

FRATELLI TUTTI AND THE DIALOGIC SPIRIT OF CATHOLIC HIGHER EDUCATION: A REFLECTION ON CHRISTIAN HUMANISM AND ONLINE LEARNING

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Abstract Online and blended learning is now commonplace in educational institutions throughout the world. Alongside its potential for breaking down barriers, a dependence on online approaches runs the risk of dehumanising the educational process. In his encyclical *Fratelli tutti*, Pope Francis addresses the need for the Church and society to develop a sense of fraternity and solidarity that keeps the human person at the centre of the educational process. The role of the Catholic university in the construction of human fraternity today, is to question how this mission can be addressed in a digitized culture. By utilizing Christian Humanism as a foundation stone for institutional and curricular reform, a fraternal and dialogic spirit of encounter can be sustained.

Keywords Christian Humanism, Blended Learning, Fraternity, Online Learning


Introduction

This essay will explore the possibilities which Christian Humanism offers for the promotion of an authentic spirit of collegiality and dialogue in Catholic Higher Education. It begins with a brief exploration of what Christian Humanism could mean in this context, drawing on the words of Pope Francis in the launch address for the *Global Compact on Education*. The authors then turn to reflect on what this means for online learning. After reflecting on Pope Francis' assessment of digital technology, some thought is given to how online learning is not simply a challenge to authentic education but is an invitation to reflect on what we do and how we do it. This leads to further discussion of how Christian Humanism could facilitate authentic dialogue in an online environment. Finally, the authors reflect on the opportunities and challenges this creates for Catholic Higher Education.

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Catholic Higher Education and Christian Humanism

Catholic universities are part of a global network (International Federation of Catholic Universities (IFCU)) which offers a range of support measures to their mission. The official record of IFCU reminds us that “The true sense of IFCU’s mission is to constantly reinvent in a spirit of continuity and openness that combines fond memories and future aspirations” (Jarton 2016, p. 9). This is, rightly, a challenge and encouragement to those with an interest in the development of Catholic Higher Education.

It is important to remember that both words, “Catholic” and “university” must work *in dialogue* with each other if the “Catholic university” is to make a meaningful contribution to the world of education and the life of the Church. A Catholic university, therefore, must first be a very good *university*: this is where it becomes a place of “encounter” owing to the excellent educational, cultural and pastoral experiences it should offer all people. Its Catholic identity in turn offers a profound educational vision which is grounded in the tenets of Christian Humanism and is part of, not separate from, wider academic life.

It is important to begin with a crucial question: what do we mean by Christian Humanism? Some prior reflection on wider cultural and educational ideas will help to frame the discussion to come. Much of contemporary educational thinking emphasises the importance of outcomes related to the world of STEM: Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (Johnson et al., 2020). Of course, these four domains are powerful forces which shape the way we live today and have, without doubt, brought multiple benefits to the human condition in medicine, travel, communication and transport, to give just four examples. Any advances in educational practice will be powered by technology and a global vision of education which in turn will rely heavily on the border-opening possibilities offered by the vibrant communications technology which the pandemic has now made the currency *du jour*.

In such an exciting blue-chip field, there is a danger that calls to reflect on Christian Humanism could seem like little more than a transitory indulgence for the intellectual benefit of the few, not the many. That would be a mistake as it is the tradition of Christian Humanism which offers the intellectual, cultural, and pastoral foundations necessary for an authentic appreciation of both *fraternity* and the Catholic university’s role in the construction of a common home on this planet.

In *Fratelli tutti* (henceforth FT) Pope Francis offers some wide-ranging reflections on the topic of human fraternity in a world too often plagued by so-called “culture wars”. His personal Christian inspiration compels him to reach out to others (“people of good will”) in the hope of fostering dialogue and fraternity (Pope Francis, 2020a). A similar way of thinking is discovered in his video message for the launch of the *Global Compact on Education* in 2020 which is, in fact, an invitation to open our minds to the new pedagogical horizons offered by “Christian Humanism”:

Finally, dear brothers and sisters, we want to commit ourselves courageously to developing an educational plan within our respective countries, investing our best energies and introducing creative and transformative processes in cooperation with civil society. In this, our point of reference should be the social doctrine that, inspired by the revealed word of God and Christian Humanism provides a solid basis and a vital resource for discerning the paths to follow in the present emergency (Pope Francis, 2020b).

Careful study of the language of the *Global Compact* is instructive: it does not make big claims for Catholic education's particular charisms and seems to refer more to the life of the school than to the life of the university. Nonetheless, it is possible to draw on the ideas contained therein and apply, as appropriate, to the university. Pope Francis's articulation of a "Catholic" vision of education exemplifies how this vision is a means to dialogue with others. The Church's multiple educational traditions are part of its outward-facing mission: the nature of the human person—created in the image and likeness of God but wounded by Original Sin— demands, therefore, the presentation of an educational "philosophy", or set of underpinning principles, which is intentionally "fraternal" and not, at the outset, explicitly rooted in the language and thought forms of religion. This is not to ignore the importance of religion and the centrality of Truth, but to acknowledge that the search for a shared educational language seems to be one way to open the doors of dialogue. In line with this way of acting, education becomes a process of "encounter" with the other.

Things become more complex when we consider the reference by Pope Francis to "Christian Humanism" and its place in a thematic chain which includes "social doctrine" and the "revealed word of God". To what is he alluding? Is this a suggestion that the eirenic language of the *Global Compact* is, perhaps, little more than a mirage and that it is, in fact, another means of evangelisation? A deeper discussion of the range and shades of meaning of Christian Humanism vis-a-vis evangelisation would require a much longer study but a satisfactory starting-point comes from Jens Zimmerman:

Religious ideas about human nature, especially Christian ones, and their further development through the process of secularization are deeply embedded in our cultural narrative, and have shaped our collective understanding of human dignity, human rights and social responsibility. Hence, one important reason for reflecting on the idea of humanism in general, and on Christian Humanism in particular, is the need for self-understanding (Zimmerman, 2017, Introduction).

Zimmerman's definition aligns Christian Humanism with "human dignity, human rights and social responsibility", all of which are part of the discourse around human fraternity found in FT. The academy is where critical exploration of the impact of secularization on religious identity and

practice, especially in education, should be found. In so doing, the Catholic university can lead the way in clearing new ground and asking fresh questions on the nature of the human person.

In 2007, Pope Benedict XVI, addressing a global convention of university teachers in Rome, sought to articulate a similar vision for universities, using the term “new humanism”, to distinguish the ideals of Christian Humanism from those who place (secular) humanism in opposition to religious culture:

The present crisis, however, has less to do with modernity’s insistence on the centrality of man and his concerns, than with the problems raised by a “humanism” that claims to build a *regnum hominis* detached from its necessary ontological foundation. A false dichotomy between theism and authentic humanism, taken to the extreme of positing an irreconcilable conflict between divine law and human freedom, has led to a situation in which humanity, for all its economic and technical advances, feels deeply threatened (Pope Benedict XVI, 2007).

Pope Benedict is, it seems, offering a philosophical rationale for Christian Humanism, which he terms “authentic humanism”, owing to its grounding in the Incarnation and Christian understanding of the human person. In this way of thinking, he follows Pope John Paul II’s mention of “authentic humanism” in his first encyclical, *Redemptor Hominis* (Pope John Paul II, 1979).

To make firm links between Christian Humanism and education today is not without its challenges. In the world of Higher Education, even in the network of Catholic universities, is there sufficient space for collegial reflection on the possibilities offered by Christian Humanism for addressing issues such as: performativity, a results-driven culture, and the myriad issues around secularism? Furthermore, is there an additional risk that the use of the *language* of Christian Humanism could be seen as “old-fashioned” and, potentially, a barrier to shared understanding of education? These important questions, instead of being blocks to progress, offer opportunities for deeper thinking on how the rise of “new communications technology” could be a suitable vehicle for the promotion of Christian Humanism as the foundation stone of a refreshed understanding of contemporary Catholic Higher Education.

Refreshing the Mission to Educate

What is the Catholic mission to educate? There are multiple ways in which we can define education per se: to add “Catholic” to the debate makes things even more complex. We can, however, make the claim that the Church is a body which has education, broadly understood, in its DNA. History shows us the many forms this has taken. One expression of the Church’s educational mission was the creation of the universities of medieval and Renaissance Europe (Young, 2019). These communities of scholars were, we could argue, a gift of the Church to culture, and while the nature, shape, and aims of the university have, rightly, evolved over time, the current global network of

Catholic universities has a duty to preserve for the new generations the spirit of the original *universitas*, duly updated to address the needs of the present age.

The prevalence of digital technology and the widespread post-COVID adoption of online/blended learning, necessitates a reappraisal of how the Church understands its educational mission. As Pope Francis notes in the post-Synodal exhortation to young people, *Christus Vivit*, “It is no longer merely a question of “using” instruments of communication, but of living in a highly digitalized culture” (Pope Francis, 2019, 86). However, a systematic analysis of how to utilize digital resources in the mission to educate is somewhat lacking, despite some initial guidance on “distance learning” from the Holy See in 2021 (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2021). Even if the Church has been quite successful in transferring its “offline” content and teachings on to an accessible digital platform, it has not been so successful in thinking about innovative ways to engage a new generation with this teaching. Is it the case that the Church is too focused on the limitations of technology, rather than its opportunities?

Pope Francis remains somewhat cautionary in his outlook on technology’s role in education. Indeed, in *FT*, he devotes an entire section to what he terms “the illusion of communication”, characterized by “shameless aggression” and “information without wisdom” (Pope Francis, 2020, 42-50). This has particularly problematic ramifications for education. In *Christus Vivit*, he notes at length the dangers of manipulation of knowledge, the spread of falsities, lack of dialogue, and the loss of objectivity:

It should not be forgotten that “there are huge economic interests operating in the digital world, capable of exercising forms of control as subtle as they are invasive, creating mechanisms for the manipulation of consciences and of the democratic process. The way many platforms work often ends up favouring encounter between persons who think alike, shielding them from debate. These closed circuits facilitate the spread of fake news and false information, fomenting prejudice and hate. The proliferation of fake news is the expression of a culture that has lost its sense of truth and bends the facts to suit particular interests (Pope Francis, 2019, 89).

For Francis, digital communication can even hinder authentic encounter with the other. He speaks of the digital environment as “blocking authentic interpersonal relationships” by fostering “one of loneliness, manipulation, exploitation and violence” (Pope Francis, 2019, 88). This also hinders our encounter with truth and knowledge as through increased isolation comes “gradual loss of contact with concrete reality” (Pope Francis, 2019, 88).

What Francis extrapolates here is that although the digital world might appear to give us unlimited access to knowledge, often it functions as an echo chamber in which we selectively engage with others who share our views and can easily shield us from those who have different visions and philosophies. Here “Respect for others disintegrates [...] as we dismiss, ignore or keep others

distant”, making the skills of debate and dialogue null and void (Pope Francis, 42). The danger here is that we lose grip on reality, by only selectively engaging with certain voices and points of view (Pope Francis a, 2020, 47).

However, when set within the context of Francis’ wider vision of Christian Humanism, his caution and hesitancy towards the digital becomes somewhat understandable. At the heart of this, lies the importance of the dignity and sanctity of the human person as made in the image and likeness of God (International Theological Commission, 2004). Whether this dignity is respected and realised serves as the litmus test by which all educational praxis must be judged. And whilst the digital realm presents significant challenges to this, it is possible for educators to utilize digital communication in a way that aligns with Pope Francis’ vision of Christian Humanism and thus advance the mission of Catholic education.

Christian Humanism in a Digitized Culture

The concerns that Pope Francis has about encounter and connection within the digital realm are inherently linked to his concerns over digital acquisition of knowledge. He cautions how the “flood of information at our fingertips does not make for greater wisdom”, and “is not the way to mature in the encounter with the truth”. Rather, for Francis, “Together, we can seek the truth in dialogue” (Pope Francis a, 2020, 50). Here Francis is speaking here of an ethics of encounter that includes a) an encounter with the truth and b) encounter with each other as intertwined pursuits. The question then is if the pursuit of truth is a shared endeavour that involves encounter, how do we enact this in the online environment?

Though it may be more difficult to build community through digital communication, as it lacks “the physical gestures, facial expressions, moments of silence, body language”, (Pope Francis a, 2020, 43) this is not to say that this form of communication needs to be shunned. Rather, it must be used in a way that keeps central the protection of human dignity and the desire for authentic encounter with the other. For Francis, successful communication in interpersonal encounters is marked by the “ability to sit down and listen” which is “paradigmatic of the welcoming attitude shown by those who transcend narcissism and accept others, caring for them and welcoming them into their lives” (F Pope Francis a, 2020, 48). The key here is listening to the other; constant communication, does not mean effective communication if we fail to sincerely hear. Importantly, communication in the online environment must be one of dialogical encounter which breaks free of a self-imposed exile behind the screen.

Despite Francis’ caution, he acknowledges that digital communication can present us with distinct opportunities to build such means of encounter, if used appropriately. In *Christus Vivit* he describes how the “web and social networks have created a new way to communicate and bond” (Pope Francis, 2019, 87) and in his 2014 *Message for World Communications Day* he speaks even more

enthusiastically of how the internet provides us with “immense possibilities for encounter and solidarity” which is “truly good, a gift from God”. As the pandemic has shown us, the mission to educate could easily have come to a standstill if it were not for the existence of digital technologies.

If we approach digital technology as “a gift from God”, as Francis does, this immediately changes the way we utilize it. We can compare this to how when the Earth is seen as a gift, we acknowledge the need to protect and care for it, rather than see it as a site for human conquest. In this manner, the purpose of digital communication becomes not a selfish, isolated pursuit, but rather one of engagement and living *fraternity*. It becomes a resource that God provides to help us flourish as human beings. However, for this to be fully realised, the digital realm must be used in service of the human person, rather than subjugating the human person to a technocratic logic.

What Pope Francis is challenging here is not the use of digital technology, but rather the dominance of a technocratic mentality, which makes the “method and aims of science and technology an epistemological paradigm” (Pope Francis, 2015, 107). Essentially this is a reductionist vision that neglects the richness of the human person, placing it at odds with the holistic approach that Catholic education so carefully cultivates. Importantly, where these two approaches differ is that the first sees the human actor as purely rational and independent, whereas the second sees the human person as rational, spiritual, and importantly *relational*, created by God for relationship. For Pope Francis, this is key to how we can appropriately use digital communication, placing it at the service of the person, the human family, and the mission to spread the Gospel: this is the heart of Catholic education. The inherently relational and social nature of the person found in the vision of Christian Humanism, demands an appropriate pedagogical vision.

Catholic Education in the Online Classroom

When applied to Catholic Higher Education, Pope Francis’ language of encounter can help guide us in thinking about an appropriate “Catholic pedagogy” for use in the classroom. Rather than a hinderance, the shift to online/blended learning that Covid has necessitated, presents us with an opportunity to reflect on our current praxis, and how this can more accurately reflect the approach of Christian Humanism. Indeed, there are many ways in which this new technological turn can enhance the mission of Catholic Higher Education. We now know, for example, that the web can break down accessibility barriers, allowing intercontinental educational initiatives to take place at the click of a mouse. The possibilities offered to us through technologies such as lecture capture, or asynchronous learning, also give increased access to students with caring responsibilities or other learning needs (Nordmann et al. 2020). The world of universities is now more accessible, and our Catholic institutions have taken advantage of technology to connect scholars and students in a way that would not have been common in the recent past.

Furthermore, the use of new technologies gives room to explore the dialogical nature of education. A core feature of online and asynchronous praxis is an emphasis on “student ownership” of learning. Some have suggested, though not uncontroversially, that educators should move away from the “banking model” of education in which the educator imparts knowledge, and, in its place, develop models that require students to be active participants in their own learning (Friere, 1993). By using the language of encounter, Pope Francis reminds us that the Catholic vision of education is always dialogical: the communication of knowledge demands encounter and exchange. In many ways, this runs counter-cultural to the ever-dominant paradigm of seeing higher education in economic terms, as a product for purchase. A timely reappraisal of this logic of commodification is much needed.

However, the endeavour to create a socially just online classroom in Catholic institutions is not without its difficulties. We could mention, for example, issues of equity of access to technology, or the inability to replicate practical components of learning in a virtual environment. There are also serious health issues that may result from requiring students and staff to spend long hours seated at screens. Such concerns require ongoing watchfulness if we are to be faithful to the need to offer integral care for our students.

Concluding Remarks

To continue to develop provision and enhance the spirit of dialogue in Catholic Higher Education, the following questions will offer opportunities for both national and international conversations, leading in time to concrete resolutions:

1. To what extent does dialogical online learning help or hinder the mission of Catholic Higher Education today. Is it possible to embed authentic opportunities for “encounter” in the pedagogy of online/blended learning methods?
2. Is it reasonable to repropose the aims of Catholic Higher Education to make them increasingly open to institutional cross-border cooperation? What could this mean for the sacramentality of learning and study as a pathway to the divine (Sullivan, 2018)?
3. In pedagogical terms, how can the Catholic educational tradition act as a site of inspiration for other forms of education – or do we even see this as a possibility? What can Catholic Education learn from wider research which will help Catholic institutions to develop and enhance their provision?

In moving this debate forward, we do so in the knowledge that the educational world post-COVID is now seen in very different tones. Perhaps this presents a unique opportunity to recover the ideals of Christian Humanism, some of which had fallen victim to a technocratic mentality, and invite Catholic universities to make new online partnerships, develop joint qualifications and collaborate in initiatives for the promotion of human fraternity. We finish with some words of *Gaudium et Spes* (1965, 31) which seem especially relevant for the mission of Catholic Higher Education today:

Above all the education of youth from every social background has to be undertaken, so that there can be produced not only men and women of refined talents, but those great-souled persons who are so desperately required by our times.

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