

His Holiness, Pope Francis' speech delivered at the Faculty of Information Technology and Bionics, Pázmány Péter Catholic University, on April 30th, 2023, in Budapest

„Dear brothers and sisters, good afternoon!

In greeting each of you, I express my appreciation for your fine words of welcome, which I will address in a moment. This is the final meeting of my visit to Hungary, for which I am most grateful. Here I think of the course of the Danube, which links this country to many others, uniting not only their geography but also their history. Culture is in some sense like a great river: it runs through and connects various areas of life and history, enabling us to navigate in this world and to embrace distant countries and lands. It nurtures the mind, satisfies the soul, and fosters the growth of society. The very word *culture* comes from the verb *to cultivate*: knowledge entails a constant planting of seeds that take root in the soil of reality and bear rich fruit.

A hundred years ago, Romano Guardini, a great intellectual and a man of deep faith, in contemplating the beauty of a magnificent lake and its surrounding hills, had a profound insight into contemporary culture. As he put it: “I have come to realize so clearly these days that there are two ways of knowing. The one sinks into a thing and its context. The aim is to penetrate, to move within, to live with. The other, however, unpacks, tears apart, arranges in compartments, takes over and rules” (*Letters from Lake Como: Explorations in Technology and the Human Race*, Edinburgh, 1994, p. 43). Guardini distinguished between a gentle, relational knowledge and mastery, which he described as “rule by service, creation out of natural possibilities, which does not transgress set limits” (p. 45), and another way of knowing, which “does not inspect; it analyzes. It does not construct a picture of the world, but a formula... a law that can be formulated rationally” (p. 44).

In this second form of knowledge, materials and energy are directed to a single end: the machine (cf. p. 46). As a result “a technique of controlling living people is developing” (p. 47). Guardini did not demonize technology, which improves life and communication and brings many advantages, but he warned of the risk that it might end up controlling, if not dominating, our lives. He foresaw a great threat: “[in that case] we lose all the inner contact that we might have derived from a sense of proportion and the following of natural forms. We become inwardly devoid of form, proportion and direction. We arbitrarily fix our goals and force the mastered powers of nature to bring them to fulfilment” (p. 48). And he left posterity with a troubling question, “What will become of life if it is delivered up to the power of this dominion?” (p. 49). What will happen when we become subject to the imperatives of technology? “A system of machines is engulfing life... Can life retain its living character in this system?” (ibid.).

Can life retain its “living” character? This is a question that is proper to ask, particularly in this place, which is a centre of research into information technology and the bionic sciences. Truth to tell, much of what Guardini foresaw seems obvious to us today. We need but think of the ecological crisis, in which nature is merely reacting to its exploitation at our hands. We can think of the lack of [ethical] boundaries, the mentality that “if it is doable, then it is permissible.” We can think too of our tendency to concentrate not on persons and their relationships, but on the individual, absorbed in his or her needs, greedy for gain and power, and on the consequent erosion of communal bonds, with the result that alienation and anxiety are no longer merely existential crises, but societal problems. How many isolated individuals, albeit immersed in social media, are becoming less and less “social” themselves, and often resort, as if in a vicious circle, to the consolations of technology to fill their interior emptiness. Living at a frenzied pace, prey to a ruthless capitalism, they

become painfully conscious of their vulnerability in a society where outward speed goes hand in hand with inward fragility. This is a grave problem today. I mention this not to engender pessimism – for that would be contrary to the faith I rejoice to profess – but rather to reflect on that *hubris* of pride and power denounced at the dawn of European culture by the poet Homer, which the technocratic paradigm exacerbates, and threatens, through a certain use of algorithms, to further destabilize our human ecology.

In a novel that I have often quoted, *The Lord of the World*, by Robert Hugh Benson, we read that “size [is] not the same as greatness, and that an insistent external could not exclude a subtle internal” (New York, 1908, p. xxv). That book, written more than a century ago, was to some degree prophetic in its description of a future dominated by technology, where everything is made bland and uniform in the name of progress, and a new “humanitarianism” is proclaimed, cancelling diversity, suppressing the distinctiveness of peoples and abolishing religion, abolishing all differences. Opposed ideologies merge and an *ideological colonization prevails* – which is a huge problem – as humanity, in a world run by machines, is gradually diminished and social bonds are weakened. In the technically advanced yet grim world described by Benson, with its increasingly listless and passive populace, it appears obvious that the sick should be ignored, euthanasia practised and languages and cultures abolished, in order to achieve a universal peace that is nothing else than an oppression based on the imposition of a consensus. As one of his characters describes it: “the world seems very oddly alive... it is as if the whole thing was flushed and nervous” (ibid., p. 125).

I recognize that I have presented a rather somber scenario, but it is precisely against this backdrop that I believe we can appreciate the uniquely important role played by scholarship and culture in the life of society. A university is, as its very name indicates, a place where thought emerges and develops in a way both *open* and *symphonic*, and never monotonous. It is a “temple” where knowledge is set free from the constraints of “accumulating and possessing” and can thus become *culture*, that is, the “cultivation” of our humanity and its foundational relationships: with the transcendent, with society, with history and with creation. As the Second Vatican Council put it: “Culture must be directed to the total perfection of the human person, to the good of the community and human society as a whole. It should *cultivate* the mind in such a way as to encourage a capacity for wonder, for understanding, for contemplation for forming personal judgments and *cultivating a religious, moral and social sense*” (*Gaudium et Spes*, 59). Already in ancient times it was said that philosophy begins with awe, in the capacity to wonder. In this regard, I very much appreciated what our speakers had to say. I think of your observation, Monsignor Rector, that “in every true scientist there is something of the scribe, the priest, the prophet and the mystic”. And again, that “with the help of science we seek not only to understand, but also to do what is right, that is, to build a humane and solidary civilization, a sustainable culture and environment. For with a humble heart, we can climb not only the mountain of the Lord, but also scale the heights of science.”

The truth, as we know, is that the greatest intellectuals are humble. The mystery of life, after all, is disclosed to those who are concerned with the little things. Dorotyya made a splendid point: “As we delve into the smallest details, we find ourselves immersed in the complexity of God’s work”. Seen in this way, culture truly preserves and defends our humanity. It immerses us in contemplation and shapes persons who are not prey to the fashions of the moment, but solidly grounded in the reality of things. And who, as humble learners, feel the duty to remain open and communicative, never unbending and combative. True lovers of culture, in fact, never feel entirely satisfied; they always experience a healthy interior restlessness. They research, they raise questions, they take

risks and they continue to probe. They are able to move beyond their certitudes and plunge with humility into the mystery of life, which reveals itself to the restless not the complacent, is open to other cultures and calls for the sharing of knowledge. That is the spirit of the university, and I thank you for experiencing it as such. Professor Major said as much when he spoke of the satisfaction that comes from cooperating with other educational institutions in shared research programmes and from welcoming students from other parts of the world, such as the Middle East, and in particular from war-torn Syria. It is by openness to others that we come to know ourselves better. Indeed, opening ourselves to others is like looking in a mirror, we come to know ourselves better.

Culture accompanies us on the journey of self-knowledge. Classical thought, which is undying, reminds us of this. The famous maxim from the temple of Delphi comes to mind: "Know thyself." It is the first of two thoughts that I would like to leave with you as we conclude. What do those words mean: *Know thyself?* They counsel us to be able to recognize our limitations and, consequently, to curb the presumption of self-sufficiency. This proves beneficial precisely because, once we realize that we are creatures, we become creative. We learn to immerse ourselves in the world instead of attempting to dominate it. Technocratic thinking pursues a progress that admits no limits, yet flesh and blood human beings are fragile, and it is precisely by experiencing this, that they come to realize their dependence on God and their connectedness to others and to creation. The inscription at Delphi thus invites us to a kind of knowledge that, starting from the humility of our limitations, leads us to discover our amazing potential, which goes far beyond that of technology. Self-knowledge, in other words, bids us keep together, in a virtuous dialectic, our frailty and our grandeur as human beings. Wonder before this paradox gives rise to culture: never satisfied, constantly seeking, restless yet called to community, disciplined in its finitude yet open in freedom to the infinite. I pray that you will always cultivate this exhilarating journey towards the truth!

The second thought that I would leave with you has to do precisely with that truth. It comes from Jesus Christ, who said: "The truth will make you free" (*Jn 8:32*). Hungary has seen a succession of ideologies that imposed themselves as truth, yet failed to bestow freedom. Today too, the risk remains. I think of the shift *from communism to consumerism*. Common to both those "isms" is a false notion of freedom. Communism offered a "freedom" that was restricted, limited from without, determined by someone else. Consumerism promises a hedonistic, conformist, libertine "freedom" that enslaves people to consumption and to material objects. How easy it is to pass from limits imposed on thinking, as in communism, to the belief that there are no limits, as in consumerism! To pass from a blinkered freedom to an unbridled freedom. Instead, Jesus offers a way forward; he tells us that truth frees us from our fixations and our narrowness. The key to accessing this truth is a form of knowledge that is never detached from love, a knowledge that is relational, humble and open, concrete and communal, courageous and constructive. That is what universities are called to cultivate and faith is called to nurture. And so I take this occasion to express my hope that this University, and indeed every university, will always be a beacon of universality and freedom, a fruitful workshop of humanism, a laboratory of hope. I bless you from the heart, and I thank you for all that you are doing. Thank you very much!"

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