

The timeless 1997 message of John Paul II to universities

Holy Father Saint John Paul II was well known for his unity and close relationship with the academic “world”. He had distinguished himself by the above much earlier as a bishop of Cracow. His meetings, during pontifical visits to Poland, with the academic milieu of the Catholic University of Lublin, University of Warsaw or Toruń University are particularly worth noting. Yet his meetings with the Pontifical Faculty of Theology in Cracow, later transformed into the Pontifical Academy of Theology and finally elevated to the Pontifical University of his name, were something of extraordinary.

It is crucial here to provide the relevant historical background and remind of the papal bull „*Eximiae Devotionis affectus*” issued on 11 January 1397 by Pope Boniface IX to found, at the request of the King of Poland Saint Jadwiga of Anjou (Hedvig) and her husband Władysław Jagiełło (Lithuanian: Jogaila Algirdaitis), the Faculty of Theology at the University in Cracow¹. His Holiness Pope John Paul II, by his bull „*Beata Hedvigis*” of 8 December 1981, called into being the Pontifical Academy of Theology constituted of three faculties: theology, philosophy and Church history². On 19 June 2009 Pope Benedict XVI elevated the Pontifical Academy of Theology to the Pontifical University of John Paul II in Cracow.

It needs to be noted in the above context that on 8 June 1997, during his 6th Papal Pilgrimage to Poland, in Cracow, Pope John Paul II canonized Queen Hedvig of Anjou and later, in the afternoon he met at the Collegiate Church of St. Anne with the academic milieu of Poland to celebrate the 600th Anniversary of the Faculty of Theology. It is at this time that the Conference of Rectors of Academic School in Poland (KRASP), the assembly composed of all the rectors of Polish universities, was established³.

The address made to the academic world by the Holy Father was of tremendous significance for it was the occasion to deliver the papal message to the Polish scientific world. Referring to the historical context of founding the Faculty of Theology, the Jagiellonian University and of the Pontifical Academy of Theology, John Paul II expressed his gratitude for the great work of Queen Hedvig which is still living and developing.

¹ cf. Boniface IX, *Bulla Eximiae Devotionis affectus (11 I 1397)*, Jubileusz Sześćsetlecia Wydziału Teologicznego w Krakowie [The Jubilee of 600th Anniversary of Faculty of Theology In Cracow 20 X 1996-20 X 1997], Kraków 1998, pp. 159-160.

² cf. John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Motu Proprio Beata Hedvigis* establishing the Pontifical Academy of Theology in Kraków, The Jubilee of 600th Anniversary of Faculty of Theology In Cracow 20 X 1996-20 X 1997, pp. 162-165.

³ cf. John Paul II, *Przemówienie wygłoszone z okazji sześćsetlecia Wydziału Teologicznego Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego [Address on the Occasion of 600th Anniversary of the Faculty of Theology of the Jagiellonian University]*, Cracow 8 June 1997, *Pielgrzymki do Ojczyzny [Pilgrimages to the home country] 1979-1983-1987-1991-1995-1997-1999-2002*, *Przemówienia, homilie [Addresses, Homilies]*, Kraków 2005, pp. 983-990.

During this meeting the Pope made a special address to the Pontifical Academy of Theology and reflected upon the time when the Faculty of Theology had been removed from the Jagiellonian University as well as upon his subsequent endeavours – as a bishop of Cracow – to create new academic and structural reality. John Paul II said: *How then can I fail today, on the occasion of this Jubilee celebration, to give thanks to God who has enabled us not only to defend this great spiritual treasure of the Theology Faculty, but also to enlarge it and grant it a new, even more prestigious academic status? And thus the Pontifical Academy of Theology, together with other Catholic centres of learning in our homeland, is making its own contribution to the development of Polish learning and culture, while remaining a particular witness of our times - times of struggle for the right of theological athenaea to have a place in the academic landscape of present-day Poland*⁴. It was also crucially important to raise the questions: What is the university today? What is its role in today's culture and society? And now, we have reached this timeless message to all universities – and I believe – to all universities in the world.

Message which is still valid

What made John Paul II's address significant is his re-acknowledging the University as the *Alma Mater*. The mother who gives birth and educates, who shows concern, and University is like that in this respect. *This is a spiritual concern: that of giving birth to souls for the sake of knowledge, wisdom, the shaping of minds and hearts. It is a contribution which is absolutely incomparable*⁵.

The Pope reminded as well that the university is called **to serve the truth**, to uncover it and to convey to others. He stated: *Man transcends the boundaries of individual branches of knowledge in order to direct them towards that Truth and towards the definitive fulfillment of his own humanity. Here we can speak of the solidarity of the various branches of knowledge at the service of man, called to discover ever more completely the truth about himself and the world around him, the cosmos. (...) The knowledge of truth begets a spiritual joy (...)*⁶. John Paul II considered it imperative to give courage and hope in seeking the truth: *If today, as Pope, I am here with you, men and women of science, it is to tell you that the men and women of our time need you. They need your scientific curiosity, your perceptiveness in asking questions and your honesty in trying to answer them. They also need that specific transcendence which is proper to Universities. The search for truth, even when it concerns a finite reality of the world or of man, is never-ending, but always points beyond to something higher than the immediate object of study, to the questions which give access to Mystery. How important it is that human thought should not be closed to the reality of Mystery, that man should not become insensitive to Mystery, that he should not lack the courage to plunge into the depths*⁷.

Another universities' duty specified in John Paul II's message which is still relevant today is **the service of thought**. *Every intellectual, independently of his personal*

⁴ Jan Paweł II, *Przemówienie wygłoszone z okazji sześćsetlecia Wydziału Teologicznego Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego*, Kraków 8 czerwca 1997, Pielgrzymki do Ojczyzny 1979-1983-1987-1991-1995-1997-1999-2002, Przemówienia, homilie, Kraków 2005, s. 985-986.

⁵ Ibidem, s. 986.

⁶ Ibidem, s. 986.

⁷ Ibidem, s. 987.

convictions, is called to let himself be guided by this sublime and difficult ideal and to function as a critical conscience regarding all that endangers humanity or diminishes it. Being a scholar entails obligations! First of all, it entails the obligation of a particular concern for the development of one's own humanity⁸.

Further on in his address the Polish Pope observed that *in the daily work of a scholar a particular **ethical sensitivity** is also needed. (...) The workings of the mind must necessarily be nourished by the spiritual climate of indispensable moral virtues like sincerity, courage, humility, honesty, and an authentic concern for man. Moral sensitivity makes it possible to preserve a connection between truth and goodness which is very essential for science. These two problems cannot in fact be separated! The principle of freedom of scientific research cannot be separated from the ethical responsibility of every scholar. In the case of men and women of science this ethical responsibility is particularly important. Ethical relativism and purely utilitarian attitudes represent a danger not only for science but directly for individuals and for society⁹.*

The necessary condition guaranteeing the sound development of science is according to John Paul II **an integral notion of the human person**. In the context of scientific development and various research, including genetics, the message of the Pope poses a huge challenge to universities: *the training of men and women not only competent in their specialization or full of encyclopedic knowledge, but above all endowed with authentic wisdom. Only people with this kind of education will be capable of shouldering responsibility for the future of Poland, Europe and the world¹⁰.*

Another extremely important element of the Pope's message was his reconfirmation of the Church's great concern and of the necessity of Her relationship with the scientific „world”. *I have greatly looked forward to it as a means of testifying once more that questions of science are not indifferent to the Church. Ladies and Gentlemen, I wish you always to know that the Church is with you - and, in conformity with her mission - desires to be at your service. (...) I address the venerable Jubilarians: the Jagiellonian University and the Pontifical Academy of Theology, and I offer my best wishes for an abundant outpouring of the gifts of the Holy Spirit for their further **service to Truth¹¹**.*

Therefore, **the service of thought and the service to truth, ethical sensitivity and a constant integral notion of the human person** are the challenges to all academic communities. I believe, John Paul II' message of 1997 to Polish universities is still valid, not only in Poland, but also in the world.

Thank you for your attention.

⁸ Ibidem, s. 987.

⁹ Ibidem, s. 988.

¹⁰ Ibidem, s. 988-889.

¹¹ Ibidem, s. 989.