

**Testimony of the Rector of the Catholic University of Portugal, Maria da Glória Garcia**

**Never let a second go to waste**

**(Castel Gandolfo, 19/11/2015, 4.30 p.m.)**

As I meandered through my thirty-five years of teaching at the Catholic University of Portugal, and another three as Rector, in search of material for the testimony I was asked to give, a wonderful notion from the poet Tolentino Mendonça seemed to be whispering in my ear, and would not let me be: “*When the redness of the poppy has waned, the garden becomes empty*”.

The poppy, this delicate, misunderstood flower that is neither planted on purpose nor expected, pops up between prized bushes, cherished roses, the light scent of jasmine. But, it is the poppy that gets all the attention. The garden belongs to the poppy and the poppy is the flower of the garden.

What is it about the poppy? Why do we feel the garden is full with it and empty without it? Which raises another question: How can we make the poppy’s moment last?

We have now identified the crucial questions that accompany me in the institution that I have embraced for almost forty-years, the Catholic University of Portugal (or Católica, for short). The answers to them can be found in the redness of the poppy, which is another way of talking about passion.

Indeed, this is precisely what is stated in the working paper of the Congregation for Catholic Education: “*Educating today and tomorrow: a renewed passion*”.

Because educating, in a Catholic University, is much more than providing a quality university service to the community. It is a connection of life with the values that identify it. This stems from coming together in the classroom, walking along the corridors, visiting the administrative services, eating in the canteen, studying in the library, and is also in the smile of those who enter and in the farewell of those who leave. It is a harmony of dialogue that extends beyond the academic community, as it accompanies the life of those who participate in it and those who have passed through. Because educating, and educating oneself, are specific forms of being with others and should lead to

“*an attitude*” towards life. And I can happily note that, at my University, the outcome of this is what we call “*the Católica spirit*”.

Always under construction, the “*Católica spirit*” is shaped around the participation of each member of the academic community, in different and open ways, in university life. This is why I aim to make interaction within the organisation easy, so that activities such as giving expression to an idea, holding a cultural or religious event, promoting a new training activity, developing volunteer programmes, designing and fulfilling research projects..., once they have been validated, can quickly, but consistently, evolve and take shape. That is also why I seek to foster close dialogue between teachers and students, trainers and trainees, senior researchers and their junior counterparts, so that difficulties can be overcome, creativity can be encouraged and the desire to gain more knowledge can be stimulated, giving priority to what is important in the relationship with the past and with the future, in respect for the dignity of the person, and with responsibility and solidarity.

This is so that the “*Católica spirit*” will tend to be seen as an expression of freedom, transformed into a part of the being of every one of us, the guarantee for the redness of the poppy...

Two years ago, at Christmas time, a teacher showed me a card she had received from Macau. From his far-off country, in Asia, an ex-student was writing to say that he had successfully concluded his degree in Law, but, he wrote “*your teachings ... and the Católica spirit will stay with me forever*”. That is what he felt and expressed. And this feeling I want to share, safe in the knowledge that our teachings and the Católica spirit will be transmitted to those who come into contact with this graduate, whether in a professional or in a social context.

It is difficult to transmit what exactly this spirit is, what shapes this feeling of belonging. But I cannot help but express my satisfaction when I hear students identifying themselves in these terms, and recognising that, although far away, on the other side of the world, they remain connected by invisible ties to the institution they graduated from.

In another context, I remember a time when Católica was preparing one of its first applications for European funding, which would be crucial for our research. The highly demanding requirements could only be met thanks to the mutual support and generosity of a group of teachers, students and staff who

forgot about how tired they were, left all of their personal concerns outside the university and placed Católica as their top priority. And they did it.

In the same way, a year ago, our Christmas card was made from family photos of teachers, students and staff. The university asked an artist to use these photos to produce a nativity scene which appeared on the card and on a huge poster which took pride of place at the entrance to the building. And you can imagine the pleasure on their faces as they looked at that nativity scene, feeling that they were all a part of it!

And there are many other stories. Stories of moments. Stories of connections in a place where science is produced and where university training is given. Stories of passion. Stories that explain the sense of belonging without which nothing can be achieved and with which everything is possible.

Every year, with the aim of nurturing this “*Católica spirit*”, and renewing it, my University creates and promotes a unifying key idea, which will be particularly understood and experienced throughout that year by the community in general and the academic community in particular.

The key ideas of the last years have been: “*Educate for confidence*”, “*Inspire the future*” and “*Expand horizons*”.

The appeal to “*educate for confidence*”, in 2013, aimed to translate Pope Benedict XVI’s call for “*fresh thinking and a new cultural synthesis*”. Paths were opened to peaceful and fair conviviality, within the University, based on the recognition of differences; the environment of mutual respect and the search for the truth was deepened; the profound nature of the relationship between people was touched and efforts were made to decrease the distance between major statements and the day-to-day tasks which shape life.

What lies between statements and their realisation is the heart; what transforms great sayings into acts are the ties that are woven between people in a community, allied to the courage which comes from the confidence transmitted by the love of God. Educating for confidence also means making each of us believe in our potential, in our capacity to affirm ourselves as a person, in our strength to innovate and to overcome obstacles, and in the possibility of being a driver of change in society.

And, of course, we could not forget the appeal for confidence contained in the enlightening words of Pope John Paul II, which I may quote here: “*Consult*

*not your fears but your hopes and your dreams. Think not about your frustrations, but about your unfulfilled potential. Concern yourself not with what you tried and failed in, but with what it is still possible for you to do”.*

For 2014, the motto chosen to guide our lives, in particular, was *“Inspire the future”*.

More than just a statement, the motto *“Inspire the future”* allowed us to transmit enthusiasm, promote strength, and mobilise each and every one of us into action, replicating this in waves of energy, while at the same time setting a challenge and holding ourselves accountable. Besides strengthening the dialogue with the present, we also sought to anticipate, interpret and guarantee our future path.

The Catholic University is a privileged location for creating knowledge and a culture for life, yet it has the capacity to be more than it is, this power to go beyond what it does, this facility for producing ideas, and turning them into a source of inspiration, and for transcending the future which is unknown but which it aims to understand by means of those who seek it out.

In short, the objective of the motto *“Inspire the future”*, experienced at Católica in that way in particular throughout 2014, was to meet the challenge presented by Pope Francis of *“walking and sowing ever a new, always further and beyond”*.

This year, 2015, began with and has been lived under a new motto, which is just as stimulating as the previous ones: *“Expand horizons”*. Interestingly, the idea also came from a message from Pope Francis to young people, in which his challenge to them was not to be *“spectators but protagonists”*, adding the words *“Please do not watch life go by from the balcony! Mingle where the challenges are calling you”*.

A university, and for obvious reasons a Catholic one, has to be a laboratory for the present. The adventure of knowledge is an expression of love for life, which calls for protection and illumination by new horizons of meaning. It is not enough for a Catholic University to look at reality from a distance, as if it could position itself beyond the difficulties and the hopes that history brings. The Catholic University wants to be *“where the challenges are calling”*, where it places itself in the service of people and society, since it realises that only in this way can it accomplish its mission. The intention is for horizons to be expanded not towards the abstract, but to meet the specific. Researching and innovating to better educate; researching and innovating to better serve. The

aim is for horizons to expand with the boldness of looking reality straight in the eye, of learning to love it and to inject it with hope, science, innovation, ambition, skill and future.

In order to better understand the demanding renewal of life together at Católica, over the course of these three years we were privileged to welcome António Spadaro, Pedro Rubens, and Cardinal Ravasi as our guests, in sessions which brought together, in particular, the teaching body of our university. And while António Spadaro reminded us all that communicating is an opportunity to move forward, Pedro Rubens left us at ease to imagine worlds and discover our own paths, and Cardinal Ravasi shook up the auditorium, encouraging us to undertake an internal pilgrimage by means of a prophetic itinerary, as a source of energy for the here and now.

The Catholic University of Portugal has a reputation, and is recognised by its peers, for constantly renewing and improving its quality as a university, but also wants to assume its identity. The recently approved Code of Ethics and Conduct, the fruit of much internal debate involving teachers, researchers, students and staff, is proof of this. And the implementation of this Code, which is now under way, is also providing an opportunity for sound conviviality and enrichment of the “*Católica spirit*”.

With this spirit the University is now looking to create alliances and build bridges with society – public and private institutions, companies, and national and international organisations in the social sector. And we challenge institutions, especially Catholic universities, to join us, and venture into joint projects, with the generous sharing of knowledge. Because the desire to learn from others makes us better and allows us to more easily identify our weaknesses, with the aim of overcoming them.

Transformation always brings something new with it, and implies risk. But – let’s remember Pope Francis – we cannot only educate in our comfort zone, and nor can we only educate in the risk zone. It is necessary to find a balance between a safe step and a risky one. Without fear, and never letting a second go to waste.

I just hope that the poppy’s moment lasts in the hearts of those who are living, will live and have lived the Católica experience.