**Letter of Rector**

**of the Catholic University of Lublin**

**for the Nativity of the Lord 2023**

**The advent of God on earth**

**as a call for dialogue and reconciliation**

Beloved in Christ, Sisters and Brothers,

Dear Friends of the John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin!

For Christians, the Nativity of Christ is not merely a historical event, but above all a great mystery of faith. Its essence is the coming of God himself to man, the meeting of the loving Creator with his creation. This is how St. Paul defines this extraordinary humility of God: “Christ, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped. Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness, and found human in appearance” (Phil 2:6-7). St. Caesarius of Arles, one of the renowned Catholic preachers of the 5th century, adds in the very same spirit: “Our Lord Jesus Christ is heavenly and true mercy. Even though no one sought Him, He descended from heaven on His own accord and humbled Himself to extoll humanity”.

The unique encounter between God and man taking place in Bethlehem can be described as dialogue between heaven and earth. The Son of God, entering humanity, began a salvific dialogue, knocking at the gates of our hearts and patiently asking to be received and listened to. Our life is an attempt to continually respond to this God's call. It is only when we listen to His voice, when we honestly present our reasons to Him, confronting our own views with His will, that we can grow internally and build a vital relationship with Christ. Only when we learn to argue and reconcile with God will we be able to speak honestly, sincerely, and humbly with another person.

However, observation of various spheres of public life prompts the reflection that dialogue with God is gradually losing its importance and that people forego dialogue in favour of quarrelling. Interlocutors are unable and unwilling to listen to each other, unable to calmly present their arguments and seek consensus, and are not interested in seeking the truth but in pursuing their own interests. If this dangerous process is not stopped and remedied by means of Christian principles, it can lead to the dissolution of social bonds and of the sense of community, symbolised in the Bible by the confusion of languages and the unsuccessful construction of the Tower of Babel. May, then, the dialogue between the Creator and the world, which began in the Bethlehem stable, become today an opportunity to take a closer look at the role of dialogue in our relationship with God and with other people.

1. Christ Teaches Humanity to Dialogue

Invariably, it is the Creator who takes the initiative in God’s dialogue with man. From the moment of creation, and even more so from the moment He comes into the world in human form, He reaches out towards us with His word. Although it is the word of truth, which is the ultimate guidance in life, God does not impose His will by force, but allows humans to reflect on it and allows them to choose freely. God repeatedly presents His proposal, patiently waiting for a response.

This ongoing dialogue between God and us proceeds not only at the level of words recorded in the books of Holy Scripture but goes back to the most difficult deeds performed by Jesus. This is what the incarnation of God’s Word consists in; it did not remain at the level of theory, but materialised in the person of Christ, showing extraordinary solidarity with creation, for which the Creator felt responsible. As indicated by the aforementioned preacher from early Christian period, St. Caesarius of Arles: “God’s Son wants to be hungry with us, to be thirsty with us, to feel cold with us, and to be on pilgrimage with us. In order to be with us, He is not even averse to dying and being thrown into prison”.

Dialogue and encounter as the unique features of the mission of the founder of Christianity on Earth have been pointed out at present time by Pope Francis in one of his addresses: “Jesus himself announced the kingdom of God in dialogue with all kinds and categories of people of the Judaism of his time: with the scribes, the Pharisees, the doctors of the law, the publicans, the learned, the simple, sinners. […] We lose nothing by engaging in dialogue. We always gain something. In a monologue, we all lose, all of us”. The Pope’s words make us aware that before He helped people, Christ had listened to what they had to say. He had a message to share with them, a message that reached into the depths of their inner problems. He delivered this message with care and with the power of divine truth, which he identified with. At times it was a painful and demanding teaching, because the one who loves knows that he must sometimes admonish and even punish, for the sake of the loved one and their proper development. Some of Jesus’ dialogues and encounters with people led to healing and consolation, as in the case of the woman caught in adultery or the demon-possessed. Others ended with the admonition of the two-faced Pharisees or the expulsion of the merchants from the temple. All this, however, was done in a spirit of respect and concern for humans and their welfare.

2. Conditions for Fruitful Interpersonal Dialogue

Dialogue requires the active participation of two people meeting each other. God comes in the hope that people will open their hearts to Him, however not like during the night in Bethlehem, when He came to His own and His own did not receive Him. Our response cannot be limited to moments of personal conversation with God during prayer. Dialogue with Him also takes place through other people. When I talk to my neighbour, I should remember how the Son of God relates to me. One should also be aware that when discussing, instructing, helping, refusing to help, or breaking off dialogue, we always do so in relation to Christ, the God dwelling in man.

In order for dialogue with others on personal or social levels to be fruitful, certain conditions must be fulfilled; these conditions can be found in Christ’s attitude towards His interlocutors.

First, one should approach the other person with respect and have the goodwill to seek the truth. Second, both parties should listen calmly to each other’s points of view, seeking first and foremost commonalities rather than differences. Third, when criticising or rejecting the views of the interlocutor, one should not hurt the person and violate his or her dignity. Fourth, making a remark, criticising, or proposing a difficult solution must not be based on prejudice or a hostile attitude on the part of the person offering criticism. On the contrary, such remarks must not be perceived by the admonished person as a personal attack but as a proposal to rethink his conduct.

When addressing His interlocutors, Christ always looked into their faces with love, which is the prerequisite for fruitful dialogue. Only by respecting the interlocutor is it possible to listen patiently, to put forward one's views without force or offence, to come to an understanding, to defend the truth and, at the same time, to learn certain things even from someone with whom we fundamentally disagree. The rich young man who asked Jesus what he was to do to gain eternal life, walked away saddened since Christ’s demanding of him to give away all he had proved too difficult. Still, he cannot have felt offended by Jesus as this demand was put to him with care and love.

3. A Catholic University as a School of Dialogue

The university is a place particularly predestined to hold all kinds of disputes with a sense of freedom and with the intention of pursuing the primary objective of arriving at the truth about the reality under investigation. Honest dialogue, supported by arguments developed through many years of academic research, has been a symbol of the activities of universities since their inception. A Catholic university has a unique role in this regard, since the person of Christ, the Son of God, is in the background of everything that is undertaken within its walls.Christ is at the same time the ultimate truth and master of humble and loving dialogue, which is consistent and linked to the witness of life and even, when necessary, with self-sacrifice. As the community of the John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, we hold it to be our special obligation to engage in constructive dialogue at different levels and to teach this skill.

Dialogue in the context of a Catholic university means creating a climate characterised by a sincere exchange of ideas, getting to know each other, striving for the truth together, the ability to listen to the other, proposing rational hypotheses and solutions, free of negative emotional bias.

We began the current academic year with awarding an honorary doctorate to the eminent Argentinian Rabbi Prof. Abraham Skorka, whose commitment to Jewish-Christian dialogue is highly valued by Pope Francis. His perspective on the issue of dialogue can teach us much. Rabbi Skorka’s approach to the relationship between science and faith is as follows: “Science and religion are two parallel fields that should enter into dialogue with each other. The scientist who tries to disprove the phenomenon of religion on the basis of his knowledge is unintelligent, as is the man of religion who wants to discredit science by appealing to his faith”.

The rabbi’s another statement is likewise noteworthy: “Genuine dialogue assumes that we try to get to know and understand the interlocutor. […] Dialogue demands that its participants reveal themselves to one another. […] We begin to notice the similarities between ourselves and the other person. [...] The soul of one person is reflected in the soul of another. The divine breaths present in each of them then merge, forming a knot that will never be loosened”. Indeed, these words of Rabbi Skorka correspond very well with those of Pope Francis: “Dialogue is born out of respect for the other person, out of the conviction that he has something valuable to say. [...] In order to talk, it is necessary to be able to take down the defensive walls, to open the doors of the house, and to offer human cordiality”.

All these qualities of dialogue mentioned by the Pope and the Rabbi are worth following in different circumstances, whether in academic disputes aimed at discovering the truth, in interreligious contacts, or in socio-political debates.

There is no better model for conducting meetings and engaging in dialogue than Jesus Christ Himself. As Pope Francis indicated, in the Christian understanding, dialogue begins with listening and creates communion. It is God who is the first listener; He listens to the human heart in order to open it to receive the fullness of love and the joy of life. D**uring this time of Christmas, the most family-oriented holiday, which should be permeated with the spirit of peace and reconciliation, I wish that the culture of dialogue becomes more and more a reality**. May the Incarnate God, who has entered into dialogue with humanity, teach us to be open to the truth, to be able to present it in a debate, and to defend it when necessary. May the humble God-Man be our model of forbearance towards the views of others, of patient listening and persuasion.

May Jesus, who looked upon all with love, encourage us to be kind to the people with whom we speak and grant us the ability to seek what unites rather than what divides.

**Rector of the Catholic University of Lublin**

**Fr. Prof. Mirosław Kalinowski**

**Lublin, Nativity of the Lord 2023**