Lyon, Toulouse, Fribourg, Washington, Tokyo and Beirut. Global, collegial, and a recognized platform of educational diplomacy, the

Federation has built a reputation as a key voice in the advocacy of Catholic higher education and recognized in the Apostolic Constitution *ExCorde Ecclesidae* for its specific role (EC, 35).

The legacy of IFCU is multifaceted, encompassing its commitment to academic excellence, social justice, and intercultural dialogue. By fostering connections among member institutions, IFCU has played a crucial role in facilitating collaborative research, and joint initiatives. This has been particularly relevant since the inception of this 'prophetic institution', in the words of historian Michèle Jarton, because the idea to set up the Federation grew from the awareness by the visionary Fr. Gemelli of one the most important challenges Catholic institutions were faced with, the affirmation as centres of excellent scientific research. The Federation developed out of the urgent need to support the development of the Catholic research university. Along its 100 year journey, IFCU has served as a platform for sharing best practices, nurturing a sense of global solidarity, fostering the creation and development of regional associations (in Europe, North and South America, Africa, and Asia) and working with them in the joint commitment to the pursuit of truth and wisdom.

In addition, as a platform for the development of Catholic institutions, IFCU is dedicated to promote social justice, reflected in its efforts to address global challenges and promote inclusivity among its widely varied more than 240 members. Through initiatives focused on sustainable development, human rights, and social responsibility, the federation has demonstrated a commitment to an articulation of the principles of solidarity with the attainment of the ultimate telos of science: the improvement of Man's estate, as formulated by Francis Bacon .

Furthermore, IFCU has been instrumental in fostering intercultural dialogue, recognizing the importance of understanding and appreciating different voices. That is why our Strategic Development Plan evolving since 2018 is called 'A Global Voice for a Common Future'. By bringing together scholars from different backgrounds, women and men, the federation has contributed to the creation of a more interconnected and harmonious global academic community, supporting the mainstreaming of gender equality and celebrating the often under represented contribution and leadership of tremendous women scholars for the development of our institutions.

And yet, we do not live in the best of worlds. The splendour of our times, marked by extraordinary breakthroughs in science cannot obscure the misery of poor access to quality

education, inequality and a systemic environmental failure, for which universities too are not without responsibility. The times are hazardous, yes, and for catholic universities they are particularly challenging. Allow me to single out four main issues. The first is **cultural**, a crisis of religious values, particularly in the global North and in Western societies that seeps from narratives about the Church's outdated irrelevance vis-à-vis the great problems faced by Humankind (from environmental failure to technology on the loose, to social and cultural values). Catholic universities emanating from the heart of the Church are bound through thick and thin to a specific intellectual tradition, one that centers on the revelation of the truth emerging from the deep reality of Christ, that as such has inspired the commitment to freedom, critical spirit, the defense of human dignity, social justice. Precisely the values that cultural context often fails to recognize in our specific value proposition.

The second stress element is **financial**, the drop in recruitment, decrease in public funding in some geographies, failure to inspire donors. A perceived lack of prestige of humanities programs constituting the core around which the Catholic university has evolved is relevant in some geographies, but the opposite is true in other spaces: a perception that these same programs speak to economic elites, a sort of a new leisure class that does not require the vocational impetus leading to successful employment. In addition, digital transformation demands sizeable financial investments in platforms and software, hardware and specific data, sound and image infrastructure. Clearly, the technological cloud is not a staircase to heaven but a door to financial hell. As one past President of the university of Chicago once wrote: 'of the needs of a university there is no end'.

At the heart of the mission of the Catholic university is the **search for truth that is also a statement of trust**. And this is the third crisis element, **the crisis of truth and trust**, with generative AI prompting manipulation, deep fakes, and in addition a growing critique of evidence-based science in the wake of the COVID 19 pandemic. Catholic universities are not immune to student and faculty pressure, donors demands and ill public perceptions, that tie in to another global trend: the lack of faith in university leaders and in the university more generally, owing to poor judgement, or an inability to assert bravely and consistently a vision with moral clarity at a time when public discourse has forsaken nuance and complex situations are numbed by fear of consequences. The university is at the heart of a debate on the soul of our societies.

Finally, allow me to point out **high value employment disruption**. The recent data disseminated by the IMF Chief Executive suggests that in developed economies roughly 60% of high value generated employment will be disrupted by 2030 and that 40% of university curriculum will be obsolete by 2025. We must prepare for these challenges and be ready to celebrate what we do well, but also to have the courage to anticipate change and act accordingly.

But to every cloud there is a silver lining. Even though the four forces of disruption are dire, they do not forecast the end. While Catholic universities are affected by adverse cultural wars, and the consequential crisis of truth because our *campi* do not operate outside the murky realm of history, they are also safe spaces of collegial interaction and dialogue, places where the cultivation of science and the fight for access to quality education for all is set to promote a renewed capacity to aspire. Our value proposition, in a valueless time, is structured around the inalienable defense of dignity, human and that of the planet. We are places of discomfort, because the aspirational goal derives from dissatisfaction, as Pope Francis told the students gathered at the Catholic University of Portugal for WYD. Dissatisfaction at inequality, inequity, defacement and abuse. We seek social justice, but this is a slow work that requires good storytelling. To change who tells the story and how it is told, is to change the world. What is so different in the moment we live now is that the quality and the impact of multiple stories are changing. Boosted by new media platforms, new narratives are shared and most importantly listened to. What is different in our moment, I argue, is not that people are speaking and challenging us, but that we shall be better, if they are listened to.

Financial stress, employment and curriculum disruption require renewed creativity, an ability to do things differently, be it in managing, distributing, attracting. Rethinking how things are done perhaps inspired by the formula of Herman Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener" and his assertion 'I prefer not to'. That is, to opt strategically to do things otherwise, be it by bringing in alternative practices, wisdoms, epistemologies. Rather than simply reproducing accepted knowledge, it is necessary to recuperate the task of understanding education not simply as instruction but also as a practice of interference in the dominant organization of knowledge.

Through its commitment to academic excellence, social justice, and intercultural dialogue, IFCU has made a lasting impact on higher education globally. As we reflect on the journey, we recognize a continuum of intellectual and spiritual growth that continues to shape the world of higher education in profound ways. The federation stands as a testament

to the enduring relevance of Catholic educational principles and the transformative power of collaborative engagement on a global scale. Cardinal Mendonça has written of the recurring importance of the future in Pope Francis' encyclicas, of His future oriented Theology. There is a Portuguese expression – almost impossible to translate – that the Pope conveyed in His address in Lisbon. He inspired them to have 'saudades do futuro' (longing for the future): "We are called to something higher, and we will never be able to soar unless we first take flight. We should not be alarmed, then, if we sense an inner thirst, a restless, unfulfilled longing for meaning and a future, *com saudades do futuro!* [Looking to the future]. And here, in addition to the *saudades do futuro*, do not forget to keep alive the memory of the future. We should not be lethargic, but alive!" (ALisbonWYD).

Along these two days, we celebrate a Federation rich with *saudades do futuro*. We begin a celebration that shall end in Guadalajara at the IFCU General assembly in 2025. We are here today beginning a journey that will take IFCU to Nigeria, Washington, Sydney, Sevilla, honoring the past to move ever more persistently to build a better and brighter future for Catholic higher education around the globe.

Thank you for your presence and let us continue to walk together.