



EMPATHY IS A RESOURCE THAT CATHOLIC UNIVERSITIES BEAR WITHIN THEMSELVES

When Pope Leo XIV signed, on 15 May 2026, his first Encyclical Letter — significantly on the 135th anniversary of Leo XIII’s *Rerum Novarum* — his intention was not merely to produce a programmatic document. He sought to identify with precision the epochal crossroads at which humanity finds itself today. The advance of artificial intelligence promises to simulate precisely what technology will never be able to replace: our very humanity. For this reason, *Magnifica humanitas* is not a treatise on technology. As its subtitle indicates, it is a document on safeguarding the human person in the age of artificial intelligence. And it is precisely there, at that point of tension between simulation and experience, that the Pope places empathy as a category at risk, thus justifying the urgency of his call for an open reflection: “when words are simulated, they do not build genuine relationships, but only their appearance” (MH, n. 100). The first Triennial of Contemporary Art of Catholic Universities — bringing together one hundred artists and seven universities from three different continents — emerges from this appeal.

The Triennial as an act of empathy

If there were a word capable of representing Catholic Universities and their integral vision of the meaning of education, that word would be precisely “empathy”. Empathy is present at the origin of this university project; it perfectly defines its specific scope; and it effectively translates its mission. It is not a rhetorical ornament, but a structural principle: it is through the ability to place oneself within the experience of the other and to inhabit their point of view that the university can fulfil its deepest vocation, namely, generating communities around truth. As Saint John Paul II recalled in the Apostolic Constitution *Ex corde Ecclesiae* (1990), Catholic universities were “born from the heart of the Church”, as a body of professors and students committed to the shared pursuit of truth and deeply open to the totality of human knowledge. It is precisely here that empathy enters the scene as a firm disposition that makes it possible to combine meticulous scientific activity with constant care for the person. Hannah Arendt, in her essay *The Crisis in Education* (1954), wrote: “Education is the point at which we decide whether we love the world enough to assume responsibility for it.” This insight finds a particular resonance in the tradition of Catholic universities: educating is not merely transmitting content; it is an act of love by those who feel responsible for the present and future of the world, finding empathetic responses to its needs.

The Triennial of Contemporary Art of Catholic Universities also aims to create a network among Catholic universities spread across different geographical regions, embracing the challenge of recognising a shared identity that strengthens the richness of relationships. Together, we constitute a system — not a federation of interests, but a living and articulated body, to which each institution contributes through its own initiative, its own language, and its own historical context. This convergence of visions and efforts constitutes, in itself, an act of institutional empathy. Pope Leo XIV encourages universities to make empathy the instrument of their daily experience. As he states

incisively in *Magnifica humanitas*, empathy is fundamental in enabling knowledge to “grasp complexity” (MH, n. 137). In the same way, it is empathy that allows the university community to have a social and cultural impact, contributing to “the discernment of choices that affect people’s daily lives” (MH, n. 72). It is no coincidence that these two dimensions — the ability to inhabit complexity and the capacity to achieve ethical discernment — appear together: only a university capable of empathy can transform the fragmentation of specialised knowledge into a wisdom oriented towards the good of individuals and of concrete societies.

A word synonymous with hope

In the fragile and fragmented context of the present, marked by growing polarisation and by increasingly sophisticated forms of communication that, paradoxically, isolate more than they unite, empathy emerges as a necessary cultural act of preservation. It is an increasingly indispensable instrument for building and sharing knowledge, for weaving reciprocity, and for fostering collaborative practices, not only within the exclusive sphere of personal relationships, but also, and above all, within the broad and polyphonic fabric of collective life.

The various forms of community that make up global society — the family, the school, the university, and the spaces of civic life — have everything to gain from deepening this form of knowledge in which the human dimension is expressed in a privileged way. A family that educates in empathy forms people capable of facing difference without fear; a university that cultivates it forms professionals who do not reduce the other to data or to a function; a workplace permeated by empathy becomes a place of recognition rather than merely of productivity. As Pope Leo XIV points out, an artificial system can reproduce the external signs of compassion, but it cannot suffer with those who suffer, nor truly rejoice with those who rejoice. For this reason, at a time when many processes — informational, relational, and even emotional — are being delegated to algorithms, reaffirming the centrality of human empathy becomes an act of cultural awareness and, at the same time, an act of hope.

The humility without which empathy does not exist

The term empathy is relatively recent. It does not exist in ancient Greek or in classical Latin with the meaning we attribute to it today. It was coined at the end of the 19th century, and its most recurrent use was, interestingly, recorded in the field of aesthetics. When we contemplate an artistic object, we project onto it a dynamism that belongs to our psychic existence and that allows us to feel ourselves within what we observe. From the vocabulary proper to aesthetics, the application of the term empathy later moved into the field of interpersonal relationships, since, when we look at someone’s face, we also project onto that face our own repertoire of inner states and can identify, by analogy, similar feelings that we have already experienced. This general theory of empathy, known as the “theory of inner imitation”, was developed by the German philosopher Theodor Lipps and was later taken up by the school of Husserl.

It should be noted that Edmund Husserl’s phenomenological circle quickly realised that Lipps’ theory, by explaining the understanding of the other as a projection of the self, risked failing to reach the other in their specific otherness. If everything I recognise in another person’s face is a projection of my own inner experience, then I never truly leave myself: the other ultimately remains a reflection of me, rather than an autonomous subject endowed with an inner life genuinely distinct from my own. It was precisely around this problem that Edith Stein, philosopher, saint and Doctor of the Church, one of the fundamental figures for the contemporary dialogue between faith and reason, wrote her doctoral dissertation entitled *Zum Problem der Einfühlung* — “On the Problem of Empathy”.

Stein insists on a decisive point: we never experience the pain or joy of another person in the same way that the other person experiences it; we experience them as belonging to the other. It is this constitutive humility — the fact that empathy never cancels the otherness of the other, nor naively absorbs it into my own experience — that makes empathy an act of respectful knowledge, rather than a form of relativism or appropriation. The patient exercise of that closeness in which the other can truly be recognised as other constitutes an important lesson for our time, marked by new forms of cultural misunderstanding or algorithmic depersonalisation.

The Triennial as a School of Empathy

The concept of empathy offers the first Triennial of Contemporary Art of Catholic Universities a fruitful stimulus for bringing aesthetics and ethics into dialogue and, at the same time, for encouraging all fields of knowledge towards an interdisciplinary conversation, drawing us closer to one another in order to undertake together that demanding, patient yet passionate exercise which is, ultimately, mutual recognition.

Saint John Henry Newman, in *The Idea of a University* (1852), had lucidly described this same movement as the true fruit of university life: scholars, proud of their own disciplines and, precisely for this reason, in competition with one another, are led through coexistence to adjust the claims and boundaries of their respective fields of research, and thus “learn to respect, to consult, to aid each other”. It is precisely this transition — from rivalry between specialisations to mutual respect, from disciplinary isolation to mutual assistance — that the Triennial seeks to foster, not only among fields of knowledge, but also among people, institutions, and cultures.

Affirming friendship as a cultural leaven is an urgent task that must unite us all, within our university communities and beyond them. Artistic creativity can strengthen new forms of institutional and personal empathy, inspire thought and action, and encourage listening and the flow of life. The work of art is sustained by a paradoxical structure that makes it, at the same time, a physical, visible, and tangible reality — canvas, stone, video, sound — and the vehicle of an intentionality, a wound, an interiority that exceeds it and cannot be reduced to pure materiality. It is precisely this tension between matter and meaning that makes the work of art a privileged place for the exercise of empathy: before it, we are invited to suspend immediate judgement, to pause our gaze, and to allow something else to address us before we classify it or instrumentalise it.

Likewise, in human relationships, the transformative moment occurs when we stop looking at the other according to their usefulness and become capable of recognising them in their own being, freely and without reducing them to an instrument. For this reason, the Triennial can legitimately present itself as a school of empathy, because it deepens transversally that same perceptive and affective capacity which we are called to exercise in the concrete relationships of academic and social life. The very international architecture of the project is already, in itself, an exercise in institutional empathy, an invitation to inhabit a shared listening to goodness, truth, and beauty.

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May the Triennial strengthen the international role of Catholic Universities as cultural workshops capable of contributing to the task of humanisation, activating dynamics of thought that promote peace, spiritual progress, and fraternity.

Card. José Tolentino de Mendonça
Prefect of the Dicastery for Culture and Education
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