

The Responsibility of Universities in the Developing Countries on the Threshold of the XX1st Century

By

LOURDES J. CUSTODIO*

We stand at the threshold of a new millennium! We have lived a unique period in the history of civilization characterized by an amazing technological innovation, a rare economic opportunity, an astonishing political reform and a remarkable cultural rebirth.

At the dawn of a new era, humankind seems, however, to be gripped by an attitude of uncertainty. We are moving between a past that is being overturned and a future which is being imperceptibly announced as the beginning of a new culture with uncertain features. We are not simply before a critical crossroads. We are in many turning points of a long and winding road that humanity has traversed from prehistoric civilizations, through the long agrarian period to the more recent Industrial Revolution. Now we are dealing with the ambitious and difficult transition of all: the transition towards a *Global Society* that is *Interdependent* and oriented towards an ever-increasing globalization in all orders. This has been called the period of "*The Great Transition*".¹

Everything seems to contribute, in a way never known before, to this reality. The international political field, the economy, the environment, communications, culture, the realm of ideas - all are moving towards this reality, affecting each and everyone of the world's inhabitants. But with a

*Dr. Lourdes J. Custodio is the Dean of the College of Education, University of Santo Tomas, Manila. The following pages are an excerpt from her *Discurso de Apertura* for the Schoolyear 1993-1994, delivered on June 1993 at the University of Santo Tomas Chapel.

¹Alexander King and Bertrand Schneider, *The First Global Revolution: A Report by the Council of the Club of Rome* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1991), p. XIX

difference from the past. The process of profound change before had influenced gradually throughout many generations, thus allowing for a certain psychological adjustment. Today, the process of change has taken on such an accelerated pace as to leave no time for the needed adjustment.

CHALLENGES POSED BY THE NEW HORIZON OF THE XXIST CENTURY

A central feature of the global situation is the enormous increase in the totality of human activity that has led to a huge rise in the demand for raw materials and energy. Much of this is due to the rapid though uneven growth of the world population in this century.

This situation radically modifies the basic total demands of food, housing, education and health services. Concomitantly, all would like to have access to consumer products proper to the economy of consumerism, impelled by the natural expectations of peoples who are becoming more and more aware of their rights and better informed as well, thanks to the knowledge extension and advances in communications.

There is an even more powerful factor in the growth of human activity - the increased consumption per capita that economic growth has made possible. This, in turn, has reciprocally been a cause of that growth. A clear evidence of this phenomenon is the proliferation of mass-produced goods spawned by the factories of the industrialized world. We live, indeed, in a consumerist society. But there is still another consumption of human, material and energy resources particularly for military purposes as a source of work and profit for some developed countries. That such a criminally wasteful use of resources is tolerated is incomprehensible in the face of extensive hunger, poverty, disease and underdevelopment.

The growth of the economies has been accompanied by an alarming deterioration of the biosphere with serious consequences to the climate, food production, availability of potable water. These series of problems have become the greatest threats to human survival for not even beyond the XXIst century. This is the forecast, if the actual consumeristic practices continue as well as the unabated use of energy and all other kinds of natural resources, in the absence of programs for saving and their massive recycling.

We are also before the grave uncertainty of global food supply in the face of a production and distribution seriously affected by the persistent barriers of international commerce and the unjust imbalances in the prices of raw materials. The market economy is devoid of a frame of social reference, operating so often at the cost of underdevelopment, insensitive to international cooperation and alien to the indispensable solidarity among countries.

Added to all these is the tremendous disparity existing among countries in the matter of technological advancement and well-being. There are

likewise, astronomical debts, both internal and external, beginning with the more powerful economically and followed by the overwhelming debt of the developing countries. These developing countries have very scarce participation in the global economy which thrives increasingly on alternative raw materials and applies mercilessly the principles of competitiveness.

Lastly, a new defensive insecurity exists which rests on the vacuum left by what was a mutually well-defined ideological enemy. The strategies of defense must now face the diverse problems deriving from economic imbalances, uneven demographic pressures, ecological devastation, famine, fanaticism, racism, revivals of excessive nationalism. Over and above all these is the generalized threat of confrontation between the billions, who are disinherited and marginalized, and the materially privileged. In spite of the very positive efforts towards disarmament, there remains the threatening reality of the accumulated nuclear capacity for annihilating.

Thus far is the new scenario presented by the XXIst century. We are at the turn of a new historical era. Not only do new problems arise, which are political, social, economic, and environmental, but other local events acquire a global dimension owing to the all-pervasiveness of the mass media. All of these happen in the context of a new international order.

It is noteworthy that the aforesaid societal situation at the dawn of the XXIst century turn out to be challenges to the universities as well. The well being of humanity will, to a significant extent, be influenced by the capacity of the universities to respond to these challenges. The universities must, therefore, approach reality lest they give up continuing their mission of service to society. They must, in the first place, clarify their identity.

THE IDENTITY OF A UNIVERSITY

The question of the university's identity needs to be asked periodically and what better time to do it than at the portals of the new millennium. In every new beginning we tend to look back to consider past experiences, in preparation for new departures. The importance of the university in modern life cannot be ignored and its role will be increasingly more relevant as its scientific outputs will become more necessary in the decision-making process of governments.

The question proposed by John Henry Newman² a century ago, on "*What is a university?*" is still relevant today. It has, in fact, become one of the foremost concerns of people who meditate on the future of humanity and the place of learning and reflection in a rapidly changing society.

²John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986), Discourse V, pp. 75-93.

In the developing countries, the question on what a university is has been extended and two questions are posed: "*What is a university for?*" and "*How should a university be organized?*"

Karl Jaspers³ in his book on "The Idea of a University" proposed three things to be required of a university: professional training, education of the whole man and research.

This essential mission - which may be conveniently explored through the concepts of *universality*, *diversity* and *interdependence* - must always be taken into account in reflecting on the issues confronting the university in the modern world⁴. Perennial questions relating to the social functions of the university, the relevance of the curricula, university autonomy, academic freedom, and mass higher education cannot be addressed meaningfully without a clear understanding of the fundamental purposes of the university.

The university is a prominent actor in modern life. With some sixty million students and university mentors and researchers, the whole higher education community represents a formidable force with a real impact on future developments in all spheres of life.

NEEDED RESPONSE OF UNIVERSITIES TO THE CHALLENGES FACING THEM AT THE TURN OF THE XXIST CENTURY

I will highlight 10 of the needed responses of the universities to the aforesaid challenges:

- 1) Universities are considered the cradle of future decision-makers and change agents of society, since they have the age-old responsibility in training leaders for society. They are uniquely able to provide the breadth of training to equip them for a world in which interrelations between economic, technological, ethical and social issues are of extreme importance.
- 2) Universities must be centers of accurate and relevant information and dispassionate thinking about society's problems.

Although there are demands upon universities to produce "relevant" research, directed to the solution of urgent problems, the highest priority should still be given to basic research, for that is their most enduring contribution to society, one they are uniquely fitted to make.

³Karl Jaspers, *The Idea of a University*. Trans. H.A.T. Reiche and H.F. Vanderschmidt (London: Peter Owen Limited, 1965) p. 51-74.

⁴Federico Mayor, UNESCO Director General, Address to the Participants of the General Congress of the International Association of Universities, (Helsinki, August, 1990)

There can be linkages established between academic research and industrial research, where the latter can produce wealth and give assistance to the needy as well. One of the concerns of university instruction must be to communicate to future researchers a sense of responsibility to society.

- 3) Universities are deciding to a great extent the future of the nation where they are located, specifically because they have the highest intellectual reserves in their respective countries which supply the ever-growing knowledge and trained manpower. No other institution of the intellect is better equipped to cope with the aim of contributing to a sustainable development based on scientific rigor than the universities. Thus, the quality and extension of their impact upon society impose upon them moral duties and an enormous responsibility.
- 4) In the developing countries confronted by rapid changes resulting from the overwhelming influence of science and technology, much of the scientific research and technological innovation are pursued for goals of industrialization and militarization. Considering hunger, disease, illiteracy still so prevalent in many countries, the powers-that-be need sound advice to redirect the use of science and technology for the benefit of the less privileged in society and that they be pursued in line with environmental concerns.

Politicians require high quality advice in matters and areas such as education, public welfare, health, new technologies, energy, human reproduction and demography and many others. Scientists and experts can bring into the political scene a wealth of experience and wisdom, independence of thought, critical views, disinterestedness, and broadness of outlook that would be for humanity's welfare.

- 5) The Universities of our times are called upon to interpret new cultures in a lucid and critical manner. This should be at the core of their social function and their role as *social critics*. Teaching, learning and pursuing research must be enriched with new cultural perceptions. Universities must become credible and competent partners in the on-going dialogue about emerging cultures, both at the national and international level, for their authority in this respect is not only intellectual but moral as well.
- 6) The university should be the staunchest bastion for the synthesis of knowledge and of human culture sustained by two pillars: the *humanities* and *science*. An effective presence of the humanities in the university is needed. It will be a serious mistake to reduce the university to purely scientific and technological concerns. The rapid development of informatics, of genetic engineering and the all-pervasive instant communication put into the students' hands

keys to dominate nature and an enormous recourse to power. If the university is to avoid a disproportionate development of technology while moral and social progress lag behind, it must imbue the students with ethical criteria for the responsible use of technology.

By its very nature, the role of extreme importance of the university is to offer a solid human formation. The university forms professionals and specialists but, above all, it develops men and women into integral human persons. Undeniably, before they are professionals they are human beings. In the exercise of their profession, it is not possible to separate their human attitudes and their personal conduct from their attitude as professionals.

- 7) The university is called upon to share actively in consolidating the civilization of peace that is emerging. The human and social dimensions of this civilization of peace must be guaranteed. University mentors must be filled with the urgency to build the defenses of peace in the minds of their students. They must be able to touch their hearts so that with regards to "others" they will become persons marked by a passion for peace, justice and solidarity, especially for the weaker sectors of society.
- 8) The potential that research work possesses in all levels to create meaning and the consequent capacity to propose the cultivation of values constitutes essentially the mission of the university. The university must participate actively, deriving from its specific task, in the building of a new humanity in which justice, freedom and the right to a human life becomes a reality for every man, woman, all races, peoples and cultures. At this point, it is important to remind all those concerned that together with the development of research in the physical sciences, social sciences and the humanities, teaching must be accorded all the importance, respect and reward it richly deserves.
- 9) In a world where so much poverty prevails especially in the developing countries, the university must take an option of social service to society which may be rendered through its community outreach programs in marginalized areas. Aside from contributing to development, the students' involvement in these programs greatly help in their acquiring a keen social awareness.
- 10) Universities are called upon to reconcile mass higher education with maintaining the highest standards in scholarship and research. This is both a challenge and an opportunity for universities. One way of enabling more people to enjoy equal educational opportunities and gain access to higher education is through the development of the new technologies of information and the use of mass media of communications for creating programs of distance learning.

The formidable task enumerated above can only be assumed seriously and systematically from an education for the XXIst century in the university.

THE UNIVERSITY OF SANTO TOMAS AND ITS RESPONSIBILITIES AS A CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY IN A DEVELOPING COUNTRY

A Catholic university, by the very fact that it is a university is called upon to assume the responsibilities just mentioned. However, in so far as it is Catholic, it has to undertake a courageous exploration of the riches of Revelation and nature, so that the combined efforts of intelligence and faith may enable men and women to attain their full development as human beings created in the image and likeness of God, renewed even more admirably by Christ after the fall and destined to shine forth in the radiance of the Spirit.

At the dawn of the third millennium, the University of Santo Tomas (UST), is called upon to see if the responsibilities it has assumed as a university and more so as a Catholic university to serve the Church and society are finding fulfillment in the light of the foregoing. A Catholic university, such as ours, pursues its objectives through its formation of an authentic human community animated by the spirit of Christ. The university community, composed of professors, students, administrators and non-academic staff, have their respective roles oriented towards maintaining and strengthening the Catholic character of the institution. The source of unity of the university community, as the Apostolic Constitution of Pope John Paul II on *Catholic Universities* states, "springs from a common dedication to truth, a common vision of the dignity of the human person and, ultimately, the person and message of Christ which gives the institution its distinctive character." (*ECE*, n. 21). A university community that receives such an inspiration is animated by a spirit of freedom and charity and is characterized by mutual respect, sincere dialogue and protection of the rights of individuals.

University professors are expected to continuously improve their competence and endeavor to set the content, objectives, methods, and results of research in an individual discipline within the framework of a coherent world vision. Christian professors are to be witnesses and educators of authentic Christian life which is the result of an integration between faith and life, between professional competence and Christian wisdom. They should be men and women of faith and prayer as well. The students are challenged to combine excellence in humanistic and cultural development in their educational undertaking. Most especially, they must continue the search for truth and for meaning throughout their lives, inasmuch as "the human spirit must be cultivated in such a way that there results growth in its ability to wonder, to understand, to contemplate, to make personal judgments, and to develop a religious, moral and social sense." (*GS*, n. 59)

The students should be made aware as well of the responsibility of their professional life; that they should have the enthusiasm of being the trained

"leaders of tomorrow" and are to be witnesses to Christ in whatever place they may exercise their profession.

In a Catholic university, the administrators are bound to promote the constant growth of the university and its community through a leadership of service. Likewise, the dedication and witness of the non-academic staff are vital for the identity and life of the university.

U.S.T. and Its Role in the New Evangelization Today

As a Catholic university, U.S.T. has to respond to the call of the Church for a new evangelization today. The Second Plenary Council of the Philippines (PCP-II) has also called for a renewed integral evangelization in our country. It must therefore respond and contribute to this new evangelization in its fundamental activities of university life - teaching, research and community service. To be evangelizing, it must first be evangelized. This means that its activities must be re-invigorated by greater openness to the Gospel as it comes to us through the Church. We as members of the university community, made up of scholars representing the various academic disciplines, are to be deeply convinced of the truth of the Gospel as interpreted and proclaimed by the Magisterium of the Church and be ever open and attentive to the presence and work of the Holy Spirit, the principal agent of evangelization. Likewise, Catholic doctrine, ethics, spirituality are to be "vitally present and operative" in all university pursuits. (*ECE*, n. 13)

The legitimate autonomy and unique methods of the various branches of research and knowledge are fully acknowledged by the Church. There is no desire to hamper research or to determine in advance the methods and results of legitimate scholarly inquiry. (*ECE*, no. 14 & 35). In fact, the Church recognizes the importance of such endeavors in their own right as well as their importance for the proclamation of the Gospel (*ECE*, no. 44). Our university has established various research centers with their own specific objectives, characteristic of their field of specialization.

The Church rightly expects, however, that we as a Catholic university be a center where research and teaching are conducted in the light of the Catholic faith and that the professors and students are convinced that the light of faith is a real light. Moreover, that the Church possesses the wisdom to determine what is authentically human and what is contrary to the dignity of the human person, in their research. They make their own, the words of Pope John Paul II: "the priority of ethics over technology, the primacy of the person over things, the superiority of the spirit over matter." (*RH*, no. 16)

We must create an atmosphere in our campus that fosters the formation of authentic Catholic leadership that will be of service to the Church and society. For this to happen, the university's mission of research and teaching must be consciously interrelated and coordinated with the Church's mission

to spread the Gospel.⁵ When such a condition prevails, then our university is truly equipped to contribute to the Church's mission to evangelize the world at the dawn of the third millennium.

U.S.T.'s Responsibilities towards Development

The need for an all out support for development in the present world has been a recurrent call by the Church. Pope Paul VI, in his encyclical *Populorum Progressio* stated that "the social question has become worldwide Today the peoples in hunger are making a dramatic appeal to the peoples blessed with abundance." (PP, n.3) Pope John Paul II, in his encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, recalling the 20th anniversary of *Populorum Progressio* noted that "the hopes for development, at that time so lively, today appear very far from being realized." (SRS, n.12) And in the encyclical *Centesimus Annus*, commemorating the first centennial of *Rerum Novarum*, there is again a call for a concerted worldwide effort to promote development. (CA, n.58)

Our university is doing its share to contribute to this urgent task of development which is not only economic but oriented to the reality and vocation of the human person seen in his totality. (SRS, no.29) The specific contribution of our university in this respect is made through the intellectual, spiritual and social formation of the students.

We should now be confronted with the question: To what purposes are the sciences and the arts that our university dispenses going to serve? What sensitivity to social justice, dedication to the common good have we instilled upon our graduates?

Our university has produced specialists, doctors, lawyers, engineers architects, teachers, nurses, theologians. We need to ask if we have formed persons who are deeply concerned about progress for the disadvantaged. We earnestly hope that the students' formation in the Social Doctrine of the Church and their active participation in the various community outreach programs organized by our university will have created a social sensitivity in them. We justly anticipate that the men and women formed in our university will have a service mentality and "a love of preference for the poor."

The global challenge of a sustainable development at the eve of a new century will require a response marked by competence, skill, disinterested service, a sense of interdependence and concern for an all-encompassing human progress. We know its ultimate secret: the ingenuity, justice and love preached by the Gospel. This is a responsibility that UST has assumed and will continue to assume as its irreplaceable mission.

⁵Pope John Paul II, Address to the International Congress on Catholic Universities, (Rome, April 25, 1989)

Conclusion

On the threshold of a new century, we begin a new schoolyear 1993-1994. Every new beginning, no matter how uncertain at times, always holds a promise. For us believers, we can hold on to God's promise "Behold I make all things new." As we begin anew our task requiring a "courageous creativity and a rigorous fidelity," from each and everyone of us, may the words of our Holy Father addressed to all who are engaged in the mission of a Catholic university, be a shining star to light our path in this journey:

"My encouragement and my trust go with you, in your weighty, daily task that becomes ever more important, more urgent, more necessary, on behalf of evangelization for the future of culture and of all cultures. The Church and the world have great need of your witness and of your capable, free and responsible contribution." (*ECE*, Concl.)

May Mary, the star of evangelization, accompany us in this difficult, yet beautiful journey ahead of us. □