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Letter of the Cardinal Secretary of State to the President of the “Giuseppe Toniolo” Institute of Higher Education on the occasion of the 100th “Day for the Catholic University”

The following is the Letter sent by Cardinal Secretary of State Pietro Parolin to the president of the “Giuseppe Toniolo” Institute of Higher Education, Archbishop Mario Delpini of Milan, on the occasion of the 100th National Day for the University of the Sacred Heart, celebrated today on the theme “Demand for the future: young people between disenchantment and desire”:

Letter

To His Most Reverend Excellency
Archbishop MARIO DELPINI of Milan
President of the “G. Toniolo” Institute of Higher Education

From the Vatican, 9 April 2024

Most Reverend Excellency,

There are places where the future seems to arrive first. One of these is the university world, because it is where tomorrow’s professionals are prepared and the research from which often the most decisive innovations for the progress of the human family are derived is developed. Today, important expectations are focused on the future, but at the same time threatening clouds seem to be gathering; and young people, within the academic environment, perceive and experience this tension with particular intensity. The theme chosen to celebrate the 100th National Day for the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart: “*Demand of the future: young people between disenchantment and desire*” is located in this context.

From this perspective, we cannot remain prisoners of the past, nor can we project ourselves towards tomorrow naively and hastily. Instead, it is necessary to fuel the awareness that everything is played out in the present,

because there will be no true future if we do not live today fully. Pope Francis has reiterated on several occasions that one cannot address the young thinking of them only in relation to the future, because they represent primarily the present: “You young people must fight for your space today, because life is living for today”, he said, during World Youth Day in Panama. “No one can make promises to you about a day in the future. Your life is today. Your taking risks is today. Your space is today. ... You, dear young people, are not the future... you are the present!” (*Homily*, 27 January 2019).

The urgency of offering young people the best conditions to build the future starting from the present was perceived fully by the founders of the Catholic University, who wished to catalyse the attention of the entire ecclesial community around the nascent university, obtaining from Pope Pius XI the institution of a specific national Day. Pontiff's regard for this proposal was such that he considered his support for the project a tribute to his own person: “There is no doubt that in this University Day, celebrated in all Italy, from the largest centres down to the smallest places, with such intelligence of goodness and such generosity, we see *a second day of the Pope*, so directly does it respond to one of Our most fervent desires” (*Address to Roman friends of the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart*, 1 June 1924).

A century later we can understand the reasons for such a strong bond and the great expectations placed on the Catholic University. The ideal and material investment was so huge that, while it was still taking its first steps, thanks to widespread mobilization and impressive fundraising, the University had already received – an extraordinary fact – civil recognition from Victor Emanuel III (cf. Royal Decree of 2 October 1924, no. 1661). Now that “the Catholic” is among the country's most important and prestigious universities and assumes an ever more relevant role also at international level, we can see how fruitful and farsighted was the intuition of the founders, especially Fr. Agostino Gemelli and Blessed Armida Barelli, supported with great determination by the Supreme Pontiff.

Gemelli's vision of the future was so wide-ranging that, while he was forming the Milanese institute, he initiated a capillary network to give rise to an international network of Catholic universities. Indeed, the establishment of the *International Federation of Catholic Universities* (IFCU) is due primarily to him. The Holy Father, receiving the association on the occasion of its centenary celebrations, reiterated how valuable the work had been, and how relevant its contribution is to the mission of the Church today. Indeed, after recalling the potential of the approximately two thousand Catholic universities spread around the world, also in terms of promoting peace and integral development, he emphasized the unique character of its formative project: “A greater passion must animate the university, as evidenced in a shared search for truth, a greater horizon of meaning, lived out in a community of knowledge where the liberality of love is palpable” (*Address to the IFCU*, 19 January 2024).

This year marks another important anniversary for the world of youth and universities. Precisely 14 April marks forty years since the first great gathering of young people who, organized in the context of the Holy Year of Redemption, became the seed from which the World Youth Days blossomed. On that occasion, Saint John Paul II consigned the cross to the young people, with the mission of taking it into the world as a sign that there is salvation in Jesus, who died and rose again. In this regard, Pope Francis recently reminded young people that “only in this way, in the light of His presence, will your memory of the past prove fruitful, will you find courage in the present and be prepared to face the future with hope ... and to be in turn the leaders of tomorrow, ‘artisans’ of the future” (*Message to young people for the fifth anniversary of the Apostolic Exhortation Christus vivit*, 25 March 2024).

The link between World Youth Day and university pastoral care gradually became closer, up to the event in Lisbon last year, when the Holy Father devoted a specific meeting to the university world, outlining a sort of “manifesto” for the mission of Catholic universities in our time. Precisely because young people cannot be robbed of their future, he invited them to invest with great courage in the present in order to respond to the healthy restlessness that dwells in their minds and in their hearts: “We are called to something higher, and we will never be able to soar unless we first take flight. We should not be alarmed, then, if we sense an inner thirst, a restless, unfulfilled longing for meaning and a future, *com saudade do futuro!*” (*Address to the Portuguese University*, 3 August 2023).

In encouraging us to ardently embrace this outburst of goodness, similar to a confident and silent sowing in the present, which allows for the abundance of tomorrow's harvest, Pope Francis, sharing Pius XI's affection and hope for the University and appreciating its presence, commitment and development, renews His closeness and His paternal accompaniment, and heartily imparts a special Apostolic Blessing to Your Excellency, the Rector Magnificent, the General Ecclesiastical Assistant, the members of the Toniolo Institute, the distinguished Professors, the technical-administrative staff and all the students, asking to be remembered in prayer.

Adding my cordial good wishes and heartfelt congratulations for the prestigious goals achieved, I avail myself of the circumstance to express my sincerest regards to your Most Reverend Excellency,

Devoted in the Lord

Pietro Cardinal Parolin
Secretary of State
