



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC JOURNEY OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS TO LUXEMBOURG AND BELGIUM

(26-29 September 2024)

MEETING WITH UNIVERSITY PROFESSORS

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS

Promotiezaal of the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven
Friday, 27 September 2024

[Multimedia]

Distinguished Rector,
Esteemed Professors,
Dear brothers and sisters, good afternoon!

I am pleased to be here among you. I thank the Rector for his words of welcome in which he reflected on the tradition and historical roots of the University, and on the principal challenges we all face today. Indeed, the first task of a university is to offer integral formation so that students may be equipped with the tools needed for interpreting the present and planning for the future.

Yet cultural formation is never an end in itself, and universities should never run the risk of becoming “cathedrals in the desert”. They are, by their nature, driving forces of ideas and sources of new inspiration for human life and thought, and for facing the challenges in society. In other words, they are *generative places*. It is a fine thing to view universities as generating culture and ideas, but above all as promoting the passion for seeking truth, at the service of human progress. In a particular way, Catholic Universities such as yours are called to “offer the decisive contribution of leaven, salt and light of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the living Tradition of the Church, which is ever open to new situations and ideas” (Apostolic Constitution *Veritatis Gaudium*, 3).

I would now like to extend a simple invitation to each of you: *expand the boundaries of knowledge!* Rather than multiplying concepts and theories, make academic and cultural formation a critical space that both understands and speaks about life.

There is a short biblical story in the Book of Chronicles that I would like to share with you. The protagonist, Jabez, addresses this plea to God: “Oh that you would bless me and enlarge my border” (1 Chron 4:10). The name Jabez means “pain”, a name he was given because his mother had greatly suffered during childbirth. Yet Jabez does not wish to close himself off within his own pain, dragging his feet in lamentation. Instead, he asks the Lord to “expand the boundaries” of his life in order that he might enter into a greater, more welcoming and blessed place. The opposite of which are closures.

Expanding boundaries and becoming an open space for humanity and for society is the great mission of a university.

In our own day, we find ourselves facing an ambivalent situation with its limited boundaries. On the one hand, we are immersed in a culture marked by a refusal to seek the truth. We have lost the ardent passion for searching. We would rather find comfort and refuge in the tenuous thought – the drama of the tenuous thought! – taking refuge in that all things are equal, everything is the same, everything is relative. On the other hand, when the question of truth arises in university contexts and elsewhere, we can often fall into a rationalist approach, considering as “true” only those things that can be measured, tested by experiment, and touched, as if life were uniquely restricted to what is material and visible. In both these cases, boundaries are limited.

With reference to the first type of limit, we find a kind of “intellectual weariness”, which consigns us to a permanent state of uncertainty, lacking all passion, as if the search for meaning were useless and reality were incomprehensible. This worldview is expressed by some of the characters in Franz Kafka’s works, which describe the tragic and distressing human condition of the nineteenth century. In a dialogue between two characters in one of his stories, we find this affirmation: “I think she doesn’t worry about truth because it’s too tiring” (*Racconti*, Milano 1990, 38). Searching for the truth is indeed tiring since it obliges us to move out of ourselves, to take risks, to ask ourselves questions. Yet, due to an intellectual weariness, a superficial life is more appealing to us, one that does not deal with new challenges. There is likewise the danger of being attracted to an easy, effortless and comfortable “faith” that does not call anything into question.

Turning to the second kind of limited boundaries, today we run the risk of falling once again into a “soulless rationalism”; conditioned by a technocratic culture that leads us to it. When human beings are regarded as mere matter, when reality is constrained within the limits of what is visible, when reason is reduced to mathematical logic, when reason only comes from the “laboratory”, then wonder is lost, and when it is lacking, one cannot think; wonder is the beginning of philosophy, it is the beginning of thought. In this way, we lose our ability to marvel, which urges us

to look beyond, to raise our eyes heavenwards, to dig into the hidden truth that addresses the fundamental questions of: Why am I alive? What is the meaning of my life? What is the ultimate aim and purpose of this journey? Romano Guardini asked himself: “Why is it that man, despite so much progress, is unknown to himself and becomes ever more so? It is because he has lost the key to understanding his own essence. The law of our truth states that man understands himself only if he begins from above, from beyond himself, from God, for man’s very existence comes from Him” (*Preghiera e verità*, Brescia 1973, 56).

Dear Professors, instead of falling into intellectual weariness or a soulless rationalism, may we too learn to pray like Jabez: “Lord, widen our borders!” Let us ask God to bless our work, at the service of a culture capable of facing today’s challenges. The Holy Spirit we have received as a gift urges us to search, to open up spaces for our thought and action, until he leads us into the fullness of truth (cf. *Jn* 16:13). We are aware, as the Rector said earlier, that “we do not yet know everything”. At the same time, this very limitation drives us forward, helps us to keep the flame of research alight, and to remain an open window to today’s world.

In this regard, I would like to express sincere words of gratitude: Thank you! Thank you, for through expanding boundaries, you have become a welcoming environment for the refugees obliged to flee from their lands, amidst great insecurity, enormous hardships and often excruciating suffering. Thank you once again. We have just seen a moving video testimony. While some people call for the reinforcement of physical borders, you have expanded borders as a university community. Thank you. You have opened your arms in welcome to those marked by suffering, in order to help them study and grow. Thank you.

Indeed, what we need is a culture that *expands boundaries*, and avoids “sectarianism” – and thank you for not being sectarian – or exalting oneself above others. A culture immersed as good “leaven” within our world, contributing to the common good of humanity. This responsibility, this “great hope” is entrusted to you!

A theologian from your land, a student and professor of this University stated that, “We are the burning bush that allows God to manifest himself” (A. GESCHÉ, *Dio per pensare. Il Cristo*, Cinisello Balsamo 2003, 276). Keep this flame alive; expand boundaries! Please be uneasy with the restlessness of life, and be restless seekers of truth, and do not allow your enthusiasm to wane lest you yield to intellectual lethargy, which is a very bad illness. Be protagonists in generating a culture of inclusion, compassion, and attentiveness towards the weakest as you seek to overcome the great challenges in our world today.

And please, do not forget to pray for me. Thank you!
