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# Spirituality and Higher Education: Perspectives from Service-Learning

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Guidelines for an “institutional spirituality”  
in Catholic higher education: towards a  
“New Humanism”

3.2

*Texts extracted from Volume 3 of the Uniservitate Collection:*  
***Spirituality and Higher Education: Perspectives from Service-Learning***

Uniservitate Collection

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Design of the collection and of this volume: Adrián Goldfrid

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*Spirituality and Higher Education: Perspectives from Service-Learning / María Nieves Tapia ... [et al.] ; adaptado por Karina Marconi ; M. Alejandra Linares ; coordinación general de María Nieves Tapia ; M. Beatriz Isola ; Laura Gherlone. - 1a ed adaptada. - Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires : CLAYSS, 2022. Libro digital, PDF - (Uniservitate)*

Archivo Digital: [descarga](#)

Traducción de: Karina Marconi ; M. Alejandra Linares.

ISBN 978-987-4487-30-8

1. Trabajo Solidario. 2. Pedagogía. 3. Espiritualidad. I. Tapia, María Nieves II. Marconi, Karina, adapt. III. Linares, M. Alejandra, adapt. IV. Tapia, María Nieves, coord. V. Isola, M. Beatriz, coord. VI. Gherlone, Laura, coord. VII. Marconi, Karina, trad. VIII. Linares, M. Alejandra, trad.

CDD 370

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## **FIRST PART**

### **Institutional Spirituality and Service-Learning from the Mission of Catholic Higher Education**



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## 2. GUIDELINES FOR AN "INSTITUTIONAL SPIRITUALITY" IN CATHOLIC HIGHER EDUCATION: TOWARDS A "NEW HUMANISM"

Mauro Mantovani

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### Abstract

In Catholic Higher Education, a cursory glance between the binomial spirituality - the proper place for creativity, expression of the vitality and charismatic novelty with which the Spirit guides the Church along the paths of history - and institutional reality, structured instead to stabilise what already exists, would seem antithetical. On closer examination, on the contrary, they are profoundly interconnected in a virtuous relational dynamic.

The various Catholic and ecclesiastical institutions, renewing their respective legislation and university regulations, are developing, in the light of the new cultural and social challenges and on-site service. The "fundamental criteria" set out by Pope Francis in the foreword of the Apostolic Constitution *Veritatis Gaudium* are very significant for the "bold cultural revolution" sponsored by the encyclical letter *Laudato si'* (n. 114), for which "a new way of thinking" is necessary and "We lack leadership capable of striking out on new paths".

For this, it is necessary to move from the binomial spirituality-institution to an "institutional spirituality" understood as a synthesis of shared identity of being and acting: this builds and shapes the profiles of teachers, students and staff, expresses the values and specific characteristics of the educational and cultural offer, encourages the decision-making dynamics and internal and external communication, inspires the projectualities. In this light, the following actions make sense: the promotion of the "new humanism", integral ecology and care for the common home, the valorisation of relationality, communion and sharing, the "global compact on education", generativity, transdisciplinary and intergenerational dialogue, the protagonism of young people, the vocation to self-giving and competent service, openness to a more inclusive "we" and to "universal fraternity". In this context, service-learning, recovering the category of "intellectual" charity alongside "Samaritan" and "political" charity, represents a true and real "date with history" that we cannot afford to miss.

## Introduction

Within the reflection on service-learning in Catholic Higher Education, and particularly on the relationship between spirituality and service-learning, this contribution proposes some lines of thought on the issue of "institutional spirituality" within Catholic and ecclesiastical centres of higher education.

On superficial analysis, it would seem almost antithetical to the binomial between spirituality - the proper place for creativity, expression of the vitality and charismatic novelty with which the Spirit guides the Church along the paths of history "as a sign and instrument both of a very closely-knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race" (Second Vatican Council, 1965, LG, 1) - and institutional reality, structured instead to stabilise what already exists, on the contrary, they are profoundly interconnected in a virtuous relational dynamic.

As is well known, the Catholic Higher Education system is configured according to the apostolic constitution of Pope Saint John Paul II *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* (cf. John Paul II, 1990, ECE) on Catholic universities and to the apostolic constitution *Veritatis Gaudium* of Pope Francis (cf. Francis, 2017, VG) on Ecclesiastical universities. In the light of these documents, the various institutions adapted their statutes and renewed their respective university legislation and regulations, deepening their understanding of the new cultural and social challenges we are facing: their identity, vision, mission and therefore their educational and cultural service - both in an international and local sense - to the Church and the whole human family.

*"Institutional spirituality" represents a further step beyond the simple binomial "spirituality-institution" because it presents the identity dimension which, in a shared way, unites the esse and the agere of each reality involved in higher education and training.*

"Institutional spirituality" in this sense represents a further step beyond the simple binomial "spirituality-institution" because it presents the identity dimension which, in a shared way, unites the esse and the agere of each reality involved in higher education

and training. Profiles of teachers, students and staff derive from it, the values and specific characteristics of the cultural offer are expressed, the styles and dynamics of decision-making are born, the features of internal and external institutional communication are outlined, and the projectualities of the various areas and sectors find inspiration.

In this regard, we offer some lines of reflection and operational suggestions by first asking ourselves the following questions: 1) about the meaning and value of an "institutional and charismatic spirituality"; and then 2) about how it can constitute a fundamental "strategic" dimension given the future of our institutions and their educational and cultural service.

## Why an "institutional spirituality"?

### Identity and Charisma

Catholic and ecclesiastical universities are identified by a specific identity intrinsically linked to a believing experience, which carries with it the need to live and bear witness to the faith both in being and in acting, thus incarnating it in all its dimensions, both individual and collective. Today, however, some Catholic and ecclesiastical Institutions of Higher Education seem to suffer from an identity crisis due to internal divergence and "de-linkage" between the institutional and academic aspects and the educational and pastoral aims and values, with the real risk of discrepancy and incoherence between their statutes and the actual procedures and practices that are carried out. The particular risk is that there is a lack of "a soul" to give shape to the institutional "body", which would rekindle the whole university life. This is why reflecting on "institutional spirituality" may be very appropriate to deepen this necessary "incarnation", i.e. to translate into cultural terms the potentialities and particularities of a "proper" charismatic identity.

First of all, what is meant by "spirituality" and "charisma"? It is an experience of faith that can be lived and passed on, which therefore becomes an educational and formative proposal offered to the whole Church and the human family, with a role - also civil, cultural, social, economic and projectual - that must be taken very seriously. This is how, for example, the economist L. Bruni describes a charism:

*I understand a gift of "new eyes" capable of seeing things that others do not see, eyes that see more and differently than others. He or she who receives a charism can see values where others see only devalues, beauty in ugliness, gifts in problems. The action of charisms is vast and powerful, it covers and permeates the world, it is like the blood that runs through the veins of history. Religions have always been privileged places where charisms flourish because they find particularly fertile ground there; but the action of charisms goes far beyond the visible confines of religions, it is the most secular thing imaginable. [...] The history of humanity, including economic and social history, is also the fruit of these charisms (Own translation) (Bruni, 2007, p. 22).*

The magisterium of the popes from the Second Vatican Council onwards has made clear the importance and value of spiritualities and charisms for the evangelising mission of the Church, also in terms of cultural promotion. Today we know well that without the charism of Benedict of Nursia and other founders of monasteries, and the charism of Francis of Assisi, the European economy would not have been the same; spiritualities played a fundamental role in economic, political and cultural life, exercising an active presence and a determining influence on the development of society.

Benedict of Nursia, for example, gave us the intuition that according to the monk work and prayer have the same dignity and thus began that "fundamental revolution" which has gradually attributed to manual work an enormous value in medieval humanism and not only. If before work was an activity ensured by slaves when monks began to be seen working in the fields, then... cities understood that work is something important, it is for the freeman and in turn, liberates and promotes his dignity. Benedictine monasticism, in its many historical forms, contributed significantly to the shaping of Western culture, expressing itself in architecture, painting, poetry, music and literature. The same can be said of the Mendicant Movements, of the Clerics Regular, of the Orders and Congregations that were and still are involved in education and formation.

Franciscanism contributed to giving us a vision in which fraternity is considered a cornerstone of social and relational life. It is a founding principle of modernity and, as is well known, it is one of the three fundamental nuclei of the French Revolution, together with liberty and equality. It is understood that it is not enough to affirm individual rights to liberty and equality, because a "right of bonding" is necessary: fraternity, as Pope Francis reminds us not by chance in *Fratelli tutti* and as dramatically experienced in times of crisis, such as during the social and health emergency of the pandemic, exercises precisely this function.

In this regard, it is also interesting to note the cultural, social and political influence of the charisms, starting from those of the main religious orders and the many works that emerged from them: these show unequivocally the absence of the apparent dichotomy between spirituality and commitment to mankind. F. Ciardi points out in the field of culture:

*The instances of eugenic-sociological-sociobiological thought [...], social utopia [...], human rights [...]. Also, social commitment and commitment in the field of peace, creation, life and health, and mission, are to a large extent taken on religious paths. [...] Among the religious, we find historians, writers, geographers, anthropologists, mathematicians, astronomers, scientists... Their cultural impact is linked above all to the charism and spirituality of which they were bearers, which led them, according to the diversity of grace, to work in favour of man taken in his integrity and concreteness, in an attitude of authentic*

*service, which led them to concern themselves with every authentically human expression. The 'interior' life was expressed in 'external' works suited to it (Own translation) (Ciar-di, 2007, p. 16).*

Western history has been marked over the centuries by spiritual forces capable of creating original and innovative ideas and institutions, the origin of profound changes. From the Cistercian order to the post-Tridentines, from the Franciscans to the Dominicans to the Jesuits and the Salesians, to the great saints - think for example of Clare of Assisi, Catherine of Siena, John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila, John Baptist de La Salle, Charles de Foucauld, Thérèse of Lisieux, Teresa of Calcutta - our history is full of charismatic figures and religious movements that have influenced the *ethos*, society and culture in Europe and worldwide (cf. Motta, 2015). And in this perspective, the more recent phenomenon of ecclesial Movements and the consolidation of the "spirituality of communion" is particularly interesting, a challenge that old and new charisms are called to take up to be a prophetic response for the whole of humanity today.

*The various spiritualities often played a "pioneering" and innovative role in the various border areas, such as hospitals and healthcare, schools and education, "care for the sick", making these areas into places of increasingly specific public and "institutional" policies.*

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And "today" - Bruni continues to point out -

*we can find, if we know and want to see them, many charismatic people who found social cooperatives, NGOs, schools, hospitals, banks, trade unions, who fight for the rights denied to others, to children, to animals, to the environment, because they see 'more and differently' than everyone else. In this day and age, even if it is true that on some fronts radical leanings towards individualism and ideal and spiritual impoverishment are observed, at the same time we are indeed witnessing an abundant proliferation of charismas, which operate in the thousand battles for civilisation and freedom: Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King, Dorothy Day, but also Mohammad Yunus, or [about Italy] Andrea Riccardi, Father Benzi, Ernesto Olivero, Luigi Giussani, Chiara Lubich. Different people, but all capable of not running away from the problems of the world, but of remaining attracted to it, loving it and thus transforming pain into love, the cross into resurrection (Own translation) (Bruni, 2007, p. 24).*

This awareness is particularly valuable concerning the charismas of yesterday and today that are directly involved in the educational and formative action. Therefore, rather than focusing on the difficulties that are faced, it is worth concentrating on the fact that a promising era is opening up before us for the enhancement of the various charismatic identities and the spiritualities they carry, within an increasingly inclusive ecclesial and social "we".

## Spirituality and Culture

Within the specificity of each institution and its concrete context of insertion, a Catholic institutional spirituality has behind it the long and deeply rooted "history" we have just mentioned. Precisely because it is "Catholic", it must be open and inclusive; if in fact, it starts from a particular experience, it is - as such - oriented to spread in "concentric circles" as an offer accessible to all those who are willing to accept and experience it. The bearer of a charismatic spirituality is not essentially an altruist or a philanthropist but is first and foremost a *community* builder and a *passionate person*, driven by desire, because he is endowed with the eyes to see something that fascinates him, and thanks to this he succeeds in dragging and attracting others behind him.

So we must recognise the never-ending dynamics between "charisma" and "institution". The charismatic innovates, sees unsatisfied needs, recognises people falling into poverty, opens new paths for fraternity, pushes beyond "the limits of human frailty" and civilisation. Then comes the institution that imitates the innovator, embraces innovation, "normalising" and institutionalising such innovation. It is the task of *leadership* to reinforce specificities, not in opposition to others, but by presenting them as a characteristic offering within a larger "system".

*The incarnation of institutional spirituality in every Catholic and ecclesiastical university today can offer an important contribution as a gift to all humanity and as an expression of the "Church that goes forth". In this way, spirituality and institution become the two faces of the same formative and cultural identity aimed at promoting the "new Humanism".*

Therefore, the incarnation of institutional spirituality in every Catholic and ecclesiastical university today can offer an important contribution as a gift to all humanity and as an expression of the "Church that goes forth". In this way, spirituality and institution become the two faces of the same formative and cultural

identity aimed at promoting the "new Humanism", already predicted by Pope Saint Paul VI at the end of the Second Vatican Council and to which his successors have frequently drawn attention, even Pope Francis does. A "new Humanism" that is integral, planetary, in solidarity... as an expression and an integral part of the "culture of dialogue" and the "culture of encounter".

Those who have experience in university life, undoubtedly agree on the urgent need for growth, in the various Institutions, of a shared "academic wisdom" that not only includes and preserves, but also consolidates and develops an explicit spiritual dimension, so that a serious and critical search for and living witness to the truth is carried out, through collaboration, dialogue, openness to communion. The fraternity of life, study, research, work and organisation is a precious stimulus for the cultivation, communication and application of knowledge.

In fact, in past centuries there is no shortage of testimonies of educational experiences, to name but a few - think for example of Plato's Academy, the community around Origen, the school of Nisibis between the end of the 5th and the beginning of the 7th century, the *Scholae* and medieval Universities, the Renaissance Academies - where it is clear that truth is sought together and not alone. Friendship is cultivated and a fundamental value is given to the quality of relational and community life, aware that instruction does not consist only in transmitting theories, but in communicating and sharing an experience, a life, through a process of learning and mutual exchange of reciprocal gift and acceptance that does not refer only to the faculty of intelligence, but existentially involves the whole person.

In this context, it is interesting to note what Pope Francis writes in *Veritatis Gaudium* when he affirms that:

*So too, in the nineteenth century, Blessed Antonio Rosmini called for a decisive reform in the area of Christian education [...] Only in this way is it possible to overcome the "fatal separation of theory and practice", for in the unity of science and holiness "we find the true spirit of that doctrine which is destined to save the world". For the teaching of that doctrine, in ancient times, "did not end with the brief daily lesson; it was continued in the constant intercourse of the disciple with his master" (Francis, 2017, VG, 4).*

As L. Bruni pointed out,

*In the pre-modern world, charismas saw and healed physical wounds mostly, giving life to structures of blessing, as were for centuries hospitals, schools, orphanages, etc., wounds loved by the many founders of religious orders and not only, who made the human ever more human and earthly existence bearable for many disadvantaged and excluded. In*

*In modernity and post-modernity, the wound to be healed is more and more the wound of relationship, the inability to meet in reciprocity: this 'spiritual and relational' wound shows its drama further and further. We are waiting for new charismas (what if they were already in action?), for new eyes that help us to see blessings in these wounds.*

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Undoubtedly this is a fundamental task for Catholic Higher Education, exactly as it reads in *Christus Vivit*:

*we cannot separate spiritual from cultural formation. The Church has always sought to develop ways of providing the young with the best education possible. Nor should she stop now, for young people have a right to it. "Today, above all, the right to a good education means protecting wisdom, that is, knowledge that is human and humanizing. All too often we are conditioned by trivial and fleeting models of life that drive us to pursue success at a low price, discrediting sacrifice and inculcating the idea that education is not necessary unless it immediately provides concrete results. No, education makes us raise questions, keeps us from being anaesthetized by banality, and impels us to pursue meaning in life. [...] This, then, is your great challenge: to respond to the crippling refrains of cultural consumerism with thoughtful and firm decisions, with research, knowledge and sharing" (Francis, 2019, ChV, 223).*

## **The vital assumption and witnessing of identity and charismatic values**

Institutional spirituality must be constantly promoted in academic life and the "third mission" of the university. In this perspective, the continuous training of teachers and all university staff is strategic and multidimensional, because it is called to unite professionalism - which can never be lacking and which must be increasingly qualified and verified - with identity, spiritual and value aspects. In this perspective, as P. Carlotti underlines,

*there is no one who does not see the three missions of the university: investigative or research, didactic or teaching, and socio-educational or social justice. The educational and social challenge today emerges when it comes to combining unity and diversity and above all communion and freedom, uniqueness of the person and communal and social*

*interpersonality, freedom and truth, for example, in social justice. The healthy personal and social capacity for encounter and dialogue with others who are different from us refuses to stand up to their measures and to homologate them to oneself, considering them simply as one's version (Own translation) (Carlotti, 2020, pp. 3-4).*

*It is strategically necessary to develop shared cultures that make explicit the spirituality that inspires the Institution: for this purpose, the frequent awareness of all the components of the university community can be very useful, to be aware of the specific nature of the Institution and its values*

It is therefore strategically necessary to develop shared cultures that make explicit the spirituality that inspires the Institution: for this purpose, the frequent awareness of all the components of the university community can be very useful, to be aware of the specific nature of the Institution and its values. In the

real exercise of this spirituality, everyone is a protagonist, leaders, teachers, administrators and students themselves: it is therefore essential to create a climate of collaboration and co-participation, avoiding certain directives or orientations, that have not been matured and taken on board, arrive only "from above" and therefore do not reach the various institutional levels and the "grassroots" in a capillary way. In particular, the teaching role is undergoing a profound transformation, which must be understood as a responsible, personal and integrated commitment within the educational community as a whole, with vocational and training teaching skills, to develop an increasingly adequate service to students and society (cf. Esmenjaud Zermeño, 2021). This requires careful discernment in the choice of collaborators and in the allocation of managerial and coordination roles, which must be entrusted to people who effectively share the institutional spirituality.

Care for the relational quality of the university environment at all levels is decisive because the vital assumption of the characteristic elements of an Institution *that has a soul* is experienced - starting from the students - almost more by osmosis and by a lived and concrete experience than by the mere announcement and declarations present in the regulations and official university documents. The excellence of the University, its quality and effectiveness, as well as the value and timeliness of the academic offer, depends very much on the *care of relationships*: positive relationships among teachers, between students and professors, and between the University and society. The university functions themselves (teaching, research, *outreach*, administrative management, etc.) are all involved. Teaching - in the method of implementation, in the choice of privileged and shared themes, in the relationship among teachers - must show the institutional characteristics together with

its strategic choices and values. Research must be geared towards that which is inherent to it, with a new impetus and by improving the quality, and with a real "*shared and convergent research between specialists of different disciplines*" (Francis, 2017, VG, 5). The "third mission" is the dimension that makes the Institution present in the territory, showing its ability to read the needs, to dialogue and collaborate with other realities and stakeholders, to give shape and continuity also to *collaborative projects and service-learning*. The Administration activity has a very important task in showing consistency with its professed values. It is also necessary that *leadership* attracts and involves, promotes participation and knows how to manifest in the institution, the harmony of diversities and the "conviviality of differences" according to the well-known model of the "polyhedron" and not the exclusive disharmony of the repetitive and homologous of the "sphere".

The life and development of the '*universitas personarum et scientiarum*' has, inevitably, a symphonic character. "*Every change, even the current one - Pope Francis affirmed in 2017 while visiting an Italian University - is a step that brings with it difficulties, weariness and suffering. However, it also brings new horizons of good. Great changes demand rethinking our economic, cultural and social models to recover the central value of the human person*"<sup>5</sup>. Catholic and ecclesiastical higher education is called to show the effective value of the application of this dialogical and oblation dimension, not only in interpersonal relationships but also in the interweaving of formal structure and institutional life and also in the concrete fields of knowledge. Dialogue and self-giving are precious in the academic field because dialectics, research, scientific production, efficiency and effectiveness of technical services, etc., are favoured by the climate of communion and exchange that is established among all the components of the academic community.

Moreover, an institutional spirituality is never something static and achieved once and for all, but it is a *dynamic process of continuous construction*, which can be threatened especially by the assumption of competitive and "market" logics, ranking requirements, etc., which sometimes, little by little, force one to give up making one's own, real, identity explicit and visible.

If we look particularly at the relationship between institutional culture and service-learning, we can speak of a reciprocal reinforcement, because service-learning corresponds very well to that dynamic of "knowing, knowing how to do, knowing how to be" and to the aspects of "head-heart-hands" (cf. Francis, 2019, ChV, 222) which, Pope Francis reminds us, are fundamental to respond to the challenge of the educational emergency and to relaunch "the global compact on education" in an intergenerational key (cf, among others, dal Covolo, Mantovani, Pellerey, 2020; Ciferri, 2021). To sustain service-learning and to con-

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5 Francis, 2017, Address of his Holiness Pope Francis to "Roma Tre" University, Rome, 17 February 2017.

*To sustain service-learning and to consolidate the spirituality and institutional culture, there is not only a "technique" among many others, but a true and proper relational anthropology of the "gift of self".*

solidate the spirituality and institutional culture, there is not only a "technique" among many others, but a true and proper relational anthropology of the "gift of self", which must be cultivated and spread more and more: the

human person is fulfilled not by the amount of "knowledge" that he/she manages to accumulate and handle, but by the ability to "wisely" invest his/her freedom for the good of an ever wider "we".

This is a fundamental dimension of "meaning" and also of the hierarchy of energies and resources, which should make the "difference" concerning other cultures and institutional logic. Following with what has been stated so far, there emerges the demand for attention to the poorest and most vulnerable, *"the option for those who are least, [and] those whom society discards"* (Francis, 2017, VG, 4), which should not be lacking in our institutions, starting by offering real opportunities to young people who find themselves in unfavourable situations.

The University is proposed as *"the natural place to experience the alliance between the notum of the parents and the novum of the children, between the reasons of culture and the responsibilities of politics, between the answers of technology and the questions of Humanism"* (Own translation) (Dionigi, 2021, p. 27); where a "bridge" is built between generations, in the testimony of the *studium* (understood both as competence and as passion) in which teachers transmit to students an education of "great perspective" and "broad thinking" with the ability to fascinate (*delectare*), instruct (*docere*, thanks to the fact that the commitment to learn, the *discere*, is constant) and mobilise (*moveré*) towards the true, the good, the just and the beautiful.

## Towards the future

### Some key benchmarks

We are not only living a *"time of changes but are experiencing a true epochal shift"* (Francis, 2017, VG, 3) and we find ourselves not only amid an economic-financial crisis and in a social, health and environmental crisis, but above all in an anthropological and ethical crisis. For this reason, there is a strong need for a *"culture necessary to confront this crisis"*

(Francis, 2017, VG, 3), and so the indispensable and fundamental contribution of the university institution emerges towards a radical change.

More than fifty years ago, Pope Saint Paul VI had pointed out in *Populorum Progressio* that "men very often find themselves in a sad state because they do not give enough thought and consideration to these things" (Paul VI, 1967, PP, 85), Pope Benedict XVI invited to "broadening the scope of reason and making it capable of knowing and directing these powerful new forces" (Benedict XVI, 2009, CV, 33), this challenge was fully taken up by *Veritatis Gaudium* and entrusted to our institutions, at a time when it is even necessary to "rethink thinking" (cf. Morin, 2020; Coda, 2018). Universities are therefore called to become "laboratories of interpretation, not only informative, or even formative, but also reality maker, so that they can be promoted towards better forms and solutions, i.e. they are at the service of the quality of life of individuals and peoples" (Own translation) (Carlotti, 2020, p. 5).

As P. Carlotti continues, the perspective in which this discourse is inserted

*It has its roots in the conciliar vision, activated in the incipit of the apostolic constitution Veritatis Gaudium concerning Gaudium et Spes 22, a text widely used by the magisterium and theology. Christ, by revealing God to man, fully reveals man to himself: the Christology-anthropology connection is placed in the foreground, which gives rise to the new humanism; the new man, saved in Christ, created in the Word and the awaited Lord. It is a new integral humanism, which in the university context becomes educational, according to an anthropology capable of thinking in dynamic terms. The Christological order contains another order within, the paschal order. It is at Easter that Christ and the Christian are born, the new man whose newness is paschal, when love overcomes to the end the mysterium iniquitatis, therefore, there is obedience to the Father, the outpouring of the Spirit and the revelation of God to man. It is this kerygma that is present and moves all evangelisation, including university evangelisation, the new humanism, integral and educational. [...] In authentic, integral and educational humanism, university institutions find themselves in the beautiful and challenging mission of scientific research and teaching of excellence: it is here that the newness of the service to man inaugurated by the Lord, the Crucified and Risen One, can open up (Own translation) (Carlotti, 2020, pp. 6-7; cf. Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, 1965, GS, 22).*

The preceding long quotation reminds us to what extent Christian revelation profoundly illuminates the fact that the human being is essentially dialogue and is fulfilled in dialogue and reminds us that the human person is created in the image of a Trinitarian God whose life (intra-Trinitarian), is itself dialogical because it is a continuous flow and exchange of love between the Father, the Son and the Spirit, forever gift. If God is himself a

communion of different persons, then every human person is called by grace to enter into communion with all persons other than itself and therefore to love, transforming dialogue into communion. In the archetypal intra-Trinitarian dialogue and self-giving, dialogue and reciprocal self-giving among human persons are illuminated, also in the context of Higher Education.

*Veritatis Gaudium explicitly states that "the Church carries out the performative interpretation of the reality brought about by the Christ event and nourished by the gifts of wisdom and knowledge by which the Holy Spirit enriches the People of God in manifold ways".*

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(Francis, 2017, VG, 3). It is therefore invoked "to promote [...] the renewal of ecclesiastical studies at every level [...] as part of the new phase of the Church's mission" (Francis, 2017, VG, 1) and promises "that wise and courageous renewal demanded by the missionary transformation of a Church that 'goes forth'" (Francis, 2017, VG, 3).

From the epistemological point of view, *Veritatis Gaudium* maintains "What distinguishes the academic, formative and research approach of the system of [...] studies, on the level of both content and method, is the vital intellectual principle of the unity in difference of knowledge and respect for its multiple, correlated and convergent expressions." (Francis, 2017, VG, 4). The "fundamental criteria for a renewal and revival" set out in the Foreword of the apostolic constitution mentioned above (Francis, 2017, VG, 4), provide significant elements to orient towards a necessary "new way of thinking" and a "leadership capable of striking out on new paths" (Francis, 2017, VG, 2-3).

These four criteria can constitute an important reference for our subject: "contemplation and the presentation of a spiritual, intellectual and existential introduction to the heart of the kerygma, namely the ever fresh and attractive good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which continues to take flesh in the life of the Church and of humanity"; "wide-ranging dialogue"; "inter-disciplinary and cross-disciplinary approaches carried out with wisdom and creativity in the light of Revelation"; "networking" (cf. Francis, 2017, VG, 4). In this sense, the cultural heritage of "Christian education" has virtuosities and potentialities that are still latent and can represent a real response to today's needs.

## Growing in the synergies facing new challenges

The requirement for "networking" and for working between academic institutions in synergy, in an ever more convergent and shared manner, is presented in *Veritas Gaudium* in a certain sense as a very appropriate output for the input of an inclusive approach, as Pope Francis had already indicated when in *Laudato si'* he invited us to "to think of one world with a common plan" (Francis, 2015, LS, 164).

Among the positive experiences in our institutions, we note in this regard, first and foremost, the commitment to reformulate curricula based on an interpretation of the real needs and the possibilities of opportunities, and not based on "firm positions" or to satisfy individual demands in the assignment of subjects. This perspective can help to overcome the limits of the multiplication and fragmentation of study and training paths, which are becoming more and more sectorised. In the field of culture, on the other hand, it is the "wisdom" of life that confers a horizon of full scientificity to knowledge, which does require specialisation, but never fragmentation; indeed, it gives and orients towards a unitary and organic vision, and therefore integrated and functional. This was the task that Pope Saint John Paul II entrusted more than twenty years ago in *Fides et Ratio* to the Christian thought of the third millennium when he recalled that "The segmentation of knowledge, with its splintered approach to truth and consequent fragmentation of meaning, keeps people today from coming to an interior unity." (John Paul II, 1998, FR, 85). This makes it possible to understand and to show clearly the fundamental difference between specialisation and fragmentation. Specialisation is necessary for the development of knowledge and the person and is inevitable because of the very limits of man. Fragmentation, on the other hand, is harmful, its negative effects are obvious and cannot be ignored: there is an ever-increasing and redundant multiplicity of data and knowledge, but if a unitary vision is not achieved, the meaning of knowledge and the real and the very meaning of existence is lost in the end. Separation and fragmentation reveal their full drama when they occur not only in the relationship between two sciences in particular but also in the relationship between faith and reason, between science and faith.

Through academic excellence and the true gesture of social commitment, it is necessary to try to avoid a hierarchy of knowledge and disciplines whose priority criteria are the possibility of immediate consumption or momentary events; instead, it is necessary to emphasise that all disciplines are necessary within an architecture and an integrated vision of knowledge, trying to ensure that the different levels interact, including theological, philosophical, social and scientific.

At the root of this vision is an anthropology which - as has already been said - considers the human person in its essence, as openness, encounter, dialogue; characterised by the

fact that the self exists to the extent that it exists with the other and for the other. This "dialogical dimension" is not only a methodological question but, being a constitutive aspect of man as a person, it inevitably embraces the whole of life, individually and socially. From this anthropological and ethical orientation derive the main lines of education to humanism in solidarity, taking into account the current social scenarios, as effectively indicated in a Document of the Congregation for Catholic Education: *humanising education; a culture of dialogue; globalising hope; for a true inclusion; cooperation networks* (cf. Congregation for Catholic Education (2017)).

A specific realisation can be seen in the following elements: integral ecology and care for the common home; valorisation of relationality, communion and sharing; "global compact on education"; generativity; transdisciplinary and intergenerational dialogue; protagonism of young people; vocation to self-giving and competent service; openness to an inclusive "we" and to universal fraternity; recovery of the category of "intellectual charity" which goes together with "Samaritan" and politics. These are the ingredients of our "new Humanism".

V. Zani wisely indicated the three main challenges of the present context: the "*crisis of relationships and communication between generations, the question of transhumanism and the loss of the sense of history*" (cf. Zani, 2020, pp. 8-11) in a volume dedicated to the relationship between young people and the social dimension of faith to build the future. R. Cursi, meanwhile, points to "*post-humanism, secularism and international and intercontinental relations*" within a unitary and inclusive view of the human family (cf. Cursi, 2021, pp. 83-91). It is precisely in this perspective that Catholic and ecclesiastical university institutions, thanks to their charismatic identity, have an irreplaceable contribution to make.

It is also important to organise the various activities in such a way that university evaluative practices reach the level of institutional spirituality, and do not stop at formal or technical elements; this is also a culture, that of "quality" and evaluation, that must always be helped to grow. Moreover, the recognition - in the light of the Strategic Project of the various institutions - of a shared, co-partnered and frequently revised annual objective, contributes to increasing elements of awareness and convergence in proposals and events.

Catholic Higher Education is therefore called to respond to the "*great cultural, spiritual and educational challenge*" which "*is taking shape before us today*" and which - *Veritatis Gaudium* continues - "*will demand that we set out on the long path of renewal*" (Francis, 2017, VG, 6; cf. Francis, 2015, LS, 202): there is, in fact, an *enormous and unpostponable task* at the cultural level, of academic formation and scientific research, to elaborate "*a radical paradigm shift*" (Francis, 2017, VG, 3) and no doubt the university constitutes (or can be) the most suitable and creative laboratory.

On the occasion of the Synod of Bishops on *Young people, faith and vocational discernment*, it was rightly reiterated that, for the Christian community, it is important to express a significant presence in the school and university environment,

*with good teachers, flourishing chaplaincies and serious cultural engagement. Catholic educational institutions should be the subject of particular reflection. They express the Church's concern for the integral formation of the young. These are precious arenas for encounters between the Gospel and the culture of a people and for the development of research. Such institutions are called to propose a model of formation that can bring faith into dialogue with the questions of the contemporary world, with different anthropological perspectives, with the challenges of science and technology, with changes in social customs and with the commitment to justice. Special attention should be given in these settings to the promotion of young people's creativity in the fields of science and art, poetry and literature, music and sport, the digital world and the media, etc. In this way, the young will be able to discover their talents and put them at the disposal of society for the good of all (Synod of Bishops, 2018, 158).*

### To build the "civilisation of love"

The rector emeritus of the Alma Mater Studiorum University of Bologna, I. Dionigi, recently underlined the need for a "new humanism":

*We need humanism: understood not as the re-edition of a historical-cultural moment, not as the other half of thought and knowledge, not as a particular point of view of the world; but as the capacity to face a triple responsibility, which is not taken care of by technocratic ideology [...]: to rediscover questioning thought, which feeds on criticism, self-criticism and foreign culture; to make peace with time, mortified and devoured by a present deprived both of the memory of the ancestors and of the project of those to be born. To re-appropriate the art of synthesis, the science of the whole, the vision of the whole" (Own translation) (Dionigi, 2021, p. 26).*

A very significant quotation, because it links - in a vital way - the epistemological and anthropological spheres, in such a way that it points to the perspective of the "civilisation of love" and the "new humanism" in specific terms of cultural offerings; any form of humanism, to be truly and fully "human", as Pope Saint Paul VI affirmed in *Populorum Progressio*, must be "complete" and "full-bodied" (cf. Paul VI (1967, PP, 42-43).

To this end, it is important to promote the scientificity of research, didactics and the epistemological relationality of sciences, with a "strong", ordered and multifaceted interdisciplinarity. It is also necessary to overcome all types of corporatism, whether underlying

or not, of whatever nature - be it academic, religious or cultural -, overcoming particular logics and dynamics and opening up, instead, with conviction, to relations with other university institutions. This is to complete, intensify and create good theories and good practices that are already present and operational, not only *in nuce* but above all in the federations and the *ad hoc* bodies in charge (cf. (Carlotti, 2020).

In 1996 the rector of Harvard, Derek Bok, had written to his students: "*we are not able to prepare you for that work which will almost certainly no longer exist around you. We can only teach you to be able to learn because you will have to continually relearn*" (Own translation) (cf. Dionigi, 2021, p. 26). If we look to the future, we are faced with the challenges of innovation, in teaching and research, arising from the development of digital technologies, artificial intelligence, the consequences of the social and health crisis due to the pandemic: there were, there are and there will be different criticalities to face, but there are also new opportunities, with the possibility of extensively "widening" our campuses and the accessibility of our educational and cultural offer, without losing the inestimable value of the face-to-face experience, of direct interpersonal and intergenerational relations. In all cases, the challenges of digital transformation and the development of innovative teaching methods are always central.

Catholic and ecclesiastical university institutions are called upon to contribute to give constructive vitality and greater impact to the lines of the Catholic social teaching which they are to the credit of the vast majority of the issues dealt with by our institutions. The social question, which is eminently anthropological, which calls for an educational function that cannot be postponed, requires a clear proposal; in a world marked by multiple cultural differences, full of heterogeneous visions of good and life, and characterised by the coexistence of different beliefs (cf. Congregation for Catholic Education (2017).

In this sense, the richness that comes from dialogue, as suggested in *Veritatis Gaudium*, with Christians belonging to other Churches and ecclesial communities and with those who adhere to other religious or humanist convictions, cannot be neglected. True dialogue in universities creates cultural *agorà* that can become an instrument-place of elaboration of the encounter between faith and culture given the "paradigm shift". It is a matter of developing perspectives of listening and collaboration, of receptivity and conviviality, of an intercultural rapport which, without endorsing relativism, not only respects individual differences but also highlights their richness. In this way, genuine processes of inclusion and networks of cooperation will help to "globalise" not indifference but hope. To conclude, growing synergies with academic institutions in other countries are a specific way to contribute to the building of universal human brotherhood and care for the common home.

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This is why we look upon our institutions of Catholic higher education as indispensable *cultural laboratories*, which attach increasing emphasis on education for the promotion of an authentic humanism of solidarity. It

is necessary to promote an integral formation of the person, open to interiority, interpersonal relationships and transcendence. The world, and in particular young people, need a renewed commitment to the ethical formation, the consolidation of dialogue and peace, and the solidarity of a sustainable economy.

Therefore, today it is providential and strategic to work for a virtuous articulation between didactics, research and the third mission, to encourage the commitment of young people as effective protagonists of the social change they wish to see in society; so that they commit themselves to the construction of the "civilisation of love" (cf. Toso, 2021).

### **University, service and investment in culture**

Investing in the themes of sustainability and care for the common home, in terms of an authentic "integral ecology"<sup>6</sup> and therefore not only in an environmental perspective but also in a spiritual, anthropological and ethical perspective, given a new model of development and a true conversion in lifestyles and relationships, is certainly a priority that our institutions must take very seriously today.

It is certainly also necessary to promote a greater and more adequate valorisation of the role of women in the Church and in society, along the lines of a dual anthropology capable of expressing their specific nature and vocation, not neutralising but integrating differences in a virtuous way.

The concepts of universal human fraternity, of the culture of dialogue and encounter, constitute - as we have said - a path and a task for Catholic and ecclesiastical universities and faculties, and provide us with a historical and cultural *diakonia* to be exercised.

Philosophy and other humanistic subjects offer, in this respect, a precious interdisciplinary space for knowledge, especially in the dialogue between theology and human and

6 Cf. Francis, 2015, LS, 10-11, 62, 124, 137-162, 225, 230.

natural sciences, and for realising the commitment - previously mentioned - to "integrate the knowledge of head, heart and hands" (cf. Francis, 2019, ChV, 222).

In this vein, it is evident that the experience of quality *service-learning* can offer a specific pedagogical contribution to Catholic and ecclesiastical higher education, helping to bring together its spiritual identity, academic activities and social promotion action in the territory, making a fundamental contribution to achieving an effective integral education. To this end, it is certainly important to develop institutionalised service-learning programmes, also as a way of generating and promoting culture.

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*about meeting others, seeking points of contact, building bridges, planning a project that includes everyone. This becomes an aspiration and a style of life. The subject of this culture is the people, not simply one part of society that would pacify the rest with the help of professional and media resources (Francis, 2019, FT, 216).*

In this regard, it is interesting to note the very concrete way in which Pope Francis refers to "culture" in *Fratelli tutti*, where he states that

*A people's "culture" is more than an abstract idea. It has to do with their desires, their interests and ultimately the way they live their lives. To speak of a "culture of encounter" means that we, as a people, should be passionate*

Particularly after the pandemic, there is a great need to start again - not by going back, but by looking forward. This is why *teachers* are needed to develop didactic, professional and formative competence to offer a better service to students and society; they must be always dynamically open to continuous training that transcends the idea of updating the content of the discipline and is projected, instead, on a much broader and multidimensional spectrum of personal and professional growth (cf. Esmenjaud Zermeño, 2021, pp. 199-203).

It is also necessary to encourage networking and confrontation between *students*; to help each other in their studies, with particular attention to the last and the most vulnerable. A transformation of learning times and environments is taking place in university structures, and it is necessary to always place the person at the centre, in their relational aspects precisely in terms of "laboratory", favouring - for example - the practice of story-

telling as a privileged way of transmitting knowledge. Students should be protagonists in voluntary, "third sector" groups, taking care of those who - among them - are at risk of abandonment or do not have sufficient technological access.

One of the consequences of the current affirmation and globalisation of the "technocratic paradigm" (cf. Francis, 2015, L, 102-136) is the gradual but almost inexorable resizing and marginalisation of historical, scientific and humanistic knowledge, with its literary and artistic heritage. Precisely because it is *uni-versitas*, every academic and formative institution is called to be - as it is written in its DNA - a privileged place and a vital experience of convergence *ad unum* of the "cultures" that belong to - and in some way manifest and transmit - the different disciplines: thus, University becomes a "laboratory of *interculture*"

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and not of a simple juxtaposition of cultures. In the same way that we speak of interdisciplinarity in the "strong" sense, therefore of transdisciplinarity, similarly, academic interculturality, precisely because if it is a true culture it is always open to dialogue and confrontation, carries within itself an intrinsic dimension of "transculturality".

The aforementioned document of the Congregation for Catholic Education rightly states that

*a correct view of history, along with the spirit with which our ancestors faced and overcame their challenges, can help man in the complex adventure of the present-day. Human societies, communities, peoples and nations are the result of chapters of history, by means of which a specific, ever-changing identity is revealed. Understanding the fruitful link between a community's historical development and its vocation both to the common good and to accomplishing fraternal humanism implies the formation of a historical awareness, based on the indissoluble unity that brings ancestors, contemporaries and posterity to surmount their degrees of kinship, so that all are equally recognized as being children of the Father and thus in a relationship of universal solidarity (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2017,23).*

It is, therefore, necessary to offer young people, through Catholic higher education, the lived and witnessed the experience of a passion for culture, as well as for truth, goodness,

justice and beauty. Therefore, there is a need for adults - also in universities - who know, on the one hand, how to maintain a relationship of solidarity with the generations that preceded them and, on the other hand, how to deal with the decisive and qualitative criterion of sustainability - at all levels - with the demands of future generations. In the same way, tomorrow, in the perspective of true human flourishing and its corresponding good results that will know how to update it, the gifts of God and his grace will be incarnated - by assuming it - in the culture of those who will receive them.

## Conclusion

In these pages, we have tried to deepen the value of "institutional spirituality" in the context of the reflection on the valorisation, extension and institutionalisation of service-learning. In this perspective, *service-learning* is not "forced", but contributes to expressing the charismatic-prophetic dimension of Catholic and ecclesiastical higher education, helping it to realise its mission of integral education, to raise agents of social change to build a better society, using the wisdom of the Magisterium of the Roman Catholic Church.

Our Institutions have the task of representing "*a sort of providential cultural laboratory*" (Francis, 2017, VG, 3) given a "*bold cultural revolution*" (Francis, 2017, VG, 3; Francis, LS, 114). A value that is the fruit of the prophetic dimension that comes from spiritualities and charismas, and that represents a precious heritage, which must be passed on from one generation to the next, also through university life.

We read in *Christus Vivit*:

*When young and old alike are open to the Holy Spirit, they make a wonderful combination. The old dream dreams and the young see visions. [...] If young people sink roots in those dreams, they can peer into the future; they can have visions that broaden their horizons and show them new paths. But if the elderly do not dream, young people lose clear sight of the horizon. [...] The very first dream of all is the creative dream of God our Father, which precedes and accompanies the lives of all his children. The memory of this blessing that extends from generation to generation is a precious legacy that we should keep alive so that we too can pass it on (Francis, 2019, ChV, 192-194).*

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## DIALOGUE BETWEEN UNIVERSITY PRESIDENTS



Within the framework of the writing of this book, and with the motto "Institutional Spirituality and Service-Learning", Uniservitate organized a colloquy between university presidents, on April 26, 2021. Fernando Ponce SJ (President of the Pontifical Catholic University of Ecuador) and Mauro Mantovani SDB (then President of the Pontifical Salesian University of Rome) converse about Institutional Spirituality in this colloquy moderated by Daniela Gargantini (Catholic University of Córdoba).

Link to Dialogue between University Presidents: <https://youtu.be/3t-4vJU4HgA>



In support of the Global Compact on Education

*Uniservitate* is a global programme for the promotion of service-learning in Catholic Higher Education. Its objective is to generate a systemic change in Catholic Higher Education Institutions (CHEIs) through the institutionalisation of service-learning (SL) as a tool to achieve its mission of offering an integral education and training of agents of change committed to their community.

***“We will not change the world, if we do not change education”***

*Pope Francis*

### **3** Spirituality and Higher Education: Perspectives from Service-Learning

A research topic that is increasingly attracting the attention of the academic world is the link between teaching and spirituality, understood in its broadest sense. This will be the focus of the volume that we present to our readers today. The aim is to provide, both for Catholic Institutions of Higher Education and universities at large, a space for reflection in their itinerary of discernment about their identity and specific mission.

This book, the third of the Uniservitate collection, explores these topics, bringing together research and experiences of international scope, from the Catholic university world as well as of other creeds and non-religious convictions, which delve into service-learning from the ethics of care and fraternity.

UNISERVITATE COLLECTION

*Uniservitate is an initiative led by Porticus, with the general coordination of the Latin American Center for Service-learning (CLAYSS)*

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ISBN 978-987-4487-30-8



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Published in June 2022  
ISBN 978-987-4487-28-5