

The University in a Fragmented World. A Contribution from Sophia University Institute

ABSTRACT

The John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin (KUL) was the very first University to honor the Italian religious leader Chiara Lubich, with a honorary degree. In 2007, Chiara Lubich who shared with Henry cardinal Newman some very similar intuitions on the task of a University, founded on the basis of the charism the Church recognized in her the University Institute Sophia (IUS) in Tuscany (Italy). This was to be the very last initiative of her long life as the foundress of the Focolare Movement, Chiara Lubich wanted it to be an interdisciplinary institute bringing together life and studies in harmony. Now, after more than eight years of life, the author dresses a 'state of the union' of this University Institute, in the context of the crisis of the universitarian world today.

KEYWORDS: *university education, interculturality and interreligious dialogue, competence, Chiara Lubich.*

"Our universities no longer provide a true education for the new generations." This was the heartfelt lament¹ of professor S. Zamagni, teaching in the oldest European University, Bologna, and it deeply touched Chiara Lubich in the summer of

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¹ For a brief presentation of the story of Chiara Lubich and the academic world see my *Chiara Lubich, Un'idea di Università* (2011).

2005. Professor Zamagni, economist and a close friend of Chiara, thought she could take some initiative and provide a solution to this problem. The letter, she later said, helped her to decide that the moment had arrived to fulfill an old dream, and, in December 2007, four months before her death, she received approval from the Congregation for Catholic Education for the foundation of Sophia University Institute. Earlier, in June 1996, Chiara Lubich received in Lublin the first of many honorary degrees. The John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin was hereby the first university to stress the importance of the original contribution the inspirational thinking of Chiara Lubich constitutes for our epoch. Today this insight is shared by many scholars and academic institutions², but the academic reception of it is still very partial and fragmentary. One of the most important parts of the heritage Lubich left is embodied in the life and daily evolution of the University Institute Sophia (IUS) in Loppiano (Florence).

After the first eight years of IUS what can be said that has an interest for academic education? What has changed since the foundation in 2008? What has changed is that we now have dozens of graduates who have finished their Master's degrees, as well as 10 students who have completed their PhDs, around 50 researchers currently registered for the PhD, so did 5 postdoctoral researchers, more than 500 students passed through our halls. Our first honorary doctorate went in October 2015 to Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople-New Rome. New also is the work in progress for Sophia in Latin-America and in Asia as well as in Africa. New are also two autonomous initiatives but strongly linked to Sophia, one to cover the needs for research and education in the field of pastoral issues – the *Evangelii Gaudium Institute*, that started in October 2016. The other initiative, called *Sophia Global Studies*,

² Recently were published in a critical edition of the collected speeches held by C. Lubich in occasion of the sixteen honorary degrees she received (Lubich 2016).

which intends to cover at least five themes of the socio-cultural-political and economic areas, in an explicitly interdisciplinary approach, starting from the current questions about the return of religion in the public sphere and the reality of a globalized world. In the pages available here it is not possible to make an exhaustive evaluation of the reality of Sophia University Institute after almost eight years now³. I must limit myself to only a few observations on three aspects of Sophia U.I. as an educational institution, using three keywords: competence, wisdom and dialogical capacity.

COMPETENCE

A University is called to pass on to students a series of competences and skills. Sophia made the choice not to propose a first level, undergraduate cycle of studies, but to propose master's and a doctoral level, as well as postdoctoral studies. The question that we continually ask ourselves is: what competences do students need in our world today. We don't think that superspecialization is the only valid answer to this question. To specialize is necessary but not sufficient. What does it mean today to form students with a broad approach to the world, capable of discerning behind specific questions the more global ones at stake, capable of over-

³ A first internal report on the professional outcomes of the students of IUS was made by dr. L. Paglione (sociologist), *Report di ricerca. Destini professionali e traiettorie di vita dei laureati presso l'Istituto Universitario Sophia (2008-2014)*, 2015, 48 p.. In 2014 IUS made the exercise of making a *Strategic Plan for 2014-2019*, di 60 p. A team of pedagogists and sociologists are working on a three years research project: *Educare alla vita buona del Vangelo: sfide e proposte educative "in un mondo che cambia" Un'analisi teologico-pastorale e socio-pedagogica dell'Istituto Universitario Sophia nei suoi primi cinque anni di attività alla luce degli orientamenti pastorali dell'Episcopato italiano per gli anni 2010-2020*. IU Sophia was also the topic for a PhD in the United States: Gianantonio Michelon (2009), *The Focolare Educational Model at Sophia Higher Learning Institute for Cultural Studies*, The University of the Incarnate Word, San Antonio (Texas) (December 2009).

coming the technical level and capable of reasoning also about the deeper sense of everything and about the ultimate questions?

In my subject area, sociology, the analysis of Niklas Luhmann (1991), is still interesting in this regard. He analyzed contemporary society as a world no more integrated as in pre-modern times by – on the one hand – religion and – on the other – politics, areas that dominated all other societal functions. If you could present the world as a big house, you would find that in premodern times, in an overwhelmingly rural world, religion and politics formed the roof and that all other functions were well-integrated under this roof. And the differentiations were linked most of all to geographical contexts: each village was more or less a world on its own. The other difference was social: you had a rural majority, an upper class and a small but growing middle class. Generally speaking we were in a world where not even 3 % of the population lived in cities with populations of more than 10.000 inhabitants.

Luhmann states that today instead we live in a very different world. He calls the process we are undergoing, a process of functional differentiation. Religion and politics no longer have the same dominant integrating role with regard to other societal functions. They are no longer consulted as before, they no longer represent synthesis, no longer deliver the generally accepted narratives that explain why society is running in one or other direction. They no longer provide us with the stories that once gave ultimate meaning to life and death. Economy, family, the world of education, free time, etc. became societal functions that conquered great autonomy, each following its own logic of internal development, with little attention to the whole, to society as such. Each was interested in its own part, its own specific function. In this situation we can ask: who cares for the whole, who offers a synthesis? The consequence of this new context is that for two centuries now we are in a situation where the motor of change in society is economic evolution and where, within the economy, we are confronted with the domination of financial logic on the

one hand⁴, and with techno-scientific development on the other. But neither finance nor techno-science gives us an explanation or a narrative on how to cope with life, the world, death, etc. (as did religion in other times) and no one seems to be capable to discern and coordinate for the whole as did politics in the past.

For example, that's why, in a functionally differentiated world, it becomes easier to understand why for such a long time the problem of the changing climate and more in general of the ecological question has been neglected and society didn't react adequately. The ecological crisis is a transversal problem, not linked with only one societal function (Laeyendecker 1990, 19). If we attend only to the economic function, we can understand that the ecological problem didn't exist for a long time. Things changed only when it became clear that one can do business with green products. As long as the ecological problem was not grasped in economic terms, it was as if the problem didn't exist.

We have thus a giant problem of coordination and giving meaning to the new situation of the globalizing world. We have to redefine the role of politics, and rethink what was called the *return of religion in the public space* (Casanova 1994, Thomas 2005).

We are faced with questions about what politics to adopt, and which religion really helps, and how to answer such questions without returning to pre-Modern times and without falling into either populism in politics or fundamentalisms in religion. We need to find answers to such questions without losing the positive aspects modernity brought in the development of politics and other functions.

The challenge, then, is to educate our students in a global vision and prepare them for a world where the questions of the deeper sense of life do matter, and to educate them to live in a complex world without getting lost. To navigate this situation, an interdisciplinary approach, open to the search for transdisci-

⁴ See Pope Francis, *Laudato si* (2015, 189).

plinary approaches, is essential to an education which respects the autonomy of the various areas of study, and is open to the deeper meaning of everything. What is really at stake is the challenge of respecting the legitimate diversities and in managing to articulate them in a synthesis that does not lose the meaning of things or of the direction in which to move. Unity in diversity is not only a theological problem.

At Sophia University Institute we introduce the students to the Christian Scriptures, theology, philosophy, ethics, political studies and economics. These courses are taught in a synthetic way so that the students can have an understanding of the global world and the equally complex human person. This broad approach helps, in some way, to remediate the fragmentation of knowledge and the lack of perception of man as a coherent totality⁵.

It is very interesting to read again the words of Henry cardinal Newman and his dialogue with those who in his time – the nineteenth century – abolished theology classes in almost all the faculties of the English universities, and even the classic education classes where philosophy had been taught prominently (Norris, 2009). He was appalled at the thought that such an educational method would have had as consequence that the individual would rivendicate everything for his own sake, putting himself at the center of each truth, forgetting the global state of affairs. The final result he foresaw, was the negation of man in his global being, in his fullness.

WISE

In our world characterized by the importance of techno-science, Sophia revives the indispensable role of mysticism There

⁵ The specific approach of IUS on the theme of the academic education was presented in «Sophia», 1 (2009), pp. 7-87, in eight contributions.

is no doubt that our globalized world gives great importance to the development of techno-science. The fascination of scientific conquest and the development of the most varied technologies, means that our world – at least the Western world – can doubt God because God is invisible. In contrast, nobody can doubt the existence of technological advance, which is plain to sight. What can be done? Can the invisible dimension be at the heart of and inspire a modern university? I note in this context that the Sophia University Institute is born of a contemporary mystic: Chiara Lubich. One might ask: what role can mystical discourse have where instrumental reason flourishes? The Sophia University Institute does not deny the need for technical competence, and has chosen to begin its programmes at the Master's level, so as to recognize the importance of the individual subject areas in their autonomy and specific competences. Nevertheless at Master's level, Sophia made a clear choice. In her foundational speech, the first indication of the foundress of the Focolare Movement and of the new University Institute was "what is about to be born has one task: to teach you wisdom" (2008, 15). Could we find many rectors who do not ask in their inaugural addresses for more computers, more languages, more resources for their students, all very necessary things surely. But here Chiara Lubich begins by asking that what Sophia must offer is wisdom. Lubich, at the beginning of the 1950s, following a seven year voyage of appropriation of gospel truths and having articulated what today is widely recognized as a new spirituality promoting unity and communion, "particularly well adapted to our times" (as Paul VI said in 1964), conceived for a while the desire to study theology to be able to transmit her mystical experience to the others (Povilus, 2009). For this reason, already in the 1950s she encouraged some of her companions to study, convinced that there was enough inspiration even to form a sort of theological "school", and later she spoke already of a university that would come forth one day. In January 1955 she expressed a formula in which she spoke of her desire to

communicate the charism that she had received to a wider public. Recalling the concerns of the 13th century Franciscan friars, who saw their companions travelling to study in Paris, and uttered the celebrated phrase “Paris, Paris, you destroy Assisi”⁶. Lubich in contrast expressed her conviction that in the lived experience of her companions, not only would Paris not destroy Assisi, but it would lead to the development of a third famous city, Hollywood, which here stood surely also for the development of art and the aesthetic dimension, but not only these dimensions. Hollywood, she said, represents the beautiful, Paris the truth, and Assisi life. But Hollywood also symbolized for her the desire to reach all human beings everywhere on the planet. In the fifties Hollywood with its globally release films touched and enchanted viewers from the whole planet, even the most remote localities. Chiara Lubich never forgot that the charism she received had to do with the whole family of man. But for us now, what was important was her conviction that the university would not threaten mysticism, genuine life. It should see the crucial importance of this, but not less the importance of the university, of the cultural mediation, both in itself, but also as a passage between mysticism and the communication of the message to all human beings. She viewed the academic development always also within a broader plan.

Is it possible to say that at Sophia Wisdom is taught? We do know that “wisdom unites”. What we see in Sophia is that when confronted with the dimension of Wisdom, many of the things that are already present in the First Testament profoundly affect the students. I highlight two aspects: it is said in the First Testament that Wisdom is female, which is to signify that Wisdom is beautiful, and attractive. This we see this sometimes even physically in our students, their gaze is brightened, serious faces relax, as though a light within is enflamed within the students. The

⁶ The most extensive published text on this theme is to be found in C. Lubich, *Essential Writings* (2007, 311).

second aspect that the First Testament emphasizes is that Wisdom wishes to dwell among men and women. Not infrequently one has the impression that there is an atmosphere in the classes and residences where something brings reasoning or lived practice to a new level. As we know, beautiful things are the hardest to recount, but they truly exist. It is not unusual to hear from an entrepreneur who works with graduates of Sophia that these graduates see further, that they are able to give a deeper sense to things, and bring something special to their workplaces.

DIALOGICAL

The Second Vatican Council promised a vision of the Catholic that has not yet been fully received in the world of believers. It promotes a vision whereby a Catholic who wishes to be faithful to the Holy Spirit today must promote unity in the Church, must promote ecumenism, must work to develop fraternal relations with the faithful of other religions and with all men and women of good will (Catalano 2010). I remember that in 1986, a few days after John Paul II's meeting with the religious leaders at Assisi to pray for peace, that he was still filled with joy over the success of this initiative, one of the most important of his long pontificate. He commented with Archbishop Zago, – as was told me in the very same days by a member of the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue – the one to whom this initiative had been entrusted, that it was necessary to study the theological reasons which legitimated this extraordinary experience, for fear that nothing would remain of this experience years later if this was not properly explained and legitimated.

A great theological, cultural and academic effort was called for in order to explain the attitudes (Coda 2003) that brought two successive popes, who were equally active and who performed spectacular gestures of fraternity in these four fields of action.

The question is, however, whether this has become a lifestyle for Catholics, or whether it has remained like a lick of paint in the life of parishes and associations? What is required for this to become the culture of the community of believers? I believe it requires the support of high culture. Is what Sophia does in this regard is important? Are the students of Sophia formed as protagonists in these four dialogues? This is perhaps one of the key challenges of the last few years. The Focolare Movement is well-known in the Catholic Church as one of the most active ecclesial movements in interreligious dialogue⁷. In the process of gaining approval from the Congregation for Catholic Education, it was explicitly stipulated that Sophia would, in the spirit of Vatican II welcome not only Catholics, but also other Christians, faithful of other religions, and people without any religious belief, as long as these accepted the style of life that the statutes describe, which is rooted in Scripture, in the Tradition of the church and according to the inspiration of the Focolare Spirituality. U.I. Sophia has already a consolidated experience of relationship with Muslims, Jews, and Buddhists who visit Sophia or study at Sophia. Among the students U.I. Sophia counts orthodox Christians, protestants, and Coptic Christians, along with young people without clear religious points of reference. The community life is organized in residences of 6 or 7 students on our campus, which permits our students to have an intense experience of relationships between cultures and of interreligious dialogue. We have an average of 32 nationalities present each year.

It was very interesting when the January 2015 attacks in Paris took place. Three times a week there is, as part of the academic agenda, an hour of sharing that starts with a comment on a Biblical verse. When speaking about these attacks, the French students were conscious that Pakistanis, Syrians and Africans underwent

⁷ An ample illustration of the engagement of Focolare is to be found in Catalano (2010).

similar experiences on an almost daily basis, but that these tragedies were not given the same prominence in the Western world. A very sincere sharing took place, and this helped encourage the decision to begin a course developing perspectives on themes of interculturality and interreligious dialogue. A year later the whole Institute saw how important it had been to give space to the experience of dialogue between religious persons, and to deepen our appreciation of cultural differences that help us to deepen our awareness of the diversity between us, and, frankly speaking, sometimes we have the impression that in Sophia, a global more brotherly world seems much more possible and real than all the conflicts men invent, and seem to make part of a unreal world, made of cartoon.

The question that I raise, therefore, is the following: has Chiara Lubich found a path that allows us to put together various fragments into which our lives and societies are torn?

A very famous lecturer of the Catholic University of Lublin, who came to be known as John Paul II, wrote that our “modern, mechanized and consumeristic society, ethics are subordinated to technology, the spiritual to the material, the order to being to that of having”⁸. This diagnosis is still valid, and explains, in part at least, why the individual feels him or herself to be fragmented. It is difficult for today’s individual to feel him or herself fully human. Our continent too, Europe, seems to be having this difficulty. It seems to be suffering the inability to make meaningful steps towards the integration of having and being, the material and the spiritual, the technological and the ethical. To teach to “perceive reality as one”. Chiara Lubich, doctor of Catholic University of Lublin, saw Europe as the continent that more than others had the possibility of advancing study of Wisdom and the riches of various fields of knowledge that were born here from Athenian antiquity to today (Lubich, 1974). She added however,

⁸ Quoted by Archbishop V. Nichols, in Callebaut (2011, 24).

that it was also the continent of the confusion of ideas. We here today, convened from East and West, breathing with both lungs, as Pope John Paul II suggested, can have an experience of how the search for truth can become an ever more vital one. We need only to be aware that the truth is found first of all in the meeting with the other. It is true that the other is other, but we cannot find happiness in solitude, as Aristotle knew already. After 2000 years of Christian life and reflection, we know that it is in the space of fraternal relationships, even intellectual ones, the miracle occurs: each person become more themselves, but the deep conviction that we are in a shared land grows, and it becomes possible to taste the joy that is born and grows from knowledge shared in an experience of lived communion.

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