

The Role of the Catholic Universities in the New Europe

I

The European Federation of Catholic Universities (FUCE) currently comprises forty-two member universities in twelve countries. At the regular meetings of their rectors and presidents, discussions and consultations are continually complicated by the fact that the universities are very different in nature: structurally different in accordance with the respective traditions of academic education in the various countries; different in size and in the number of faculties; different also in how they are financed and in their relationship to the state universities – and different, not least of all, in how they are linked to the Catholic Church.

A comparative study conducted by the FUCE under its current President, Michel Gassiot (formerly President of the Ramon Llull University in Barcelona), brings out these differences quite clearly. Let me give just a brief impression of them. There are countries like Germany (to be precise, the Free State of Bavaria) with just one single Catholic University; in other countries, such as Belgium or Spain, there are a number of Catholic universities. And there are countries, for example France, where the legal status of the Catholic universities is difficult; in others – such as Germany, Spain, the Netherlands, Poland and Portugal – they are protected by a concordat. Occasionally the Catholic universities are largely or almost completely financed by the State (Belgium, Germany/Bavaria, the Netherlands, Poland and Hungary); others are completely Church-funded (for instance, the Pontifical Universities of the Vatican City); others again have to fight for their financial survival – often by charging fees – as is the case in France and Portugal.

Then there are the links with the Church. Alongside universities maintained by the Catholic Church as such, there are those that have Catholic lay organisations to thank for their existence. They are all called “Catholic Universities” and are admitted as members of the FUCE. And they all see themselves as defined and protected by the 1990 Apostolic Constitution *Ex corde Ecclesiae*.

II

In view of such an extremely heterogeneous group of academic institutions, the question is bound to arise of whether fruitful collaboration is possible at all, whether they can actually speak with one voice. The need to answer this questions becomes increasingly urgent in the face of the present political situation. This is especially true of education policies and the growing together of a Europe which (in the “Bologna Process”) wishes not only to make its university structures more transparent but also to standardise them to a certain degree, for example through the introduction of a universally binding framework for university studies (specifically, through Bachelors and Masters degree courses) and through the Europewide recognition of credits (ECTS).

This question of whether collaboration between Europe’s Catholic universities is actually possible, whether they do in their totality really constitute an “entity” – this is a question with an answer. And the answer shows what an important role the Catholic universities ought to play in a Europe that is trying to grow together. The fact is that, despite our differences, we as Catholic universities have three things in common.

Firstly, the Catholic universities in Europe not only see themselves as defined and protected by the Apostolic Constitution *Ex corde Ecclesiae*; they have from the start been committed to the spirit and premises expressed in this important document. Let it suffice here for me to mention a few key points: an unconditional devotion to the “cause of truth” – the conviction that faith and truth converge – seeking the meaning of technological developments as they occur – an opening up to the world and to society – a sensitivity towards what is involved in living together in community. Put more generally, we are called to reflect on the precise why and the wherefore of what we do as teachers, administrators and students.

Secondly, the Catholic universities want to play the important role of serving their Church loyally by being good universities. Their research and teaching must be untrammelled by ideology and counter any suspicion that the epithet “Catholic” could diminish the quality of their academic pursuits.

And thirdly, we understand our epithet “Catholic” – once again, completely in line with *Ex corde Ecclesiae* – as “catholic” with a small ‘c’, i.e. etymologically correctly understood as “general”,

“comprehensive”, “universal”. The concept of the university is thus expressed for a second time in the epithet and underlines our commitment to being open-minded, prepared to dialogue with others (including those who do not share our opinions), and naturally also to feeling at home in the world and seeking to overcome boundaries and frontiers.

III

With their sights set on this, the Catholic universities of Europe look back on a tradition that needs to be brought to fruition for the New Europe and one which the Europe of the future ignores to its detriment. It is not enough to put the structures and technologies in place – a common currency, a common education system, and, in the long run, a common administration. If Europe, as it grows together, fails to bear in mind that, for all its divisions and its variety of countries, it is rooted in a shared tradition of spiritual values with a common view of humanity – which is clearly Christian in character – it will be reduced to nothing more than a group of countries thrown together as a community of interests. But that would be a community bereft of a foundation that prevented it from falling apart as soon as the economic or technological scenario changed.

With the polyglot make-up that the Catholic universities take for granted and their student-exchange programmes, they are keeping alive a great deal of that sense of togetherness that developed early on in Europe’s history. As such they are, to my mind, called to play an essential role in the process of European unification.