



Photo: The Pope with the Rectors of the Pontifical Universities in Rome ©Vatican Media

## **Five Foundational Insights for Catholic Universities**

### *A Proposal for Integral Renewal Rooted in the Gospel*

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#### **Introduction**

Pope Francis's pontificate has been a constant appeal to rethink ecclesial structures in the light of the Gospel and contemporary cultural challenges. Within this process of renewal, the Catholic university — and especially the ecclesiastical one — holds a strategic place. It is not merely a matter of preserving a legacy, but of updating its mission as a space for integral formation, for fruitful dialogue between faith and reason, and for radiating the Gospel within culture.

Through documents such as *Evangelii Gaudium*, *Veritatis Gaudium*, his promotion of the Global Compact on Education, and numerous interventions in academic contexts, Francis has offered a multifaceted and thought-provoking vision of higher education. This article presents five major crosscutting orientations of his magisterium — not as a closed framework, but as an open invitation to institutional discernment and a renewal full of hope.

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## **1. The *Kerygma* as the Heart of the University's Mission**

In the Apostolic Constitution *Veritatis Gaudium*, Pope Francis proposes as the first criterion for renewal “First, the most urgent and enduring criterion is that of contemplation and the presentation of a spiritual, intellectual and existential introduction to the heart of the *kerygma*” (*VG*, n. 4).

This is not about adding a religious veneer to a neutral academic structure, but about placing the proclamation of Jesus Christ — crucified and risen — as the formative principle, intellectual horizon, and vital center of the university. From this perspective, knowledge becomes a path of conversion, and study an ecclesial act.

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## **2. The University as a “Choir”: Communion in Diversity**

In an address to the Pontifical Universities of Rome (25 February 2023), Francis evoked the image of a choir to describe university life:

“It is not a school of uniformity: no, it is one of harmony and consonance among different voices and instruments.”

This musical image expresses a theology of communion applied to education: disciplines, knowledge, charisms, cultures, and persons are all called to harmonize within a common project. This requires structures that promote interdisciplinarity, collaborative work, and the overcoming of institutional fragmentation.

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## **3. Integral Formation: Mind, Heart, and Hands**

Francis has insisted on an education that integrates the three dimensions of the person: the intelligence of the mind (rigorous knowledge), the intelligence of the heart (inner and affective life), and the intelligence of the hands (practical commitment).

This integral pedagogy not only corresponds to a complete Christian anthropology, but is also a condition for real cultural transformation. The Catholic university cannot be satisfied with forming technicians, nor be limited to training specialists: it is called to educate wise individuals, capable of uniting contemplation and action, study and service.

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## **4. Knowledge as Service: A University that “Goes Forth”**

From *Evangelii Gaudium* to his message to the Pontifical Athenaeum Regina Apostolorum (30 October 2023), the Pope has reiterated that knowledge must not be confined to “specialized circles,” but must be at the service of the Church and the common good.

This perspective implies a missionary conversion of the university: to go forth, to read the signs of the times, and to face cultural and social challenges with evangelical creativity. When a Catholic university lives out this dynamic, it becomes a laboratory of cultural evangelization.

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## **5. Educating to Transform: Sowing in Fertile Ground**

In the context of the Global Compact on Education (2019), the Pope emphasized that every epochal change requires a deep educational process. On several occasions, he has described the educational mission with the image of the sower:

“Unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (John 12:24).

To sow with hope, in dialogue with concrete reality, forming people capable of rebuilding the social fabric based on an integral vision of the human being. The university cannot be content with preserving knowledge or reproducing outdated models: it must be a prophetic presence, capable of generating new syntheses between faith, science, culture, and ethics.

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### **Conclusion: An Open and Communal Task**

These five orientations outline a shared horizon that does not impose uniformity, but calls for evangelical authenticity, institutional courage, and creative fidelity to the mission. The Catholic university is called to renew itself from the center: the living Christ. But also from the margins: dialogue with the world, care for our common home, encounter with those who are different, and attention to existential peripheries.

Francis’s legacy raises questions that can guide deep communal discernment:

- How can we ensure that the proclamation of Christ is truly — and not just rhetorically — at the center of our university projects?
- Are we generating real spaces of collaboration among disciplines, people, and institutions?
- Does our structure form persons or merely produce specialists?
- What place do prayer, fraternity, and service hold in daily academic life?
- Are we sowing seeds for the future, or repeating models that no longer respond to today’s challenges?

Answering these questions is not the task of a single actor, nor of a one-time effort. It requires a permanent attitude of institutional conversion, nourished by the Gospel and sustained by a living academic community. Only in this way can the Catholic university be, in the 21st century, a place where truth is passionately sought, humbly lived, and joyfully offered.

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