

APOSTOLIC JOURNEY
TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA AND CANADA

MEETING WITH THE REPRESENTATIVES
OF CATHOLIC UNIVERSITIES

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II

*Xavier University of New Orleans
Saturday, 12 September 1987*

*Dear Friends,
Dear Leaders in Catholic Higher Education,*

1. At the end of this day dedicated to *the prayerful celebration of Catholic education in the United States*, I greet you and all those whom you represent, with esteem and with affection in our Lord Jesus Christ. I thank the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities for having arranged this meeting. I express my gratitude to DR Norman Francis and to all at Xavier University for their hospitality at this institution, which, in so many ways, serves the cause of Catholic higher education.

"I will bless the Lord at all times;
his praise shall be ever in my mouth.
Glorify the Lord with me,
Let us together extol his name" (Ps. 34 (33), 2-4).

Yes, let us join *in thanking* God for the many good things that he, the Father of Wisdom, has accomplished through Catholic colleges and universities. In doing so, let us be thankful for the special strengths of your schools—for their Catholic identity, for their service of truth, and for their role in helping to make the Church's presence felt in the world of culture and science. And let us be thankful *above all for the men and women committed to this mission*, those of the past and those of today, who have made and are making Catholic higher education the great reality that it is.

2. The United States is unique in its *network of more than two hundred and thirty-five colleges and universities* which identify themselves as Catholic. The number and diversity of your institutions are in fact without parallel; they exercise an influence not only within the United States but also throughout the universal Church, and they bear a responsibility for her good.

Two years from now you will celebrate the two hundredth anniversary of the founding by John Carrol of Georgetown University, the first Catholic university in the United States. After Georgetown, through the leadership of religious congregations and farseeing bishops, and with the generous support of the Catholic people, other colleges and universities have been established in different parts of this vast country. For two centuries these institutions have contributed much to *the emergence of a Catholic laity*, which

today is intimately and extensively involved in industry, government, the professions, arts and all forms of public and private endeavour – all those activities that constitute the characteristic dynamism and vitality of this land.

Amidst changing circumstances, Catholic universities and colleges are challenged to retain *a lively sense of their Catholic identity* and to fulfill their specific *responsibilities to the Church and to society*. It is precisely in doing so that they make their distinctive contribution to the wider field of higher education.

The Catholic identity of your institutions is a complex and vitally important matter. This identity depends upon *the explicit profession of Catholicity* on the part of the university as an institution and also upon *the personal conviction and sense of mission* on the part of its professors and administrators.

3. During my pastoral visit to this country in 1979, I spoke of various elements that contribute to the mission of Catholic higher education. It is useful once again to stress the importance of *research into questions vital for the Church and society* – a research carried out "with a just sense of history, together with the concern to show the full meaning of the human person regenerated in Christ"; to emphasize the need for *educating men and women of outstanding knowledge* who, "having made a personal synthesis between faith and culture, will be both capable and willing to assume tasks in the service of the community and of society in general, and to bear witness to their faith before the world"; and finally, to pursue the establishment of *a living community of faith*, "where sincere commitment to scientific research and study goes together with a deep commitment to authentic Christian living" (Ioannis Pauli PP. II *Allocutio ad moderatores et doctores Universitatis Catholicae Vashintoniensis et ad legatos Collegiorum Universitatumque catholicarum totius Nationis*, 3, die 7 oct. 1979: *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, II, 2 (1979) 687).

4. To appreciate fully the value of your heritage, we need to recall the origins of Catholic university life. The university as we know it began in close association with the Church. This was no accident. *Faith and love of learning have a close relationship*. For the Fathers of the Church and the thinkers and academics of the Middle Ages, the search for truth was associated with the search for God. According to Catholic teaching – as expressed also in the First Vatican Council – the mind is capable not only of searching for the truth but also of grasping it, however imperfectly.

Religious *faith itself calls for intellectual inquiry*; and the confidence that there can be no contradiction between faith and reason is a distinctive feature of the Catholic humanistic tradition, as it existed in the past and as it exists in our own day.

Catholic higher education is called to exercise, through the grace of God, an extraordinary "share in the work of truth" (3 *Io.* 8). The Catholic university is dedicated to the service of the truth, as is every university. In its research and teaching, however, it proceeds from the vision and perspective of faith and is thus enriched in a specific way.

From this point of view one sees that there is an intimate relationship between the Catholic university and the teaching office of the Church. The bishops of the Church, as *Doctores et Magistri Fidei*, should be seen not as external agents but as participants in the life of the Catholic university in its privileged role as protagonist in *the encounter between faith and science and between revealed truth and culture*.

Modern culture reflects many tensions and contradictions. We live in an age of great technological triumphs but also of great human anxieties. Too often, today, the individual's vision of reality is fragmented. At times experience is mediated by forces over which people have no control; sometimes there is not even an awareness of these forces. The temptation grows to relativize moral principles and to privilege process over truth. This has grave consequences for the moral life as well as for the intellectual life of individuals and of society. The Catholic university must address all these issues from the perspective of faith and out of its rich heritage.

5. Modern culture is marked by a pluralism of attitudes, points of view and insights. This situation rightly requires mutual understanding; it means that society and groups within society must respect those who have a different outlook from their own. But *pluralism* does not exist for its own sake; it *is directed to the fullness of truth*. In the academic context, the respect for persons which pluralism rightly envisions does not justify the view that ultimate questions about human life and destiny have no final answers or that all beliefs are of equal value, provided that none is asserted as absolutely true and normative. Truth is not served in this way.

It is true, of course, that the culture of every age contains certain ambiguities, which reflect the inner tensions of the human heart, the struggle between good and evil. Hence the Gospel, in its continuing encounter with culture, must always *challenge the accomplishments and assumptions of the age* (Cfr. *Rom. 12, 2*). Since, in our day, the implications of this ambiguity are often so destructive to the community, so hostile to human dignity, it is crucial that the Gospel should purify culture, uplift it, and orient it to the service of what is authentically human. Humanity's very survival may depend on it. And here, as leaders in Catholic education in the United States, you have an extremely important contribution to make.

Today there exists an increasingly evident need for philosophical reflection concerning the truth about the human person. A metaphysical approach is needed as an antidote to intellectual and moral relativism. But what is required even more is *fidelity to the word of God*, to ensure that human progress takes into account the entire revealed truth of the eternal act of love in which the universe and especially the human person acquire ultimate meaning. The more one seeks to unravel the mystery of the human person, the more open one becomes to the mystery of transcendence. The more deeply one penetrates the divine mystery, the more one discovers the true greatness and dignity of human beings.

6. In your institutions, which are privileged settings for the encounter between faith and culture, *theological science has a special role* and deserves a prominent place in the

curriculum of studies and in the allocation of research resources. But theology, as the Church understands it, is much more than an academic discipline. Its data are the data of God's Revelation entrusted to the Church. The deeper understanding of the mystery of Christ, the understanding which theological reflection seeks, is ultimately *a gift of the Holy Spirit given for the common good of the whole Church*. Theology is truly a search to understand ever more clearly the heritage of faith preserved, transmitted and made explicit by the Church's teaching office. And theological instruction serves the community of faith by helping new generations to understand and to integrate into their lives the truth of God, which is so vital to the fundamental issues of the modern world.

7. *Theology is at the service of the whole ecclesial community*. The work of theology involves an interaction among the various members of the community of faith. The bishops, united with the Pope, have the mission of authentically teaching the message of Christ; as pastors, they are called to sustain the unity in faith and Christian living of the entire People of God. In this they need the assistance of Catholic theologians, who perform an inestimable service to the Church. But theologians also need the charism entrusted by Christ to the bishops and, in the first place, to the Bishop of Rome. The fruits of their work, in order to enrich the life-stream of the ecclesial community, must ultimately be tested and validated by the Magisterium. In effect, therefore, *the ecclesial context of Catholic theology gives it a special character and value, even when theology exists in an academic setting*.

Here, the words of Saint Paul concerning the spiritual gifts should be a source of light and harmony for us all: "There are different gifts but the same Spirit; there are different ministries but the same Lord; there are different works but the same God who accomplishes all of them in everyone. To each person the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good" (1 Cor. 12, 4-7). In the different offices and functions in the Church, it is not some power and dominion that is being divided up, but rather *the same service of the Body of Christ that is shared according to the vocation of each*. It is a question of unity in the work of service. In this spirit I wish to express cordial support for the humble, generous and patient work of theological research and education being carried out in your universities and colleges in accordance with the Church's mission to proclaim and teach the saving wisdom of God (Cfr. *ibid.* 1, 21).

8. My own university experience impels me to mention another related matter of supreme importance in the Catholic college and university, namely, *the religious and moral education of students and their pastoral care*. I am confident that you too take this special service very seriously, and that you count it among your most pressing and most satisfying responsibilities. One cannot meet college and university students anywhere in the world without hearing their questions and sensing their anxieties. In their hearts your students have many questions about faith, religious practice and holiness of life. Each one arrives on your campuses with a family background, a personal history, and an acquired culture. They all want to be accepted, loved and supported by *a Christian educational community* which shows friendship and authentic spiritual commitment.

It is your *privilege to serve your students in faith and love*; to help them deepen their friendship with Christ; to make available to them the opportunities for prayer and liturgical celebration, including the possibility to know the forgiveness and love of Jesus Christ in the Sacraments of Penance and the Eucharist. You are able, as Catholic educators, to introduce your students to *a powerful experience of community and to a very serious involvement in social concerns that will enlarge their horizons, challenge their life styles and offer them authentic human fulfilment.*

University students, for example, are in a splendid position to take to heart the Gospel invitation to go out of themselves, to reject introversion and to concentrate on the needs of others. Students with the opportunities of higher education can readily grasp *the relevance for today of Christ's parable of the rich man and Lazarus* (Cfr. *Luc 16, 19ss*), with all of its consequences for humanity. What is at stake is not only the rectitude of individual human hearts but also the whole social order as it touches the spheres of economics, politics and human rights and relations.

Here in the Catholic university centers of this nation, vivified by the inspiration of the Gospel, must be drawn up *the blueprints for the reform of attitudes and structures* that will influence the whole dynamic of peace and justice in the world, as it affects East and West, North and South. It is not enough to offer to the disadvantaged of the world crumbs of freedom, crumbs of truth and crumbs of bread. The Gospel calls for much more. The parable of the rich man and the poor man is directed to the conscience of humanity, and, today in particular, to the conscience of America. But that conscience often passes through the halls of Academe, through nights of study and hours of prayer, finally to reach and embrace the whole prophetic message of the Gospel. "Keep your attention closely fixed on it", we are told in the Second Letter of Peter, "as you would on a lamp shining in a dark place until the first streaks of dawn appear and the morning star rises in your hearts" (*2 Petr. 1, 19*).

9. Dear brothers and sisters: as leaders in Catholic university and college education, you have inherited a tradition of service and academic excellence, the cumulative effort of so many who have worked so hard and sacrificed so much for Catholic education in this country. Now there lies before you the wide horizon of the third century of the nation's constitutional existence, and the third century of Catholic institutions of higher learning serving the people of this land. The challenges that confront you are just as testing as those your forefathers faced in establishing the network of institutions over which you now preside. Undoubtedly, the greatest challenge is, and will remain, that of *preserving and strengthening the Catholic character of your colleges and universities* – that institutional commitment to the word of God as proclaimed by the Catholic Church. This commitment is both an expression of spiritual consistency and a specific contribution to the cultural dialogue proper to American life. As you strive to make the presence of the Church in the world of modern culture more luminous, may you listen once again to Christ's prayer to his Father for his disciples: "*Consecrate them by means of truth – 'Your word is truth'*" (*Jo. 17, 17*).

May the Holy Spirit, the Counsellor and Spirit of Truth, who has enlivened and enlightened the Church of Christ from the beginning, give you great confidence in the Father's word, and sustain you in the service that you render to the truth through Catholic higher education in the United States of America.

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