

**Opening session of Cardinal Versaldi
to the Assembly of Jesuit Higher Education Institutions – Deusto-Bilbao
9 luglio 2018**

Dear fathers and leaders of Jesuit Higher Education Institutions

It is a great pleasure for me to address you today, at the opening of the **Assembly of Jesuit Higher Education Institutions**. Who could pass up the opportunity and privilege of addressing, in one time and space, the leadership of more than 200 Higher Education Institutions from the entire globe, serving more than one million students? Today, I am with you as former colleague who has taught psychology and Canon law for fourteen years at the *Gregorian*, the mother and original model of all Jesuit Universities. I address you as Grand Chancellor of this, your first University, and perhaps more appropriately, as the one who serves as Prefect for the Congregation for Catholic Education. I have been invited to represent at this gathering, the **voice of the Church** whom you as Jesuits want to serve in all that you are planning, discussing and doing.

In echoing the voice of the Church for you, I want to take up in my short address the theme of this Conference, *“Transforming our world together”* and I want to contemplate together with all of you, what this motto could mean in the context and logic of the recently published Apostolic Constitution, *Veritatis gaudium*, of our Holy Father, Pope Francis. Even if this document mainly focuses on Ecclesiastical Faculties, its introduction could be called the “Higher education policy” of our Holy Father. It offers us a good source of inspiration for your upcoming planning, discussions and concrete projects.

According to a good Jesuit tradition, I shall develop my thoughts in three points, following the theme of this meeting: **Firstly: transforming; Secondly: the world; and Thirdly: together.**

1) My first point: Transforming.

The vision of the Holy Father is that a Catholic university should be one that engages the world precisely in those places where the Church itself has difficulty being present. The lecture hall, the laboratory, the seminar room, the encounter with secular culture, technology and the professions are the places

where we need to be, - in order to learn and to contribute. The Catholic university is a missionary extension of the Church that “goes forth” to encounter where the Divine might be working.

We need your leadership. We need your guidance. We need your intellect to be present the places of human discovery and where today’s challenges are confronted by men and women of faith and of good will. It is there that the Church has something to offer to a world in need of a *transformation in Christ*, a humanizing, a salvific message, which is always a message of hope; as (the Prooemium 3 of) *Veritatis Gaudium* says (and I quote):

“This vast and pressing task requires, on the cultural level of academic training and scientific study, a broad and generous effort at a radical paradigm shift, or rather – dare I say – at “a bold cultural revolution”. In this effort, the worldwide network of ecclesiastical universities and faculties is 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.” (end of quote)

In other words, Pope Francis expects from the Catholic Universities an ambitious contribution to a great transformation which he himself calls a “cultural revolution”.

As Jesuits listening to a Jesuit (Pope) you would perfectly understand that this does not mean a political revolution for the sake of revolution, not a systemic upset of order and traditions and, certainly, not the ideological promise of those who throughout, and especially in our recent history, promised paradise on earth and ended up in violence and suffering caused by unfulfillable dreams of various ideologies. Was it not the great discovery of St. Ignatius, handed down to us in his “Spiritual Exercises,” that the greatest transformation is one of heart and soul touched by God’s word and Spirit?

So in the midst of all political and societal challenges of our days, we need a *revolution of love*, as Pope Benedict put it in a discourse 8 years ago. There he did not only point to the collapse in our modern belief that science could answer all questions and solve all problems, he also pointed to the relativism and cult of selfishness that this engendered: (and I quote):

“The times in which we live confront us with large and complex problems, and the social question has become an anthropological question at the same time. [...] We must recover and reinvigorate authentic political wisdom; be demanding in what concerns our own sphere of

competency; make discerning use of the research of the human sciences; face reality in all its aspects, going beyond any kind of ideological reductionism or utopian dream; show we are open to true dialogue and collaboration, bearing in mind that politics is also a complex art of equilibrium between ideals and interests, but never forgetting that the contribution of Christians can be effective only if knowledge of faith becomes knowledge of reality, the key to judgement and transformation. What is needed is a real "revolution of love".¹ (end of quote)

Benedict's call for a revolution of love would seem to be the perfect platform for a Catholic university. This same message is echoed in "*Veritatis Gaudium*" which calls on Catholic universities to serve as leaven, salt and light, that is, as messengers of life-sustaining hope.

2) My second point: The world

If the real and lasting transformation begins within the human heart and soul, then it begins where persons open up to listen to the word of God and his Spirit, where people have learned to act based on "*examen*" and discernment. And, where this kind of most fundamental and delicate transformation takes place, our world shall also be transformed. This is the fundament, the basis, if I may say so, for both the individual and for the community of those who work in the intellectual apostolate. It is also true of the institutions themselves, in their mission and their identity. Institutions can undergo – as some of you know well and are used to practice – a real Ignatian "*examen*" and discernment, based on similar motivations and inner processes as those described in the Spiritual Exercises.

Built on this strong and solid foundation, you can serve the Church's mission *to transform the world*; but cannot do so if you remain a "closed club" of auto-referential institutions or choose to do so as solo actors, that is, as individual or institutional "egos," pre-occupied with self-development and self-extension.

The first imperative and condition to transform the world is, therefore, to leave our comfort zones and join with others to approach the peripheries. The Church needs you to go toward the limits, sometimes even beyond them, where human resources, competencies and capacities fail. There, with the weak, we feel our weakness. There, we must depend on God's grace. But there we can experience,

¹ Benedict XVI, Address to the 24th Plenary Session of the Pontifical Council for the Laity, 21 May 2010.

at the same time, an even greater strength in collaborating with God and with others.

One special gift of Jesuit institutions to the Church is the preparation of men and women capable of contributing to the transformation of the world by their astute training and exposure to all that is new and relevant for human flourishing. This means that they require a preparation that exposes them to the diverse ways of understanding the world of the natural sciences, social sciences and humanities. This formation is, however, incomplete without introducing them to the process of discernment and personal reform and renewal. The Ignatian pedagogy that has produced so many leaders in the past, must do so mindful that this age (and I quote *Veritatis Gaudium*), ...

“is marked by a wide-ranging “anthropological” and “environmental crisis”. Indeed, we daily see “signs that things are now reaching a breaking point, due to the rapid pace of change and degradation; these are evident in large-scale natural disasters as well as social and even financial crises”. In a word, this calls for “changing the models of global development” and “redefining our notion of progress”” (end of quote)

The Church needs Catholic institutions that will prepare men and women for leadership in such a world, and dedicated ministers to help her in her accompaniment of the sons and daughters of this new age. She needs to be involved in creating a new paradigm to replace the failed paradigms of the past. Again, as “*Veritatis Gaudium*” says:

“The primary need today is for the whole People of God to be ready to embark upon a new stage of “Spirit-filled” evangelization.”

The great challenges and opportunities of this present moment are such that they will clearly determine the future of the planet and the human race. When we think of the potential contributions of technology, its impact on our understanding of human nature and the meaning of the person, the possible uses and abuses of artificial intelligence, for example, we know how much we need universities, especially **catholic universities**. When we consider the future of democracy and our regional and global need for order and solidarity in order to preserve human freedom and sustain our need for true communities of justice and peace, we are acutely aware of the need for training men and women who appreciate the importance of the Common Good and the wisdom enshrined in Catholic Social Thought. When we reflect on the urgent need for understanding and dialogue between and among diverse religious communities, we can only urge that Catholic faculties engage the important questions of this age with a

spirit of dialogue and discernment. And, when we see the tragedy of unhealed wounds of individuals, groups and nations, we can only hope that Catholic universities will engage such challenges with justice and understanding, peace and reconciliation as their guiding inspiration.

3) My third point and final word: “Together”

I have already touched on this point, but let me stress the need for collaboration. It would be a feeble effort and certainly not the fruit of real discernment to try to engage such a mission alone. This principle holds true for the individual person but also for the single higher education institution, which far too often focuses on competition with sister institutions of the same order, or even, with the whole Society with its more than 200 Universities. No single institution could hope to impact on these issues in any significant way without living and working with others. This means that the Catholic university is one that insists on “dialogue” as its *modus operandi*, its “way of proceeding,” as you Jesuits would call it. This is another principle underscored in *Veritatis Gaudium* (Prooemium 4 - b): (I quote)

“A second guiding criterion,.....is that of wide-ranging dialogue, not as a mere tactical approach, but as an intrinsic requirement for experiencing in community the joy of the Truth and appreciating more fully its meaning and practical implications. Today our proclamation of the Gospel and the Church’s doctrine are called to promote a culture of encounter,[41] in generous and open cooperation with all the positive forces that contribute to the growth of universal human consciousness. A culture, we might say, of encounter between all the authentic and vital cultures, thanks to a reciprocal exchange of the gifts of each in that luminous space opened up by God’s love for all his creatures.” (end of quote)

Dialogue does not mean that we speak only with those who share the same opinions. We need a broad dialogue, respectful, but also with a clear personal standpoint, with a high and positive identification with the Church.

And, our dialogue must be broad and wide-ranging, with society at large, with scientists and teachers of other subjects and fields of studies and especially with students coming from different social groups to which your Universities serve.

Dialogue is also requested with and within the Church; in moments of shared joys and success, as well as, in moments of difficulties and possible tensions, when it is not easy to keep the right balance between moving toward and

beyond frontiers, bringing with us the unalterable patrimony of our faith and morals of the Church.

In closing, ... At this meeting in which you will establish a worldwide association, that is, *one family of Jesuit Higher education Institutions*, my special wish and recommendation is that you too invest in dialogue within the Jesuit Order, between higher education institutions and other institutions and individuals, teaching and working in intellectual apostolates outside your institutions, or in other apostolates.

In some of the famous missions of the Jesuit order, in the past, an important means of evangelization had been Choirs and music. As Prefect of the Congregation, when it comes to the Society and its institutions, I would sometimes like to hear more polyphonic music than the many single soloists whose music rises to our offices in Rome, even if they are famous and well-known soloists!

Dialogue means listening to each other, knowing each other better. And, if asked or requested, it also means joining voices in one polyphonic Chorus, to offer one great Hymn of Praise and Thanksgiving “*Ad maiorem Dei gloriam*”.