



The Holy See

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II TO THE CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY OF THE SACRED HEART

Friday, 8 December 1978

Mr Rector,

1. The noble expressions with which you have wished to confirm, in this first meeting with the new Successor of Peter, the faithful adherence to Christ in the person of his Vicar and the generous commitment of service for truth in charity, which animate the members of the large family of the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart, have aroused sentiments of deep emotion and sincere appreciation in my heart. To you, therefore, to the eminent representatives of the Academic Body, to the dear Students, to the Members of the administrative and auxiliary Personnel and to all those gathered here, there goes the attestation of my fatherly gratitude and my special benevolence.

I am happy to extend to you my cordial welcome, beloved sons, and to greet in you the qualified exponents of an Institution which, for many years now, has carried out in Italy a role of primary importance for the Christian animation of the world of culture. With this meeting, which you requested and I granted joyfully, you wished to conclude in a significant way the celebrations for the centenary of the birth of Father Agostino Gemelli, the illustrious Franciscan who, with far-sighted wisdom, apostolic charity and indomitable courage, created that splendid complex of persons and works, life and thought, study and action, which your University is.

In the course of this year you have paused to reflect, with renewed intensity of affection, on the figure, thought and work of the outstanding Religious, to whom the community of Italian Catholics and the world of culture and of scientific research itself owe so much. You have taken his writings in your hands again and you have meditated again on their teachings. It seemed clear to you, in fact, that you could not offer him a better tribute of gratitude than by making room for his voice, whose echo many of you still keep in their hearts, in order that "the Father" might speak again—to those who are at present continuing his work—of ideal aims and concrete plans of action, of

inviting prospects and insidious dangers, of fears that still loom up and hopes that never fail.

2. At this moment too our thought goes to him, to gather some significant aspect of his message and draw from it comfort and a stimulus in the great difficulties of the present time. Well, there is a "constant"—at least it seems so to me—which directs and sustains Father Gemelli's action throughout his whole existence: it is *interest in man*: individual man, endowed with certain physical and psychical capacities, conditioned by certain environmental factors, weakened by certain illnesses, straining towards the conquest of certain ideals.

Was it not this interest that drove the young student to the Faculty of Medicine, towards that science which makes service of human life its own programme and banner? And was it not again the same interest that prompted him—now a friar—to specialize in experimental psychology, directing him towards the science on which his attention and his effort as a brilliant and indefatigable researcher were focused for the rest of his life?

Interest in man induced him to turn with particular passion to the most painful and difficult situations: those of the worker, to study "the human factor in work" and to arrive, after experiments carried out directly in the sulphur mines of Sicily or in the workshops of the North, at the conclusion, which was then a pioneering one, that it is not man who must be adapted to machines, but the latter that must be constructed to fit man; the situations of soldiers exposed to the shattering experiences of the violence of war, or those of aviators, contending with rudimentary and extremely dangerous aircraft, in order to prepare specific remedies for the increasingly numerous psychological traumas among soldiers in the front lines; finally, the situations of prisoners sentenced to penal servitude, to a group of whom he offered hospitality in the premises of the psychology laboratory of the Catholic University, to study their reactions from close at hand and deduce from them the norms for an effective intervention to rehabilitate them.

3. The biographical references just made show what kind of interest Father Gemelli took in man: not the interest of the scientist uprooted from reality, who considers man as a mere subject of analysis, but the heartfelt passion of one who feels deeply involved in the problems of which his fellowmen are victims. Interest in man meant for Father Gemelli the desire to serve man. How? Experience taught the courageous friar that the most necessary and urgent service to offer one's neighbour was to help him "à bien penser" (to think well), to use the words of Pascal (*Pensées*, n. 347), because "la pensée fait la grandeur de l'homme" (thought makes man's greatness) (*ibid.* n. 346). In right thought lies the premise for right action; and in right action lies the hope of a lasting solution for the serious evils that torment mankind.

"Ideas are what the world needs above all": this was his conviction (cf. A. Gemelli, "L'Università per la pace sociale", in *Vita e Pensiero*, January 1950). And as ideas are worked out and communicated in teaching, he conceived the bold project of an Institute that would gather together good students, sustained by the ideal of serious and disinterested scientific research, and willing

young people, animated by the desire to proceed with their teachers in search of truth, in order to adhere to it passionately and then generously to transmit to others its riches, which had now become the substance of their own lives (cf. A. Gemelli, *Il progresso degli studi scientifici fra i cattolici italiani*", in *Studium*, June 1907). 0.

But is human reason able to reach, by itself, the satisfying shores of truth? The painful turmoil of his youth, solved only with the tranquillizing experience of conversion, had caused Father Gemelli to feel tangibly the necessity of faith for a fully satisfying answer to the fundamental problems of human existence. He will not be afraid, therefore, to declare: "The solution of these problems must not be sought from sciences, pure or applied, it must not be sought from philosophy, but from religion". And he will establish with programmatic clarity: "We must go back to God, not to just any God, presented to us by a natural religion, but to a living God, to Jesus Christ, the supreme reason for our life, the supreme beauty to contemplate, the supreme goodness to imitate, the supreme reward to reach" (A. Gemelli, "La funzione religiosa della cultura", in *Vita e Pensiero*, April 1919).

4. The Catholic University came into being to meet these requirements. This was the intention of its Founder, who wished to constitute in it a "real and effective centre of Catholic culture", as he declared when the great project was now about to be realized (cf. A. Gemelli, "Perche i cattolici italiani debbono avere una loro Universita", in *Vita e Pensiero*, July 1919), and as he confirmed immediately after its official launching, when he stressed that: "The Catholic University was conceived with the bold dream of making Catholicism known, loved and followed in Italy" (*Bollettino degli Amici*, n. 1, January 1922).

It was not a question, obviously, of questioning in any way the method and freedom to which the individual scientific disciplines are entitled: Father Gemelli described their nature and advocated their safeguarding on various occasions. It was a question rather of carrying out, at the University level, that "union of faith and science", to which the then Apostolic Nuncio, Mons. Achille Ratti, referred in a letter from Poland (cf. Letter to Father Gemelli of 28 March 1921) and which the official Magisterium, in particular that of the Second Vatican Council, has recognized so many times as possible, desirable and fruitful (cf. *Gravissimum Educationis*, 8 and 10 and the preceding magisterial documents quoted in it).

In faith that is understood and lived, in fact, cultural progress finds, not an obstacle, but an incomparable aid to solve and overcome the antinomies to which it is dramatically exposed today: just think, for example, of the necessity of promoting the dynamism and expansion of culture without jeopardizing the ancestral wisdom of peoples; think also of the urgency of safeguarding the necessary synthesis, in spite of the division of the single disciplines; think, finally, of the problem of recognizing, on the one hand, the legitimate autonomy of culture, while avoiding, on the other hand, the risk of a humanism that is closed, limited to a purely earthly horizon and exposed, consequently, to decidedly inhuman developments (cf. H. De Lubac, *Le drame de l'humanisme athée*, Paris 1945).

Father Gemelli sees in the Catholic University the privileged place in which it would be possible to throw a bridge between the past and the future, between the ancient classical culture and the new scientific culture, between the values of modern culture and the eternal message of the Gospel. From this fruitful synthesis there would be derived—he rightly trusted—a most effective impulse towards the implementation of a full humanism, dynamically open to the boundless horizons of divinization, to which historical man is called. This would lead to reaching in the best way that purpose to which—as I said just before—Father Gemelli's life was completely directed, the purpose of serving man. "I am of the opinion"—he stated in the inaugural lecture for the academic year 1957-58, that is, at the end of his hard-working existence—"I am of the opinion that the contemporary University, while it has the duty of collaborating for the progress of sciences and of following the methodology required by each of them, must never, however, give second place to what demands recognition of its primacy, that is, man, the human person, the world of spirituality" (A. Gemelli, "Le conquiste della scienza e i diritti dello spirito", in *Vita e Pensiero*, January 1958).

5. These were the convictions that guided and sustained Father Gemelli's action in starting and carrying out, in the midst of difficulties of every kind, the titanic project of a private Catholic University in Italy. These are the convictions that must continue to direct, also today, the effort of those who have freely chosen to enter, as leaders, teachers or pupils, the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart.

I am certain that I am expressing the deep feeling of Father Gemelli when I say to you today: be proud of the title "Catholic" which describes your University. It does not mortify your commitment for the advancement of every true human value. If it is true that "l'homme passe infiniment l'homme" (man transcends man infinitely), as Pascal divined (cf *Pensées*, n. 434), then it must be said that the human person does not find full self-fulfilment except in reference to Him who is the fundamental reason of all our judgments on being, good, truth and beauty. And since the infinite transcendence of this God, who has been indicated as the "completely Other", has approached us in Christ Jesus, who became flesh in order to take part completely in our history, then it must be concluded that Christian faith qualifies us believers to interpret, better than anyone else, the deepest aspirations of the human being and to indicate, with serene and tranquil certainty, the ways and the means to satisfy them fully.

This is, therefore, the testimony which the Christian community and even the world of culture expect from you, teachers and pupils of the University, set up by Father Gemelli's intrepid faith: to prove with facts that intelligence is not only not impaired, but on the contrary stimulated and strengthened by that incomparable source of understanding human reality, which is the Word of God; to show with facts that it is possible to build around this Word a community of men and women (the "universitas personarum" of the origins) who canyon their research in the different areas without losing contact with the essential frame of reference of a Christian view of life; a community of men and women who seek particular answers to particular problems, but who are sustained by the joyful awareness of possessing together the ultimate answer to ultimate

problems; a community of men and women, above all, who endeavour to incarnate, in their existence and in the social environment to which they belong, the proclamation of salvation which they received from him who is "the true light that enlightens every man" (Jn 1:0); a community of men and women who feel committed—while respecting the legitimate autonomy of earthly realities, created by God, depending on him and subordinated to him—"to see that the divine life is inscribed in the life of the earthly city" (*Gaudium et Spes*, 43).

The title "Catholic" also prides itself on containing the commitment of a distinct faithfulness of the University to the Church, to the Pope and the Bishops, to whom it has always been and is extremely dear and to the whole Italian ecclesial community, by which it is sustained with sacrifices and considered with affection, but also with demanding hope. This faithfulness—so insistently instilled and so consistently lived by Father Gemelli—is the guarantee of that unity and brotherly charity, which are the distinguishing mark of your institution, as of any other one destined for service of the People of God.

This is your task, beloved sons, this is the order the Pope entrusts to you; and this is also his wish. A wish which I address in a very special way to the young, in whose hands are laid not only the future destiny of the glorious Catholic University, but above all the hopes of Christian animation of the future society. Let there ring out again for them, on the Pope's lips, a warning that the Rector addressed to them at a difficult hour of Italian and world history: "It is not the hour for empty chatter and arrogant attitudes", he said. "It is the hour for great tasks. It falls upon you, the young, especially to construct the future, to construct the new era of history. Wherever you may be, show that you are aware of this mission of yours. Be flames that burn, illuminate, guide and comfort. Nobility of sentiment, purity of life, hatred for vulgarity and for everything that degrades, are a duty more than ever today" (*Foglio agli studenti*, October 1940).

And now, in taking leave of you, beloved sons, my thought rises in imploration to her whom we are venerating today in the privilege of her Immaculate Conception. Father Gemelli loved the Blessed Virgin with filial devotion and defended her against disparagers with passionate ardour, to an extent that won him among his friends the name of "Knight of the Virgin". May Mary keep a glance of motherly predilection for the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart, for which this generous son of hers worked, suffered and prayed so much. May she, whom the Church invokes as "Sedes Sapientiae", enlighten and strengthen lavishly those who are now continuing a work to which the Holy See and the whole Italian Church look with unchanged affection, constant trust and ever living hope.

With these wishes I am happy to grant to you, to your families and to all friends of the Catholic University, my fatherly Apostolic Blessing,

I know that also members of the Association of Parents of the Catholic Schools are present at this meeting. In these days it is holding in Rome the first congress of its Regional Delegates.

I extend my greeting and my blessing to them, too, hoping that the Lord will assist them in their generous effort in favour of an adequate cultural, moral and religious formation of youth.

© Copyright 1978 - Libreria Editrice Vaticana

Copyright © Dicastero per la Comunicazione - Libreria Editrice Vaticana