

## **The Differential Advantage that Catholic Universities Must Cultivate**

Msgr. Prof. Philippe BORDEYNE: Response to Prof. Isabel CAPELOA GIL

The main contribution of Prof. Isabel Capeloa Gil, President of IFCU, is to help us reflect on the specific mission of Catholic universities in a context where the fundamental vocation of universities is threatened by the market economy. She argues that universities risk becoming "factories of knowledge" in a profit-seeking society dominated by four major trends and challenges:

1. Technological innovation and digital transformation
2. Radical professionalization
3. Globalization
4. Academic institutions undergoing constant reorganization

These four social trends, she says, call into question the foundation of the university as a protected space of freedom and responsibility that prepares for life.

In this context, Isabel Capeloa Gil argues that Catholic universities should value the axiological dimension of education. She adds that Catholic scholars should stop lamenting the crisis of Catholic higher education, the specific project of which hardly finding its place on the public forum.

Isabel Capeloa Gil's proposal is that instead of lamenting, Catholic universities should concentrate on promoting "value *with* values", providing a greater service to society and aiming at greater social impact.

I basically agree with this analysis. However, although Catholic universities can certainly complain about their limited financial resources, they cannot complain about their crisis everywhere. Let us take the case of my country: the French press regularly note the attractiveness of Catholic higher education. The quality of Catholic universities is also praised in Africa, Asia, Latin America, although their capacity to increase registration fees and to invest is low. Where Catholic universities are attractive, it is most often for good reasons: as Pope Francis says, the "flair of the sheep" is not mistaken. Students, families

and teachers join Catholic universities because they find there what they do not find elsewhere. Let us describe this differential advantage that Catholic universities must cultivate.

1- Catholic universities usually aim at dealing with the real challenges of society, with the real needs of people who try to find their way in a more complex world. Catholic universities inherit a tradition that has proved able to adapt to different times. As St John Paul recollects, Catholic universities were born *ex corde Ecclesia*, when the Church tried to respond to the needs of a new era, with the spreading of independent cities in the Middle Ages. Universities aimed at answering the desire to know and at nourishing the understanding of the world. Today, Catholic universities do stick to this fundamental mission. When financial resources are limited, it is all the more important to discern in what fields teaching and research must invest because they are meaningful for the common good. Choices must be made, which implies a collegial process of discernment, which corresponds to the tradition of the University. Collegiality should serve the double course of relevance and freedom of teaching and research.

2- In striving for excellence, Catholic universities must focus on the integral development of students. This means first of all the development of the whole person: this implies to lead every student to the point he or she can reach, whatever his or her starting abilities. It is the "one to one model" that Prof. Capeloa Gil mentioned. This also means the development of the whole community of students, without leaving some of them on the side of the road. As long as the university project is universal, it must carry all young people, taking them where they are, with their energy and also with their fragilities, such as anxiety, poverty, handicap, etc. In the market economy, the efficient design of an "efficient" university pushes out less efficient people. Catholic universities should be both a meeting place for all and a place of growth for all.

3- Given their relative economic precariousness, Catholic universities need to attract private sponsors who will support a limited number projects lead by committed teachers and scholars. Catholic Universities must dare to invest in pedagogical innovation, anchored in a strong vision of the person. For instance, the era of the MOOC at all costs has been replaced by a more refined reflection on the importance of interaction between on-line and presential learning, between access to information, group dynamics, and

accompaniment. As Prof. Capeloa Gil said, students bring information, they want to be guided by their teachers. In the tradition of Catholic education, formation is not restricted to academic qualification. All talents and paths to the world must be recognized: professional and technical training do belong to the great tradition of Catholic education, as shown by St John Baptist de La Salle in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Catholic Universities are legitimate in developing jointly the capacities of the head, the heart, and the hand, as Pope Francis regularly insists. "Service learning" is a wonderful way of keeping those three dimensions together, it should be further deployed.

4- In *Veritatis gaudium* Pope Francis reminds us that without interdisciplinarity or without social impact, a Catholic university would not be faithful to its mission.

In the digital era driven by a principle of "acceleration" (Hartmut Rosa), one should also remember the text on attention written by the philosopher Simone Weil in the chapter of *Waiting for God* (1942) dedicated to "Reflections on the good use of school studies in view of the love of God". She starts from a beautiful definition of prayer, in which she values the responsibility of the human being in communicating with God: "Prayer is the orientation towards God of all the attention the soul is capable of." From this premise, she adds: "School exercises, of course, develop a lesser part of the attention. Nevertheless, they are fully effective in increasing the power of attention which will be available at the moment of prayer, provided that they are performed for this purpose and for this purpose only." Simone Weil observes that study, even when it does not lead to the resolution of a problem or to an immediately effective professional skill, has the particularity of increasing the attention ability of the human being. It opens the soul to the world, it implements a particular sensitivity to the otherness.

Simone Weil's reflections are particularly evocative in this day and age when we are measuring the effects of digital transformation on the dizzying collapse of attention span. As Bruno Patino puts it, "Google's engineers have managed to calculate the maximum duration of our attention span: 8 seconds. The same engineers have calculated the attention span of the millenials, the generation that grew up with connected screens: 9 seconds. We have become goldfish, locked in the bowl of our screens, subjected to pop-

up alerts on Internet and instant messages.”<sup>1</sup> We know very well that Silicon Valley entrepreneurs enroll their children in places where they can deploy manual intelligence and sustained reflection, far from the screens. The social impact of universities will come from their ability to develop in students and teachers a genuine capacity to welcome and marvel at reality, nourished by study and patience. From another point of view, the German philosopher Hartmut Rosa has described the deleterious mechanisms of “acceleration”<sup>2</sup>. His research today focuses on the capacities of resistance that human beings can develop in giving more importance to their capacities for “resonance”<sup>3</sup>: in interpersonal relations, as in the practices of artistic activities or in communion with nature weakened by the Anthropocene.

In the context where Higher Education and Research is threatened by the negative effects of the market economy, as Prof. Isabel Capeloa Gil argued, and confronted with the anthropological crisis resulting from the digital revolution, Catholic Universities should, more than ever, remain faithful to their tradition of accompaniment and discernment, listening to the youth and to the profound needs of the society. This is the only way to keep to their mission and to maintain their unique place in the worldwide forum of universities.

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<sup>1</sup> Bruno Patino, *The goldfish civilization. A short treatise on the market of attention*, Paris, Grasset, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Hartmut Rosa, *Accélération. Une critique sociale du temps*, Paris, La Découverte, 2010.

<sup>3</sup> Hartmut Rosa, *Résonance. Une sociologie de la relation au monde*, Paris, La Découverte, 2018.