

CURRENT ISSUE

ON THE VOCATION OF A CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY IN THE  
DECLINE OF THE MODERN AGE

*Address at Pázmány Péter Catholic University,  
on the occasion of the conferral of a doctorate honoris causa  
March 27, 2017*

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Magnificent Rector, honorable Deans, other distinguished guests, colleagues, and friends, it is a great and unmerited honor to be welcomed into your scholarly community, and to be so warmly received at Pázmány Péter Catholic University, and indeed in Hungary as a whole on my first visit here.

I had the privilege of being introduced to your beautiful country with a visit to the Benedictine Archabbey of Pannonhalma. The millennial Archabbey stands as a living monument to constancy and clarity through the centuries and across many ages of great upheaval in these lands. It has been able to do so because the basic goal of the Benedictine monastic communities, as Pope Benedict XVI put it, has always been to seek God, *quaerere Deum*. According to Pope Benedict, “Amid the confusion of the times, in which nothing seemed permanent, they wanted to do the essential – to make an effort to find what was perennially valid and lasting, life itself... They wanted to go from the inessential to the essential, to the only truly important and reliable thing there is”<sup>1</sup>.

This University, too, was born in a turbulent era. I was fascinated to learn how it was founded out of Archbishop Péter Pázmány’s desire to respond to the concrete needs and realities of his time, in an age of political occupation and religious division. Your University has had to continue that mission over five centuries that have seen the rise and fall of empires and the ebb and flow of extreme tides of ideological, cultural, and political tumult.

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<sup>1</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, Address at the Collège des Bernardins, 12 September 2008.

In looking at the world around us with eyes of realism it is difficult not to conclude that we are again living in times of momentous upheaval, of confusion and instability. Politically, demographically, socially, culturally, intellectually, morally, the ground is sliding beneath our feet. What were the certainties of centuries are crumbling before our eyes into a million fragments, so that what seemed yesterday to be solid rock has today become shifting sand. Perhaps (though one can never really know except in hindsight) we are in the midst of a transformation of epochal proportions. Where can one stand firm on such sliding surfaces, today? How can we be sure of anything? How do we go from the “inessential to the essential”, to find what is “perennially valid and lasting, life itself”?

In considering this challenge, I cannot help but observe that the origin of Pázmány Péter Catholic University was rooted in its founder’s zealous contestation of the Protestant Reformation. From that original historical mandate, this University can be said to have a special mission to respond to the moral and intellectual crises of the contemporary age as well, because so many of the challenges we are facing today in the decline and crisis of the Modern era took root and grew in large part from seeds sown in the Reformation era. As Brad Gregory, the distinguished historian of early modern Europe (and my Notre Dame colleague and friend) has shown in his monumental study of the long-term consequences of the Protestant Reformation, so many of the distinguishing characteristics of contemporary life are the unintended but direct byproducts of the forces first set in motion at the dawn of the Modern age, in the Reformation’s response to the failures of Medieval Christendom. Gregory documents this dynamic with depth and precision, exposing the early-modern origins of today’s pervasive secularization of knowledge, of our acquisitive consumerist culture, of the reduction of reason to technocratic scientism, and of our inability to provide the foundational warrants to justify and sustain our own liberal institutions. As he puts it succinctly, “the Reformation is the most important distant historical source for contemporary Western hyperpluralism with respect to truth claims about meaning, morality, values, priorities, and purpose”. The unintended result of this has been “an undesired, open-ended range of rival truth claims about answers to the Life Questions” – that is, questions “about the sort of person one *should* become and the sort of life one *should* lead, concerning what one *should* value and what one *should* prioritize”.<sup>2</sup>

Among the many consequences of this hyperpluralism that Gregory traces over the centuries of the Modern age are two intertwined dynamics that have occupied the center of my own work in public law and human rights for two and a half decades: the conjoining of a limitless individualism with the hegemony of the bureaucratic state as the only arbiter of our common life. These two strands together can be said to characterize much of the condition of incoherence in which we find the discourse and practice of human rights today.

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<sup>2</sup> Brad S. GREGORY: *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society*. Cambridge, Massachusetts, Belknap–Harvard University Press, 2012.

On the one hand, human rights are increasingly interpreted to require the equal valuing and acceptance of every individual desire and choice, reflecting our incapacity to make any objective judgments about the good. At the extreme end of that fragmentation of the Life Questions are the conclusions that no desire can be judged to be better than another, and that the only “truth” is that there is no way to discriminate legitimately among autonomous individuals’ disparate claims to their own truths.

On the other hand, we increasingly see the power of the state as the only source of cohesion in that shattered world of pluralistic claims to truth and good. Human rights empower states to intervene in every social context, but especially in order to enforce the vision of individualism gone mad.

Allow me to illustrate this dual dynamic with just one recently reported example.<sup>3</sup> This past week was World Down Syndrome Day. In many places, Down Syndrome adults have put together powerful appeals for the occasion, attesting to their human dignity. But last year, the French *Conseil D’État* upheld a ban on a television advertisement that showed Down Syndrome young adults addressing a pregnant woman who was considering whether to terminate the Downs fetus she was carrying (consider that nine out of ten fetuses diagnosed with Down Syndrome in France are aborted). They said to her, “Your child will be able to do many things”. “He’ll be able to hug you.” “He’ll be able to run toward you.” “He’ll be able to speak and tell you he loves you.” According to the *Conseil D’État*, this ad risked “disturbing the conscience” of women who had aborted Down Syndrome pregnancies. And thus we end up with an understanding of human rights that requires the State to prohibit expressions urging our societies and fellow citizens to be more open and accepting of the weakest and most vulnerable members of the community, because this might “disturb the conscience” of those whose individual choices differ. Here we have extreme individualism and state control wrapped together in a symbiotic whole, where human rights increasingly become a form of authoritarian orthodoxy in favor of an ideology of autonomy that leaves no room for relationships, or for dissent.

This interdependence of hyperindividualism and the hegemony of the state can be seen as two sides of the same coin, as a single crisis of the difficulty of *belonging to one another* in the contemporary world. As autonomous individuals free of any claims of meaning or truth beyond ourselves, we are constantly told by the law and institutions of late modern liberalism that our freedom and fulfillment is to be found only in the pursuit of our own subjective desires and instincts. And yet, the elementary experience of our need to belong, hard-wired into the structure of the human person, remains whether we acknowledge it or not. The deep awareness that the horizon of our destinies lies ultimately not in what we possess and consume, or even what we autonomously choose, gnaws at us with every reduction of life to lust, money, and power. And so we are left with atomized individuals who nevertheless have a deep thirst for genuine human relationship and for meaning beyond themselves, and yet

<sup>3</sup> Sohrab AHMARI: Soulless Liberalism. *Wall Street Journal*, March 24, 2017.

whose capacity to belong to another has atrophied like a muscle that has never been used. And then the State steps in to claim its heightened role in maintaining our frayed social fabric.

It is no wonder, in this context, that the universality of the human person, especially in its dual structure as both individual and community, is under siege from every direction. From the political right, renewed forms of exclusive ethnonationalism appeal to that unsatisfied thirst for belonging, but in ways that threaten our openness to the stranger, the vulnerable, the other, and thus obscure our awareness of the universality of human nature and experience. On the postmodern left, endless parades of identity politics and emerging forms of post-humanism dissolve the human being into a chimera of socially-constructed or biologically-determined contingencies. Pervasive technocratic materialism provides endlessly better systems and technologies but is not capable of giving us any solutions to the human and moral dimensions of our problems.

Where, amid these powerful contemporary forces assailing the person, can anyone cultivate a self-awareness capable of uniting *both* the individual *and* the community, *both* the value of autonomy *and* of belonging, *both* freedom *and* responsibility?

We need to be able to recognize that participation and belonging in a specific community is essential to the flourishing of the individual, not only for the satisfaction of material needs but even more as the locus of meaning and culture. At the same time that particularity must not close us off to the awareness of the larger scope of our ontological belonging to the entire human family. We must find a way to retain a meaningful sense of being a specific *people*, while at same time remaining oriented toward a greater good, toward a horizon of meaning and purpose that is always beyond any specific attachment.

These are not mere abstractions. In practical terms, the challenge is manifest in our difficulty of dealing with the demands of human migration, integration, and social cohesion; with the protection and stewardship of the environment and our common home; with the need for economic systems that foster a beneficial production and exchange without vaporizing local communities or instrumentalizing and marginalizing vast numbers of people around the world. All of these challenges and others like them require us to come to terms with the universal horizon of human needs and of the common good, while at the same time understanding that the demands of hospitality and social integration, of our need for work and economic inclusion, even the breath of clean air we are able to take (or not), are all intensely local, particular, and personal. For that reason alone, the abstract universals of the Enlightenment self-evidently do not suffice to answer the challenges we face today; they are too removed from the concrete experience of individuals and communities.

And so we see that one of the most difficult yet urgent needs of today is to find ways to reconcile both the universal and the particular dimensions of human experience. How can it be the case that we can affirm universal truths within the horizons of culturally contingent realities? Or, conversely, can universal truths find varied forms of legitimate expression and instantiation amid the plurality of human communities? How can these two dimensions remain united?

The genius of human creativity already gives us suggestive affirmative responses to that question. Consider for instance the music of Béla Bartók, who gathered and gave voice to the folk songs of Hungary, united them with broader European ideas and developments, and thus expressed them in ways capable of enriching the entire world of music? Or to draw from experiences in my own discipline, consider how the great legal synthesis of Justinian, born out of the disparate laws of ancient Rome, has inspired hundreds of legal systems and centuries of juridical thought, for so many distinct human communities across time and space. Closer to our time, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights – one of the “highest expressions of the human conscience of our time”, according to St. John Paul II – aimed to articulate universal principles of human dignity while still allowing deliberately for the many different contexts in which they would need to find varied expression.

Both of these legal examples, not coincidentally, achieved their universality by placing the human person at the center of their work: “it is of little purpose to know the law, if we do not know the persons for whose sake the law was made,” says the code of Justinian. The Universal Declaration begins with the affirmation that “recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world”.

Where, today, can we undertake the difficult but urgent, task of creating the conditions for similar reconciliations of the universal and particular on the basis of the centrality of the human person, and not just in law or the arts but in all of our search for knowledge and our common life?

Here is where we can return to the vision of Archbishop Péter Pázmány. In his time, he faced the dual challenges of the Reformation, which fragmented the universality of the world of Christendom, and of the occupation of Hungary by the Ottoman Empire, which threatened to destroy the rich intellectual and moral identity of its people. He was concerned with *both* the universality and coherence of truth, beyond individual or nation, and *also* with the invaluable distinctiveness of concrete human experience that his (and every) culture embodies. His response was to found a *university*, which he would have understood paradigmatically as dedicated to the unity of knowledge. There, the universal and the particular can meet, and the affirmation of a specific moral and intellectual tradition can seek harmony with the universal horizon of the good, the true, and the beautiful.

Today, we are facing the long-term, unintended detritus of the same era of which Péter Pázmány stood at the threshold: a world of hyperpluralism, where universality is in retreat everywhere and where at the same time the pulverizing forces of globalization and technocracy threaten the distinctiveness of every particular cultural expression. Following the example of Péter Pázmány, our most fundamental response should be in the renewal of education, an education in which we aspire to overcome both the fragmentation of the person and the fragmentation of the knowledge of reality, which are in the end one and the same.

Of course, in our era most institutions of higher education have abandoned even the aspiration or ideal of a unity of knowledge; they are multiversities rather than universities. That is even more reason why *Catholic* universities bear a special

vocation in the modern world. They have crucial resources to bring to the problem I have outlined. The Catholic tradition embraces the distinctiveness of belonging to a people, while also affirming that the moral universality of the human person cuts across all ties of blood and politics and history. The Catholic tradition envisions, without paradox, the harmony of a universal common good and of subsidiarity as a fundamental principle of social order. In the past century Catholicism has been one of the principal institutional advocates for the dignity of all human beings as an ontological reality, and yet also defends the distinctiveness of cultures, recognizing that our capacity to honor human dignity only takes visible shape in concrete communities, relationships, and histories. And most of all, perhaps, the role of the Church has always been to respond to the specific needs of men and women in time, but to do so by reminding them and educating them to seek the ultimate meaning that is present in every fragment of reality – what is “perennially valid and lasting”, to return to where I began with the Benedictines of Pannonhalma. If individual and community are two essential dimensions of the human person, then transcendence is the third. Indicating, from within our experience of this world, the Mystery beyond the horizon of our vision is like using the method of linear perspective in art, which provides depth and solidity in a painting by pointing to the vanishing point beyond its two-dimensional plane. Without it, our humanity remains flattened and lifeless.

These are, I believe, some guideposts of our vocational paths as faculty members of a Catholic university. In their institutionally embodied ambitions and responsibilities, your university and mine share a deep common friendship and affinity of purpose.

Allow me to conclude, however, with only one cautionary note. To speak of the distinctive vocation of a Catholic university in the decline of the modern era should not be understood as a form of triumphalism, but as a form of *service*. Like all service it can only be done with humility – in this case, the humility of being aware that we do not and cannot ever possess the truth but only can allow the truth to possess us.<sup>4</sup> We must follow where it will lead, and thus not merely rest on the categories of the past but accept that the Spirit will always press us toward newness of life. As Pope Francis has repeatedly and urgently reminded us, service is done at “the peripheries, not only geographically, but also the existential peripheries: the mystery of sin, of pain, of injustice, of ignorance and indifference to religion, of intellectual currents, and of all misery”.<sup>5</sup> There, with a radical openness to the truth, and in all the particularity of an unexpected encounter, we may find ourselves surprised by the mystery of the human person and by the unity of reality.

For this reason above all, more than for any honor received, I am grateful for the gift of my encounter with you today.

*Nagyon szépen köszönöm!*

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Pope Benedict XVI, Address to the Roman Curia, Friday, 21 December 2012.

<sup>5</sup> Pope Francis, intervention during the pre-Conclave General Congregation meetings of the Cardinals, 9 March 2013.