

What Role Does the Catholic University Have in a Society in Crisis?

CORINA YORIS-VILLASANA*

ABSTRACT: In order to talk about the role of the University is called to play in our present social context we can take a look at what the Apostolic Constitution *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* has to say about the role Catholic universities should play in the world of today. The task given to universities holding the name Catholic is none other than to investigate the reasons and possible causes of the thorny problems of our time, and also to devise plans inspired by religious values as those that are particular to the Catholic worldview. Ours is a time of change where globalization has caused very abrupt and profound changes in the social and political life of the world. Globalization has been defined by A. Mora C. as the “enlargement, deepening and speeding up of global interconnectedness in all aspects of contemporary social life, from the cultural to the criminal, from the financial to the spiritual.” Accordingly, the present paper tries to explain in what sense and why a situation of crisis arises from the ignorance of the changes that globalization brings about. Taken into account the sociopolitical context of Venezuela, the paper will analyze the role the University is called to play in the socio-cultural context of a serious and still growing crisis.

Introduction

I work at a Catholic university entrusted to the Society of Jesus. I am a Catholic, and my university is located in Latin America – Venezuela –, where society is deeply affected by a serious crisis on several levels (political, social, cultural). The task of speaking on the purpose this institution is supposed to serve, even in the midst of turbulent times, when our religious values are themselves in the eye of the storm, makes me remember the guidelines set forth by the Apostolic Constitution *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, and recall the specific part that a Catholic University is to play in a context such as ours by fulfilling its mission before the Church and society alike.

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The task that has been entrusted to any university who calls itself Catholic is none other than to conduct research in order to uncover possible reasons and causes for the thorny issues of our time. At the same time, it is committed to devising plans for solving said problems; plans which will evince our religious values, the ethical values specific to the Christian worldview.

We know that the university is but a fraction of society, but also that it constitutes a qualitative influence that will considerably outweigh its quantitative aspect.¹

In my presentation, I shall attempt to explain in what sense I speak of “turbulent times” in my country and why. That will enable me to analyze the way in which the Andrés Bello Catholic University can contribute to finding a pacific way out of the crisis on which I have been commenting.

The Venezuelan Crisis

The present period in Venezuelan history is marked by the loss of certainty about big concepts which, barely until yesterday, have been making sense of politics: citizenship, sovereignty, democratic virtue, just to name a few. That conceptual loss generates a perverse effect. Our theoretical framework that used to support politics has shattered, and along with it, possible solutions to our current crisis have also been lost to our view.

It is convenient to move towards a stage of decantation and sedimentation, arrived at with enough serenity to analyze the value and validity of the signifiers in perfect cool, knowing how to discard everything deemed useless into the trunk of oblivion. This will, in turn, enable the emergence of the new, of other valid basic principles which sometimes remain darkened or hidden. This is due to the impact of specific crises arising from political and ideological circumstances, such as the prevailing political instability that we live in this spot on the planet.

It deserves mention that the anachronism of Venezuelan “21st Century Socialism” (which is a misnomer) appears at a very time when the context of the world is one of submersion in the time of globalization. Over the past few years, our country has invested plenty of time in discussing and planning several political projects that have failed resoundingly in other nations, yet here they insist on a warped concept of “social justice” which, far from alleviating poverty, has only harvested the scarcity of the most essential supplies needed for a dignified life.

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¹ Cf. “Presencia de la Iglesia en la Universidad y en la cultura universitaria”, in http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/cultr/documents/rc_pc_cultr_doc_22051994_presence_sp.html).

Globalization of this multifaceted phenomenon has given rise to sudden and profound changes in the social and political life on a global scale. To advance a definition for the term is a difficult – not to mention prickly – subject. Therefore I shall adhere to the concept supplied by A. Mora C.:

Although the difficulties that one comes across when trying to configure a precise definition of globalization are quite common, general consensus about its meaning regards it “as the widening, deepening and acceleration of worldwide interconnection that extends to all aspects of contemporary social life, from the cultural to the criminal, from the financial down to the spiritual.”²

While around the world doors are opening for the debate on globalization, modernity and the postmodern answers, on the problems of the “fall of the Welfare State” – masterfully dissected by Jürgen Habermas in 1988³ –, underdeveloped countries find themselves embroiled in contexts of crisis where social inequality, as well as economic and political problems have so thoroughly eroded them that they become fertile ground for insurrections.

Victory over that scourge called poverty is the main challenge faced by the entire Latin American territory. Overcoming that blight of our societies becomes, for all the obvious ethical reasons, an obligation. It will also ensure maintaining the desired balance between the socioeconomic and the political in all nations that make up Latin America.⁴

The matter has been advanced and debated *ad nauseam* in various international venues. It features as a priority on the list of political programs by all Latin American governments. Even so, doubts persist regarding the adequacy of selecting techniques that are needed for fighting against poverty.⁵

Among those problems, the social catastrophe lived by Venezuelans stands out dramatically. Adding to proposals for improving the quality of education, of social, healthcare and housing policies, we are under an obligation to promote coexistence.

Now, coexistence is largely absent in these dark times. Intolerance towards others is the current behavioral default, to the point where it has become a trigger for class struggle the likes of which we have never witnessed before (not the recent generations in our country, at any rate).

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² A. Mora C., “Globalización y política”. URL: <http://www.cronicon.net/paginas/Documentos/Globalizaci%F3n%20y%20pol%EDtica.pdf>.

³ J. Habermas (1988), “La crisis del Estado de bienestar y el agotamiento de las energías utópicas” en *Ensayos políticos*. Barcelona: Ediciones Península. pp. 113-134.

⁴ Cf. D. Raczynski, “Estrategias para combatir la pobreza en América Latina. Diagnóstico y enseñanzas de política”. URL: http://www.cieplan.org/media/publicaciones/archivos/21/Capitulo_1.pdf.

⁵ Ibid.

How, then, could we begin to diminish the devastating effects of this intolerance? It seems mandatory to foster civic coexistence, to learn to recognize that social order is a crucial factor in achieving the common good. And how are we to accomplish social order? What is the “common good”? Here is where the university seems to come in.

Role of the Andrés Bello Catholic University

I will not begin to talk of the meaning of “democracy”, fruitful though it might well be, as it would lead us away from the main focus of this presentation. Instead I will understand it as a regime “classically” characterized by being a manner of organizing the State, such that collective decision-making results from agreements among the people, which are in turn arrived at through direct and indirect intervention structures, thereby infusing legitimacy to their representatives.

For all its variations, virtues and shortcomings, our Latin American societies advance along the path laid out by that form of government, with a few exceptions. For indeed there are countries where authoritarian regimes have taken root. Venezuela is precisely one of the countries where political distortion has permeated government to its core. Even though the Venezuelan government displays a pretended “participatory democracy” for the eyes of the world to watch, the fact remains that a mix of pseudo-socialist or communist policies, which have failed miserably all over the world, is what our “democracy” actually comes down to.

The task of professors at a Catholic university is not to incorporate religious matters into the subjects they teach, but rather to contribute to developing critical thinking among their students, to foster the kind of debate that will allow them to question themselves – as well as others – on matters that have probably never interested them, but which are undoubtedly part of the civil virtues our societies require.

Committed as they are to a transcendent view of reality and of the human person, with Christian ethical and moral values, Catholic educators will infuse interdisciplinarity with a coherent view of the human person, and a worldview that is illuminated by the Gospel, by the faith in Christ as the center of Creation and human history.⁶

If we seek to reestablish coexistence and democracy in the country, we must bear in mind the way in which we have come to understand democracy, namely a method or a set of procedural rules “to constitute a government, and to take political decisions that are legally binding in character”.⁷ To put this way, tolerance is characterized by the transcen-

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⁶ Cf. *Gaudium et Spes*.

⁷ I. Cisneros, “Tolerancia y Democracia” (Tolerance and Democracy, in English) in http://deceyec.ife.org.mx/cuadernos_de_divulgacion_de_la_c.htm

dence accorded to the diversity of viewpoints in a democratic regime. It is precisely the lack of acceptance of diversity that is spurring confrontation. As Norberto Bobbio maintains, democracy is not a space inhabited by those few who enjoy exclusive property rights on truth. Quite the contrary, to inhabit a democratic space is to be surrounded by a cosmos that is uniquely defined by a multitude of opinions. We would then find ourselves in the presence of – as Karl Popper put it – an “open society”, which is in contrast to a “closed society”, the latter concept encompassing totalitarian spaces of any sort.

Tolerance appears in stark contrast with belief in “absolute truths”, which leads everyone to regard only his own belief as true. Accordingly, each of the many “truths” existing within a democracy have relative value. In other words, there is the possibility for diverse interpretations to coexist peacefully, and their encounter is beneficial, exactly because no one is in possession of the ultimate truth. By permitting all different viewpoints to be freely expressed, tolerance contributes to reciprocal knowledge, that is, “mutual recognition” through which partial truths may be overcome, and a more comprehensive truth – in the sense of accomplishing agreement among the parties involved – may be crafted.⁸

To speak in defense of tolerance by referring to partial truths is something worthy of careful analysis. Cisneros rightly contends that freedom of expression will make it possible to move above and beyond those “partial truths”. In defending those truths, we can often lapse into radical relativism. We hear frequent expressions along the lines of “this is my opinion. This is my truth. You guys keep your own.” Thereby it is taken for granted that truth is relative to every individual because it depends on them. Is this stance even admissible?

Those who espouse a relativistic position with regard to truth – and, therefore, with regard to tolerance – maintain that man can know the truth. Yet at the same time, they profess that no truth enjoys absolute value. Truth can only be called such if it dwells within a given space/place, at a given time/epoch/culture. In others words, no truth is universally valid, but merely by virtue of the representing subjects’ specific constitution.⁹

The apology currently awarded to tolerance is, on numerous occasions, an admission of relativism. There are renowned politicians, lawyers, and even some moralist groups devoted to progressivism, who are obstinate in repeating that if you are not a relativist, then you cannot be tolerant. Now, people who think this way are not actually as humble as they seem to be on the surface. They ascribe to themselves a monopoly on the moral

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⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Cf. Antonio Orozco-Delclós.

virtue of tolerance, thereby absolutely – and not relatively – denying it to those who would disagree with them. They do not possess enough humility to tolerate others who may think of themselves as tolerant, yet do not support relativism. And in reality, they are not relativists, either. They cannot be. This is because their relativistic claim is absolute, not relative in turn.¹⁰

Let us place the discussion within the realm of thoughts and opinions. Could we seriously say that, in order to be tolerant, we must accept all opinions voiced during a dispute? Now let us return to Venezuela's current atmosphere and ask ourselves again: "can we seriously say that, in order to be tolerant, we must accept as valid all opinions put forward in, for example, a debate over the events of April 2002?" It is true that, in order to "pass judgment", both sides must be heard. But are we really being tolerant when, standing before the image of armed gunmen attacking a crowd, we argue that they were defending "the Revolution", and on account thereof, they are not to be blamed? It is quite frequent for us to accept as unassailable the claim that "every opinion is worthy of respect", and then we instantly label as intolerant whosoever dares to contend that, sometimes, not every opinion is worthy of respect. Can we affirm that such reprimand is objective?

An opinion is worthy of respect, honor, and esteem, if it gives answer to the question of what role a person should play in the community where they belong. A person develops by creating community life. When she talks, listens, writes, or does any action that is oriented towards others, people need to make certain that our activity contributes to the construction of a sphere of coexistence.¹¹

Accepting "any point of view" as valid for the sake of tolerance would lead us into an understanding of the notion as merely having to gulp and be content with it. Such an attitude might be characterized as either downright indifferent, or fearful of a display of force on the part of who argues in such a fashion. Should this be the case, are we truly in the presence of tolerance as a "civic virtue"?

The true tolerant person is not a meek spirit that bows before any idea or behavior because, deep down, she is not truly committed to any of them. She is a person who is enthusiastic about certain principles, preferences, and ideals, and defends them vigorously. She knows life is a contest and competes mightily, yet she gladly accepts the adversary and puts effort into seeing them in all their gamut of implications and nuances.

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¹⁰ A. Millán Puelles (1998), *El interés por la verdad*. Rialp: Madrid, p. 143.

¹¹ A. López Quintás, "La Tolerancia y la búsqueda en común de la verdad", in <http://www.hotopos.com/mirand11/quintas.htm>.

This encompassing way of seeing reality, as a weave of aspects and relations, is at the core of authentic tolerance.¹²

Tolerance can be understood as recognition of the “other” – regarded as “different”, precisely because they hold opinions different from our own, but having the same value. Thus tolerance is a “moral duty” that allows the independence of criteria to be ratified.¹³ Whenever a given group believes itself to be in possession of “absolute” truth, and so governs on behalf of said group and for their own group, we cannot, as a consequence, make the case that this is democracy. In sum, we can be called tolerant when we muster the courage to defend certain precepts, maxims, and norms. We are tolerant when we fully comprehend that living life compels you to persevere and fight tirelessly, “yet [we] gladly accept the adversary and put effort into seeing them in all their gamut of implications and nuances. This encompassing way of seeing reality, as a weave of aspects and relations, is at the core of authentic tolerance”.¹⁴

From this, one concludes that cultivating “weak thought” – lacking in depth and proper grounds –, acceptance of “cultural relativism” – which shirks steadfast commitments because of the thought that all opinions are equally valid –, fostering skepticism – which denies the possibility of reaching truth –, and praising subjectivism –which imprisons man in his solitude –, none of the former lay the foundation for greater tolerance. On the contrary, they promote intolerance and dogmatism. It is only when I recognize (with Gabriel Marcel) that “what is deepest within me does not come from me”, and I struggle to clarify the truth of all that surrounds me and my own truth as well, that I overcome the desire to dominate that inspires all forms of dictatorial oppression.¹⁵

How do we restore Venezuela’s social fabric with the value of Tolerance? It is most decidedly not a matter of providing recipes or anything of the sort. It is time to search for a way of educating that will teach recognition of the other, not construed as a mere adversary, as a stone blocking your path to triumph. We must learn to see the human person in the other, with her enthusiasm, her projects, her expectations.

What is happening nowadays in Venezuela? Why does an atmosphere of intolerance persist? I would venture that a society striving for tolerance as a “civic virtue”, as the essential ingredient in achieving peaceful coexistence, such a society simply cannot afford the luxury of having an education that will not foster creativity, authenticity, and values. In order to achieve this, we must first (as written by López Quintás in the article

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¹² Ibid.

¹³ Cf. I. H. Cisneros, *ibid.*

¹⁴ Cf. A. López Quintás, *op. cit.*

¹⁵ A. López Quintás (1999), p. 14.

I have been referring to throughout this presentation) exercise long-term foresight, that is, we must avoid that deeply-rooted vice of short-termism. Secondly, we must cultivate a broadness of criterion, which is to say, we need to avoid blindly accepting our own criteria and way of living, or those belonging to people who think like us. Thirdly, the depth of thought: running away from perfunctorily analyzing situations. “Properly understood, an attitude of tolerance involves spiritual maturity, and this cannot be arrived at by merely demanding minimal rules for coexisting”.¹⁶

Many a time there has been insistence on a link between freedom of education and “neutrality”. This has been represented by the phrase “Nowadays, being a neutral man has become synonymous with being a person whose opinions are stranded in objectivity”. While it is certain that it is necessary to place oneself on “objectivity”, I do not share the view that the so-called objectivity forces you not to commit to anything. If some cautionary measures are not taken beforehand, adhering to objectivity may easily lead us into mistakenly believing that, in order to be objective, one must detach oneself from everything, not be a part of anything, not defend anything. Such a staunch defense of “neutrality” ultimately contradicts itself. You become so “neutral” that you hold neutrality as your most prized value.

At this point we need to emphasize that education should in principle be carried out in and for freedom. Only so long as this is done will we ever be able to learn how to exercise tolerance. Those who understand freedom as standing up for other people’s freedom find themselves in the domain of tolerance. However, this behavior demands maturity and preparation. It requires us to mark out the rights of citizens, to establish where my rights end and those of yours begin. In other words, it demands that the debate on individuality and the common good be fostered.

Encouraging tolerance in our country may offer a helping hand in the resolution of many of our current conflicts, and to root out the violence that has been instituted in our society. When reading the press, when we watch and listen to media of mass-communication, we find the relevant daily news to be the violence in its multiple manifestations. Even if it is just to reduce the figures for violent deaths – that sustained, recurrent, and painful news –, urgent and necessary promotion of tolerance as a core value is in order. Hence, we at the UCAB have made it a point of having all our professors develop their abilities in order to permanently pursue the much-ambitioned merging of Faith and Reason – or, as our by-laws state: “to promote dialogue among the Sciences, as well as that between Science and Philosophy, Science and Theology, so that we will attain a higher, universal, and comprehensive form of knowledge, one that will give meaning

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¹⁶ Ibid.

to university activity”.¹⁷ Thus the UCAB proclaims as one of its objectives and goals that “university teaching will be inspired by a spirit of democracy, social justice, and human solidarity. It will be open to all schools of universal thought, which themselves will be exposed and analyzed in a rigorously scientific manner”.¹⁸

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¹⁷ <http://www.ucab.edu.ve/mison-y-valores.html>.

¹⁸ Ibid.