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## *The Catholic university faced with the challenge of the waste of reason*

**Abstract:** The article deals with the essence and mission of the Catholic University. The author presents the common belief about the discrepancy between the orders of faith and reason. He pays attention to the fact that in research human cognition has been reduced to its utilitarian and positivist approach. In consequence, human cognition is detached from transcendence and science from the concept of objective truth. Therefore, the mission of the university is to restore the original unity of faith and reason.

**Keywords:** reason, rationality, faith, Catholic university, truth

**Abstrakt:** Artykuł dotyczy istoty i misji uniwersytetu katolickiego. Autor wskazując na powszechne przeświadczenie dotyczące rozdzwienku porządków wiary i rozumu zwraca uwagę na fakt, że w badaniach rozum ludzki został zredukowany do rozumu utylitarneho i pozytywistycznego. W konsekwencji ludzkie poznanie zostaje odcięte od transcendencji, a nauka od pojęcia prawdy obiektywnej. Misją uniwersytetu jest zatem przywrócenie pierwotnej jedności wiary i rozumu.

**Słowa kluczowe:** rozum, racjonalność, wiara, uniwersytet katolicki, prawda

### **The contemporary mission of the Catholic university**

We lack the historical distance to ascertain with what depth, and above all with what courage, the authority of Pope Benedict XVI will contribute to the redefinition and thus the revival of the Catholicity of the university. In the author's view, the method used is discreet, thanks to top-notch speeches given in various university settings; cheerful and joyful, with this joy of seeking the truth and serving it; framed by the Word of God, which is the first and ultimate source of dialogue between Faith and Reason.

What is the essence of a university if not an ever deeper understanding of the vocation of the university? The **mission** of the university was defined in the very first words of the Apostolic Constitution *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* [John Paul II 1990], which is still considered the foundation of Catholic universities today: “The particular task of the university is ‘the existential unification in intellectual work of two orders of reality which are too often juxtaposed to each other, as if they were mutually contradictory: these orders are, on the one hand, the search for truth and, on the other, the certainty that one already knows the source of truth’”.

This definition takes note of the dramatic rift between faith and reason. This rift has a long history, but we have not yet finished measuring and experiencing its repercussions in our own lives. By closing itself off to all transcendence, reason has mutilated itself and is reduced to its positivist and utilitarian dimension: “As a result, the question that gave birth to the university – about the truth and the good – disappears, in the end, to be replaced by the question of what is feasible” [Benedykt XVI 2005]. Thus, the university – and not only the Catholic university – is subjected to the dismantling of the organicity of knowledge, to its segmentation and commercialisation, capturing young minds and sacrificing them entirely to the feasible, the monetisable and the profitable. At the same time, everyone is confusedly aware that a narrow rationality (be it technical, economic, political, etc.) is unable to meet the challenges that beset our societies: economic and financial crisis, climate change, intercultural tensions, and the search for harmonious coexistence.

If such societal challenges are indeed embedded in a shallow and impoverished conception of human reason, then it is not surprising that Benedict XVI encourages us to redefine the University based on a broadened and therefore enriched understanding; he invites us to “...have the courage to open ourselves to the depths of reason and not to deny its greatness [...] The great task of the University is to find it again and again” [Benedict XVI 2006].

Rediscovering the depths of human reason: this is how Benedict XVI expresses the contemporary task of the university. It is a theme that is very close to his heart, as can be seen by the number of speeches in which he invokes this urgent need to re-enlarge reason so that it does not close itself off from the transcendence. The Catholic University is thus called to contribute to a new union of faith and reason, which need each other desperately. This synergy constitutes the very genesis and

development of the University<sup>1</sup>: when human reason starts to search for what is essential, true, and “ultimate”, i.e. God, He Himself comes to meet us through His Word revealed in Sacred Scripture. In what follows, we propose a Word which meets today’s often anaemic modern reason and which outlines the contemporary task of the Catholic university.

**“A man had two sons...” (Luke 15:11-32)**

Since the discussion about God is linked to the possibility of an analogous discussion about man, the Christian educational activity became, very early on, part of the process of initiation into faith: *transmission and learning* are two ways of acquiring knowledge that complement each other, as faith and reason do. It is the grammar of faith that teaches us to read and write; and this is what the centuries-old Catholic educational tradition testifies to: the transmission of faith is the prototype of all transmission that is inseparable from learning: “Go therefore and **make** disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and **teaching** them to obey everything that I have commanded you” (Matthieu 28:18-20). There is an organic link between *transmission* and *learning*, which is illustrated by the adventure of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32).

“Then Jesus said, “A man had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the estate that will belong to me.’ So he divided his assets between them. After a few days, the younger son gathered together all he had and left on a journey to a distant country, and there he squandered his wealth with a wild lifestyle. Then after he had spent everything, a severe famine took place in that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and worked for one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He was longing to eat the carob pods the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. But when he came to his senses he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired workers have food enough to spare, but here I am dying from hunger! I will get up and go to my father and say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired workers.”’”

<sup>1</sup> The search for God therefore requires from the outset a culture of the word, which has been progressively built up through the emergence of various secular sciences. If seeking the truth means seeking God, Edith Stein reminds us, then the search for God not only produces a culture but also leads us to the truth about beings and things. In other words, the search for God has produced and continues to produce academic science and knowledge which, in turn, allow us to ‘perceive, in the midst of words, the Word of God’. To put it another way, faith uses the fertility of reason so that it becomes, in turn, its servant.

So he got up and went to his father. But while he was still a long way from home his father saw him, and his heart went out to him; he ran and hugged his son and kissed him. Then his son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ But the father said to his slaves, ‘Hurry! Bring the best robe, and put it on him! Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet! Bring the fattened calf and kill it! Let us eat and celebrate, because this son of mine was dead, and is alive again – he was lost and is found!’ So they began to celebrate.

Now his older son was in the field. As he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the slaves and asked what was happening. The slave replied, ‘Your brother has returned, and your father has killed the fattened calf because he got his son back safe and sound.’ But the older son became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and appealed to him, but he answered his father, ‘Look! These many years I have worked like a slave for you, and I never disobeyed your commands. Yet you never gave me even a goat so that I could celebrate with my friends! But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your assets with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!’ Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and everything that belongs to me is yours. It was appropriate to celebrate and be glad, for your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost and is found.’”

Let’s examine in depth the interpretation of the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32), in which the Prodigal Son’s initial departure from his father’s house symbolises the reason that has drifted away from faith. It is the youngest son, i.e. reason which – during its young years – becomes carried away by an unreasonable desire for autonomy, forgetting that it owed its first merits to the fatherhood of faith.

**“Father, give me the share of the estate that will belong to me”**

Reason no longer grasps the legacy of faith as a gift but as a duty, as if faith restrained it in its insatiable desire to know. This is still too often the unjust reproach levelled at the Christian religion with regard to the progress of scientific knowledge. Christianity has always regarded the questioning reason as part of the very essence of the Christian religion<sup>2</sup>. The Christian faith is not conceived in a positivist way, nor as a way out of unsatisfied desires, but as the dispelling of the

<sup>2</sup> In the now famous speech he was to give at the Sapienza in Rome in January 2008.

mythological fog of religion, which makes it possible to discover God who is the Creative Reason and at the same time Reason-Love. The archetype of the principle of secularism – consisting precisely in distinguishing the world from the One who shaped it – is also rooted here. And it is precisely in this requirement and for this purpose that the university was born in the Christian world.

**“So Father divided his assets between them”**

Just as faith is a free act of the will, God respects human freedom: He allows Himself to be dispossessed, whereas He wanted to offer everything, to offer Himself. But this takes time and mutual understanding. Reason, deliberately cut off from faith, immediately loses the principle of unity: *“the younger son gathered together all he had and left on a journey to a distant country”*. Reason immediately feels the need to bring together what already seems to be dispersed and disorganised. The hyper-specialisation of methodical knowledge makes one forget its organic nature, i.e. its common source, evoked by faith and even by nature. But the split has already taken place, so that it can be seen: reason, young and impulsive, has already left on a journey *“to a distant country”*; the paternal and sapiential home has already disappeared before his eyes.

**“... and there he squandered his wealth with a wild lifestyle”**

Having lost the principle of organic unity, everything happens as if reason saw its knowledge disintegrate and dissipate against its will; and this in exact contrast to the cumulative logic of transmission, which is often expressed through outlay and accumulation. By leading *“a wild lifestyle”*, called rather to order and articulate what is true and good, reason – conversely – denies its identity and even its *raison d’être*. The organic vision of knowledge that feeds the unitive end of human action then gives way to the critical chains of events that affect reason itself. In a noteworthy synthesis, P. Ide [2011] details how the conception of the University elaborated by Benedict XVI takes note of this chain of events in four stages: (i) the fragmentation and breakdown of knowledge feeds (ii) scepticism and relativism, which lead to (iii) the positivist and utilitarian reduction of reason, ultimately reducing it (iv) to mere immanence.

**“Then after he had spent everything, a severe famine took place in that country”**

The inexhaustible depth of the Word of God! What is the meaning of the reason which has squandered everything? If not that it has come to question its very foundations. And it is at the very moment when the very concept of nature is being heavily abused – for example, through *gender theory* or the apparent omnipotence of

technology – that the same nature suddenly, without warning, comes back to the fore. Climate change, deadly earthquakes, tsunamis... Man experiences the often cruel but perhaps salutary experience of an absolute lack of control. Nature, in its capacity for analogy, refers man to a meaning, to a word, in short, to a logos situated beyond the human control and the nature surrounding him. Nature, however badly it may be treated today, retains this analogical dimension; it suggests directions towards the good and, in a certain way, reminds man of his dignity and therefore of his duties.

Nature is a harsh mistress of life: for reason, which has *squandered everything*, exploited and henceforth miserable, the descent into hell is not yet over. No longer able to satisfy its own needs, the emaciated reason is reduced to employing itself under such degrading conditions that it comes to envy the animal condition: *He was longing to eat the carob pods the pigs were eating*. And indeed it is fashionable today to deny the ontological difference between man and animal, to the extent that we see the animal when we look at ourselves, and when we look at the animal we see the human in it.

#### “...he came to his senses”

Even in the depths of its misery, reason retains the capacity to come to its senses, to acknowledge its errors; in short, to reason in a sound manner! It is this same look of hope that we must spread over what is now called the new society of knowledge, despite its errors. This recovery begins with material and even survival considerations: “*here I am dying from hunger!*”. To restore its taste for life, to dispel the doubts that reason has about itself: these are the first steps that the Church, the Christian educational community and the university pastoral work can take to help reason. But this presupposes being vigilant, observing from afar the desire of our contemporaries to find the path of faith, and then reaching out to them, like a father who, seeing his son from afar, from very far away, is overwhelmed with pity and reaches out to restore his son’s dignity. In short, the task of the university is to bear the mark of Divine Mercy.

Mercy reveals the very essence of the divine fatherhood, even its heart. It is what gives form to the moral law given to man. In other words, it is precisely because “our lineage comes from him” (Acts 17:28) that “your law is within my heart” (Psalm 40:9): this is the very heart of the moral theology which we must tirelessly proclaim and promote.

Insofar as it is appropriate to continue and deepen this symbolic meditation<sup>3</sup>, it is worth adding another word about the behaviour of the elder son, which perhaps

<sup>3</sup> I propose a commentary developed by Vermersch (2018).

symbolises another way of using reason. The parable does not tell us what happened to the elder son, leaving open the possibility that he, too, may have drifted away from his father. It is symptomatic in this context that he never utters the word ‘father’. This father has only one desire for him: to pass on to him all his good, i.e. the life of God. But what understanding of this good did the elder son have? “Look! These many years I have worked like a slave for you, and I never disobeyed your commands. Yet you never gave me even a goat so that I could celebrate with my friends!” Ultimately, the elder son did not enjoy his freedom, in the sense that he did not understand that his father had already given him all his good: “Son, you are always with me, and everything that belongs to me is yours.” The path to the Good, the path towards the Good, is also unfailingly the path of human freedom, the test of human freedom; such is the common experience of the two sons: “Truth and freedom either go together hand in hand or together they perish in misery” [John Paul II 1998: 90]. There seems to be a taming relationship between freedom and truth. For truth is revealed in space, in fidelity to the very Word of God (John 8:32), which leads to true freedom, the freedom of the sons of God who have possessed the true good. May that space be, more than ever, that of the Catholic university.

Mercy summarises the divine knowledge to be imprinted on the human heart and reason. It is thus the first and ultimate medium of the transmission of knowledge, gently suggesting its unity and organicity. The Parable of the Prodigal Son is thus presented as a University parable: *ex corde ecclesiae*; the University has been born and is continually reborn from the heart of the Church, which receives its life and the gift of Mercy from the Pierced Heart of Jesus.

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