

It is a great honour to be here; seeing you before me is a moving experience, reminding me of all that I have gained over the years through many encounters with Catholic universities around the world. So I'd like to begin with a world of thanks to you all, for all that your institutions have given me.

It seems to me providential that we celebrate the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary year of IFCU this year, not 25 years ago nor 25 years from now. For it is at this moment in history, with its profound experience of a “polycrisis” in all its intricate dimensions, that the contribution of Catholic universities, through their teaching and outreach but especially through their research, has, perhaps, a uniquely important role.

I am saying this as a neophyte President of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences, founded only 30 years ago this year by Pope John Paul II, so quite young compared to IFCU, and who would like to use this chance to address you to talk about how we could work together for the good of the broken world around us. This means I will speak most directly about research in the field of the social sciences, but that will still allow me to make connections with the natural sciences and engineering or technology (Laudato si puts it well when it says: “We are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental”, n.139 – let me add that our academy is working ever more closely with the older and bigger Pontifical Academy of Sciences for this very reason), but also to theology and philosophy, and the humanities more generally, since the crisis that we face requires us to rethink the foundations of our modern system (of which the social sciences are children) and for that we will need to draw on the resources of our theological and philosophical traditions. As John Paul II says it well in *Centesimus annus* (a good document to mention at IFCU's 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary): “The

## Bringing Out of our Storeroom Treasures New and Old (Mt 13:52) The Catholic Tradition as a Source of Innovation in Research<sup>1</sup>

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theological dimension is needed both for interpreting and solving present-day problems in human society” (n. 55).

Let's look at our title. We start with a phrase from Matthew which comes at a critical juncture in the Gospel story, as the attitude towards Jesus on the part of his hearers is starting to change, moving from one of amazement and expectation to one of “doubts, criticisms and overt hostility”, and in which the inner group of disciples becomes more important as the bearers into the future of His message in the face of rising opposition.<sup>2</sup> It completes what scholars call the “third major discourse” which is the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew, including its seven parables of the word or the kingdom of heaven: the sower, the wheat and the tares, the mustard seed, the leaven in the dough, the buried treasure, the pearl of great price, and the fishnet or dragnet. Many of these parables focus on the littleness of the word or of the kingdom of heaven: it is a seed sown, the tiniest of all seeds; it must compete with the tares;

it is hidden like yeast in the bread dough; it is buried, even if it is treasure; it is just one pearl among the many. We could carry on examining this text, but I think we can already see the many parallels to the situation of research in the Catholic university of today: Christianity is facing rising hostility in the part of the world where it is most established; what we have to offer seems small in the face of today's challenges . . . and perhaps, like the inner group of disciples, the Catholic universities as bearers of the intellectual tradition of the Church are going to become more central to the Church's mission.

This text was also used in the opening paragraphs of the encyclical of John Paul II that we already mentioned, *Centesimus annus*, referring back to *Rerum Novarum* and the new things that could be gained from reflecting on it 100 years later: “The treasure is the great outpouring of the Church's Tradition, which contains “what is old” — received and passed on from the very beginning

— and which enables us to interpret the "new things" in the midst of which the life of the Church and the world unfolds" (n. 3). And he uses it too in *Ex corde ecclesiae*: "By research and teaching, Catholic Universities assist the Church in the manner most appropriate to modern times to find cultural treasures both old and new, *"nova et vetera"*, according to the words of Jesus" (n. 12). So, in the light of that brief reflection on the biblical text, which seems to be especially connected to Catholic universities and to a centenary celebration, let us turn to the question of our research, using the second part of our title as a guide: the Catholic Tradition as a Source of Innovation in Research.

I'd like to make three main points.

Firstly, we could start by looking at this question historically.

Can we see anywhere where the Catholic tradition has been ahead of later research results, showing that it could be a source of innovation?

I think we could find this over and over again, but to be brief, I just give you one example, which is to be found in the lecture given by Giuseppe Toniolo when, at age 28, he started his academic career giving his first lecture as a "libero docente" at the University of Padua in 1873, so 150 years ago now. Looking at it, we can see that it anticipates empirical research results that we were only able to obtain much later. His lecture, which looks at ethics as an intrinsic factor in economics, points out that mainstream economic theory starts from an inadequate view of the human person, on the basis of which, he can say:

“. . . there arose a complete system of economic doctrines, which, resting on a defective analysis of human nature, placed in private profit the only motive, the norm and sanction of human action, the key to all economic facts . . .”

He identifies what we could call three groups of factors that also influence economic outcomes, describing them in this way:

“These and other sentiments, which, together with the spirit of self-interest, have the same root in our souls, just as they necessarily influence the whole of man's activity, so they affect every social economic fact, which must therefore be considered

as the resultant of a bundle of component forces, in the context of which personal gain acts under the modifying influence of all the other impulsive causes.”

So let's look briefly at these three groups of factors in relation to the areas of research that are now producing results confirming the philosophical-based assertions he was already making 150 years ago.

The first set of factors he places under the general heading “the religious spirit”, one of which is the “feeling of honesty and fairness . . . which, in proposing a higher purpose to man's activity, informs and colours all its manifestations, and none is exempt from its influences”.

Today, we know from the results in the field of game theory, such as that of the “ultimatum game”, that people do act in economic transactions out of a sense of honesty and fairness, doing so freely and without any constraint to do so from law, and often taking a penalty in terms of immediate economic gain.

The second group of factors are grouped around what he calls the “the consciousness of one's own moral dignity . . . an impulse that in the individual often outweighs that of material interest”.

Here we could refer to the results from other work in the field of behavioural economics, some of which has been popularised by Dan Pink in his book “Drive”, showing that giving people economic incentives at work, except in very limited circumstances, tends to reduce their effectiveness, while chances to exercise “autonomy” and “mastery” – which we could see as linked to “the consciousness of one's own moral dignity” – have far greater positive effects.

Thirdly, he talks about “the most noble need for sociality . . . with all its manifold impulses”. Here, among the many empirical results that we could mention, perhaps the most impressive is the great volume of work now available on happiness. The “World Happiness Reports” show that, across the world – and therefore in a culturally independent way, or “below” the level of culture, at the level of the human being as such – when we are at low levels of income, increasing income increases happiness, which could be seen as consistent with

a self-interested view of economic motivation, but above a fairly low income level, increases in income no longer correlate in a straightforward way with increases in happiness, and the factor that correlates much better with increases in happiness is, as Toniolo predicts, rather the quality of one's relationships.

Overall, then, Toniolo's lecture gives us just one example of how Catholic thought can be ahead of research results and could illuminate the way forward along new and innovative lines of research.

With this in mind, then, we can move to our second point.

Is there something from our tradition that could illuminate us now, helping us deal with the “polycrisis” that we mentioned above that we face today? If the Catholic universities could help the world deal with this, we would be making a decisive contribution, one very much in line with the pontificate of Pope Francis.

I think one way to address this is to look at how Catholic intellectuals reacted to the nearest crisis to the one we are in now – the crisis of the 1920s and 30s, that is, at the time 100 years ago when IFCU was founded – when democracy and liberalism seemed to be collapsing and authoritarianism seemed to be going from strength to strength. Catholic thinkers like Jacques Maritain, Emmanuel Mounier and Gabriel Marcel, among many others, developed the idea, or movement, or approach – there are various words for it – called “personalism”. In the face of the collapsing world order around then, they focused on the question of “who is man?” or “who is the human being?”, identifying in the individualism of modern liberal thought the underlying problem that needed to be confronted (let's not forget that it is individualism which also opens the door to the collectivism of totalitarian systems like Communism and Fascism).

Looking back, we could say that the personalism they started developing then, and which they were able to take so far but which now needs further development if it is to have a decisive impact, was a kind of “pilot project” for dealing with the crisis that we are in now.

For, in some ways, personalism had great success and influence; it was the main inspiration behind Christian

Democracy, which came to the fore in Europe after the totalitarian systems had been overcome, and was the major political force in Europe during the period of the “trente glorieuses” during which we had the only phase in history that we know about where there was fast economic growth coupled with low inequality, much lower inequality than we have now.

At the same time, Christian Democracy also demonstrated its weaknesses, and in particular, it was not able to resist the onslaught of neoclassical economic thinking – the Thatcher-Reagan revolution – from the 1980s onwards. I would suggest that this was at least in part because, although personalism had influenced political thought, there was no “personalist economics” that could have functioned as an effective counter to neoliberal economics. There is nothing to say, however, that such a personalist economics could not be developed – indeed, I think it’s one of the very things we should try to do in the face of our crisis.

For there is an argument to say that the problems we face now are not only of a similar kind to those faced by the

personalists in the 20s and 30s of the last century but, in some real ways, our problems are even more profound than theirs, demonstrated not least by the climate crisis. Furthermore, it is even clearer now than it was then that the fundamental problems we face, those that are at the root of our crisis, are largely social and systemic and that the individualistic mindset that we have inherited from modernity is too lacking and inadequate to help us find solutions to these problems.

We need a new philosophical (and, I would add, theological) framework, one that builds on modernity – in the sense that it still gives great importance to human freedom as modernity has done – but which allows us to go beyond the “collective action” problems we are constantly facing when we start from an individualistic view of the human being, and to recognize that we have shared objectives and goals that we can pursue together, building genuine common goods between us, and from which each one of us can also obtain the individual goods that we need. We need to find a new equilibrium between the exercise of personal freedom and the achievement

of shared goods. Personalism has the potential to help us with that.

Let me mention that the PASS has an upcoming meeting on the “social ontology” of Aquinas and the social sciences to help advance thinking along these lines.

And I am sure that there are many other initiatives that you are taking too. Let’s try to find a way to build our contribution together, in solidarity, creating a common good between us, together, one which is shared as much as possible with the wider university sector.

My third and last point refers to what we can offer the church. As universities, our first duty is to share and advance knowledge in our various intellectual disciplines, which is good for society as a whole as well as for the Church, but we also have a particular responsibility to the Church, to contribute to strengthening her and her mission. In speaking of the nature and mission of the Catholic university in *Ex corde ecclesiae*, Pope John Paul II cites a text of a meeting of Catholic universities in 1972, which I assume was an IFCU-sponsored meeting even if the footnote does not



mention who sponsored the meeting in question. The fourth of the four elements constituting the mission and identity of the Catholic university in this quotation is as follows: “an institutional commitment to the service of the people of God and of the human family in their pilgrimage to the transcendent goal which gives meaning to life” (n. 13).

Surely, there are many ways that we can do this. In my comments, however, I would like to continue considering what we can do as universities in relation to the work of the PASS, and on this front, I think a key contribution we can make to the Church is to help her become more “data literate”.

Not being able to use data in our day is like not being able to read, hence the term “data literacy”.

Just as the early Church thinkers used the leading “language” that they found around them, in Greek philosophy and Roman legal and moral thought, so we need to be able to use and speak the key language of the modern world, data, and translate into it what the Church has to offer the world.

Firstly, we need this for internal reasons. We need to be able to manage our institutions as well as possible, and in order to do that, we need to be able to evaluate where we are and set targets for where we want to go.

This inevitably brings us to the question of measurement.

Those of you here who are administrators in Catholic universities, perhaps the majority here today, will not need any convincing about the need for measurement, even if you will also be well aware that measurement can be used badly.

We know that we need to live in the tension between two phrases, both of which are true:

“If it isn’t counted, it doesn’t count”

“The things that really count can’t be counted”.

We know what happens to research when an unintelligent use of journal impact factors, research evaluation programmes and university league tables ends up putting academics in impossible situations where they resort to unethical means to achieve the unrealistic publication targets that they have been imposed on them.

IFCU is to be commended for the intelligent use of its Newman evaluation

system, helping Catholic universities to measure and improve their social responsibility without creating this kind of unhealthy competition, tending, as it does, towards corruption and plagiarism.

Nevertheless, within the wider Church I think we have the opposite problem. I have been told by theologians and philosophers in my university that “you can’t measure love”.

My answer to that is: you are right, we can’t measure love. But we can’t measure what a student has learnt in our courses either, so, if we adopt this line, then we really shouldn’t have exams either, since we know that they can’t measure what a student has really learnt.

This example shows us that the point of measurement is really very modest: it is not to make an absolute evaluation of the way things are, but to help us improve, step by step, allowing us to move from where we are now to something better.

And just as we change the way we evaluate students – giving them coursework to do, for instance, rather than evaluating them only on the basis of a final exam – so we can also change and improve the measures we use to evaluate where we are in running a parish, or a diocese, on the Roman curia.

However, I want to say that the question of data literacy is not so important as regards the internal management of church institutions as it is with regard to the external mission of the church and her work for evangelisation and promoting integral human development.

To put this in the kind of language we often hear today: we need to be able to tell our story better.

This is crucial for our work for human development, especially in developing countries, and, in a similar way, it is crucial for evangelisation, especially in rich and secure countries.

The simplest way to put this is to say: go out onto an average state university campus, or just go out onto the street, and stop someone to ask them: “what do you think of when you hear the words “Catholic Church”?”

What would they say?

Instead of saying “paedophilia, financial corruption and holding back progress, especially of women”, they could be saying “the biggest provider of education in sub-Saharan Africa, the

most global education system in the world, one of the major providers of AIDS care”, and so on.

Just after Pope Francis was elected, people who weren’t Catholic said to me: “Pope Francis has revolutionised the Catholic Church”.

I said to them “He hasn’t revolutionised anything. He is making visible to you a face of the Catholic Church you never saw before. You didn’t see it and you didn’t think it existed, but it did”.

We need to make sure that people can see all those faces of the Catholic Church, and one way to do it – one way in which the Catholic universities can play a crucial role – is by telling our story using data.

Let me give you two examples – one already existing; one that could be developed.

1. The “Global Catholic Education Reports”; and the “Global Integral Human Development Report”, a new initiative developed by Quentin Wodon in UNESCO, with the support of IFCU and other international Catholic education networks, using data collected by the Vatican Statistical Office, and available at <https://www.globalcatholiceducation.org/>

I have already been able to use these reports to support the British Embassy to the Holy See in its efforts to get the UK government to work much more with Catholic education and Catholic healthcare in its overseas development aid efforts, especially in relation to the most vulnerable, or “fragile”, states.

I am sure that there are many, many other interesting examples like this. Perhaps, as this talk takes place in the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, I could show how “ecumenical” I can be by highlighting an example from a Jesuit university! The “Fordham Francis Index” is a great example of this kind of thinking, taking the key elements of the speech given by Pope Francis to the UN General Assembly and turning them into a composite measure of human development.

2. Discussions about financial support to the Church in European countries: there are often debates about this; currently, for example, I understand that there is a discussion going on in Poland about the Church fund and especially about whether it should continue to support the work of Polish missionaries



around the world.

If we had data on what those funds invested in missionaries actually achieve, especially if we could produce it in a form that could be compared to similar investments in equivalent types of actor, we could change the discussion about the church. We could focus the discussion on what we are contributing, or, as in this case, on what potential contribution would be lost if funding was removed.

On this point, let me say that the PASS has an upcoming meeting on measurement with the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative lead by the PASS Academician Sabina Alkire, on “Measuring Integral Human Development from the Ground Up”, which will be involving Catholic aid agencies and missionaries on the ground in a discussion with some of the leading thinkers in the field to come up with better measures that can really support what Catholic actors and others are doing to promote integral human development.

Other upcoming PASS meetings are also planned on the following topics:

creating a culture of inclusion for persons with disabilities, climate resilience summit, debt in the global South, international taxation, preparation of the UN Summit on the Future, fraternal and sustainable economy ...

In conclusion, I would like to return to what I said at the beginning: it is providential that we have this 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary conference now. For I think in the next 100 years, IFCU and the Catholic university sector could play, and probably will play, a really crucial role in helping the wider society to face its crises. I think we could see the last 100 years as laying the groundwork, or having run a “pilot project”, for what is to come – for, as the Toniolo lecture and the work of the personalists shows, the key inputs we will need in the future can already be found, at least “*in nuce*”, in to come – for, as the Toniolo lecture and the work of the personalists shows, the key inputs we will need in the future can already be found, at least “*in nuce*”, in our past, and we need to do what the to come – for, as the Toniolo lecture and the work of the personalists shows, the key inputs we will need in the future can

already be found, at least “*in nuce*”, in our past, and we need to do what the Matthean text indicates to us, “bring out of our storeroom treasures new and old”. Doing this, we could make some really decisive contributions, both to resolving the social and systemic crises the world faces and to the evangelising mission of the Church in the world, telling her story in a new way. We could even imagine that by 2050, say, the average person on the street thinks of the Church not as a block on social progress but as a leader of social innovation. I think, too, that work together between the Pontifical Academies and IFCU could make a key contribution to all of this, and I look forward to trying to build that relationship between us.

Thank you very much.

#### NOTE

1. Text given at the IFCU 100th Anniversary Conference, Rome, 18-19 January 2024
2. F. W. Beare, 1981, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, p. 254.