

University Diplomacy and Democratic Engagement: The Role of Catholic Universities

The first thing I would like to consider in this panel is the aim of the call, that is, whether university diplomacy and democratic engagement are really necessary.

I formulate this consideration bearing in mind that, in many places in what we call the Western world, there are rights that are considered as already "earned" by societies. For example, the right to free elections to elect authorities or the right to educate freely, but it turns out that in some countries of our Latin American continent these rights are not assured. For this reason, it is essential to carry out specific work that goes to the heart of democratic processes, which make it possible to ensure unrestricted respect for fundamental human rights.

On the other hand, current situation shows an excessive polarization of the world, where diplomatic processes are tinged with ideological preconceptions, of one kind or another. It strongly interferes in any attempt to propose relations in terms of what we would call a "classic diplomatic normality" (there are many examples in this sense in recent times in Latin America, such as the disputes between Spain and Argentina over statements by their presidents, to cite an incident in recent weeks). This means that traditional and professional diplomacy is overtaken by the intolerance and belligerent styles of some political leaders.

Given this situation, we must recognize that university-level relationships are capable, in most cases, of overcoming these barriers and have shown, in my own experience, to be much more effective when it comes to building bridges of collaboration and joint work among very different countries and regions.

Likewise, it is necessary to bring to the discussion a transcendent issue, from my point of view, which is the public responsibility that universities have, and in particular Catholic universities.

In this sense, Pope Francis stated in an address to IFCU that: *"In the final analysis, just as every scientist and every man of culture has the obligation to serve more, because he knows more, so too the university community, especially if it is of Christian inspiration, and the ecosystem of academic institutions must respond together to the same obligation."* Therefore, university indifference to the great issues of our time is not an acceptable option for Pope Francis; the Pope himself supports the idea that: *"the university has a conscience, but also an intellectual and moral force whose responsibility goes beyond the person to be educated and spreads to the needs of all humanity"*.

I'll summarize what I've said so far:

1. In a world where governments are polarized, university diplomacy is capable of overcoming barriers that traditional diplomats cannot, due to the excessive ideologization and polarization of international relations.
2. In some parts of the planet, moreover, it is very necessary to "fight battles" in defense of the fundamental rights of Humanity, which are trampled upon by some governments.
3. Universities have a public responsibility, that society imposes on us, and which we must be able to assume in this 21st century. As Catholic universities, Pope Francis himself has asked us to be protagonists of our time.

Having made general considerations, I will focus on the situation of universities in Latin America.

Reflections on the role of private universities in Latin America are very important, since private institutions of higher education cover 54% of the total enrollment of students in the region,

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being the only region in the world where the private system exceeds the public sector in enrollment.

Within this outlook, Catholic universities have a very important role. We have been the first universities in the continent and we have strong momentum and influence in the communities where we are present.

I would like to make reference to two critical cases where we can appreciate the importance of university diplomacy: Nicaragua and Cuba.

The Nicaragua case is the most dramatic that has been presented to us in recent times. In March 2023, the news of the imminent closure of the John Paul II University, owned by the Nicaraguan Episcopal Conference, reached the ODUICAL (Latin America and Caribbean Catholic Universities Organization). At that very difficult time, we had to work on several fronts to hold back the crisis generated: from all possible diplomatic efforts, to proposing external support programs for students and teachers, so providing containment in that distressing situation. There I have had the opportunity to experience, in first person, what it is like to abuse and suppress rights, since that university (and then 33 other private institutions) have been closed, eliminated and confiscated by the Nicaraguan government authorities and reopened under another administration and name. It was a dictatorial policy of unknown proportions in these places (not even the Venezuelan regime dared to do so).

A great diplomatic achievement was the "Panama Declaration" where ODUICAL and REALCUP (Latin America and Caribbean Private universities Network) condemned this outrage and called for the immediate restitution of the rights of the Nicaraguan universities. Have in mind that both organizations together represent more than 900 universities in Latin America and the Caribbean.

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We spent dramatic hours, not knowing if the rector of John Paul II University was imprisoned, what was the fate of the professors and students. We mounted a big operation to support that community, in those moments of uncertainty. Looking back, it has been one of the most critical moments that I had to face as president of the ODUICAL. For example, we had to stop the publication of the initial condemnatory statement because, at that time, we were putting the freedom and lives of the University's directors at risk. Believe me, it was an experience that I will never forget and that shows the limits that political reality imposes on the desires for expressions of justice.

The other case is that of Cuba, a declared communist regime that long ago closed all private universities and Catholic ones.

However, here we can say that there is a success story in university diplomacy, since, from the Pontifical Commission for Latin America, with the support of CISAV of Mexico, the Félix Varela Cultural Center was founded (an institute for dogmatic studies), which is tolerated and is the germ of a future university.

ODUCAL has visited the island and we have launched a special program of support for this Institute and continued, through different channels, the negotiations so that not only its existence is tolerated, but that, in the near future, the Catholic University of Cuba (one of the 7 universities that founded ODUICAL) can revive, if the political circumstances allow it.

Conclusions

- A. Universities must play a role in defending democratic values in our societies.
- B. University diplomacy is an adequate means to replace, on many occasions, traditional professional diplomacy. It can build

bridges of fraternity beyond the ideological differences of the governments in power.

C. The Catholic universities of Latin America are convinced of both missions and we are working, through ODUICAL, on the creation of a strong network that has a voice with impact on the continent. In these times, more than ever, it needs initiatives that favour democracy and rebuild relations among our countries.

Thanks a lot.