

**THE UNIVERSITY: A FRUITFUL WORKSHOP OF HUMANISM,
A LABORATORY OF HOPE.
POPE FRANCIS' SPEECH AT PÁZMÁNY PÉTER CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY IN
BUDAPEST**

BERNHARD BLEYER¹

Abstract

On Sunday, 30th April 2023, Pope Francis visited the Faculty of Information Technology and Bionics at Pázmány Péter Catholic University in Budapest. It was the end of his visit to Hungary. In his speech, the Pope focused on the impact of various technologies. What is striking about his speech is that he combines different motifs into one message. He interprets the following texts: Romano Guardini's (1885–1968) letters from Lake Como, the novel *The Lord of the World* by Robert Hugh Benson (1871–1914) and *Gaudium et spes*, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World. This article discusses these three writings in the context of the conference "Fürsorge: Spiritualität und Führung" ('Care: Spirituality and Leadership') (17–18 April 2024).

Keywords: Romano Guardini, Robert Hugh Benson, *Gaudium et spes*, Pope Francis, University

Introduction

On his visit to Hungary, Pope Francis made an appearance at the Faculty of Information Technology and Bionics at Pázmány Péter Catholic University in Budapest on Sunday, 30th April 2023. This was also the conclusion of his trip. In his speech, which was delivered in Italian, the Pope focused primarily on the impact of various technologies, which is in line with the Vatican's official protocol, which includes a visit to the Faculty of Information Technology and Bionics. What is striking about his speech is that he makes no reference to previous papal addresses at universities but combines various motifs into one message. The Pope makes particular reference to three very different texts: To Romano Guardini's (1885–1968) letters from Lake Como, to the novel *The Lord of the World* by Robert Hugh Benson (1871–1914) and to the *Gaudium et spes*, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World. The following three writings will be used to interpret the subject of this conference: "Fürsorge: Spiritualität und Führung" ('Care: Spirituality and Leadership').

Romano Guardini: Two Ways of Recognising

Immediately following the greetings, Pope Francis proceeds to address the subject hand, commencing with the following words: "Cent'anni fa Romano Guardini, grande intellettuale e uomo di fede, proprio mentre si trovava immerso in un paesaggio reso

¹ Prof. Dr. Bernhard Bleyer, Department of Catholic Theology, University of Passau; bernhard.bleyer@uni-passau.de; ORCID: 0000-0001-6151-592X

unico dalla bellezza delle acque, ebbe una feconda intuizione culturale” (‘A hundred years ago, Romano Guardini, a great intellectual and a man of deep faith, in contemplating the beauty of a magnificent lake and its surrounding hills, had a profound insight into contemporary culture’).² Francis is talking about Guardini’s letters from Lake Como, which he wrote in 1924 and 1925. He wrote them during the two years after he was appointed to the Chair of Philosophy of Religion and Catholic Worldview at the University of Berlin. At the time, Guardini also decided to co-publish the Quickborn magazine *Die Schildgenossen*.³ Francis is particularly focused on the sixth of the nine letters.⁴ In this text, Guardini posits that there are two distinct types of cognition. He differentiates between an organising cognition and a hermeneutic one. The former attempts to analyse the object by breaking it down into its components and deciphering its functions, whereas the latter searches for the fundamental meaning of the object. Guardini likens the former to a logic of purposive rationality, of instrumental reason, which could be described as such in the present day. The sixth letter is characterised by the concern that life is becoming subsumed by a system of rational formulas and the power of technical compulsion.⁵

The second method of recognising the significance of an entity within an ecological system is to identify its function. This leads to the question of the status of living beings, and of humans in particular. It prompts an ontological search for rules in the physical and psychological systems that lie beyond the realm of formability. This issue is particularly evident in the categorisation of the status of the human being. Guardini thus refers to a topos of Christian, Catholic doctrine, which adheres to the conviction that there really is such a thing as an unavailable status.⁶ This hermeneutic endeavour to justify such an ontological attribution seeks to address the issue of how the status of a person, particularly in the context of illness and socially challenging circumstances, can be determined beyond the scope of functional parameters. It is not possible to use the functional values of blood pressure or haemoglobin levels, the social categorisation of whether someone has a flat or not, or police data on whether someone has committed a crime or not as influencing variables on the fundamental status of a person. The enduring response of Christian health and social institutions to the question of human status is the radical concept of equal and inalienable human dignity. Regardless of an individual’s background, income, language, or sexual orientation, Christian doctrine maintains that their status and, consequently, their entitlement to fundamental support in matters of health and social need remain constant.

Robert Benson: *The Lord of the World*

The second text to which Pope Francis makes reference is the novel *The Lord of the World* by Robert Hugh Benson, which is approximately twenty years older than Guardini’s Letters from Lake Como. Benson was a priest who converted from the Anglican to the Roman Catholic Church four years prior to the publication of the novel. Pope Francis has previously referenced this book on several occasions. These include remarks made during press conferences held during his Apostolic Journey to

² Pope Francis, 2023.

³ Cf. Krieg, 1997, 8–10.

⁴ Cf. Guardini, 1981, 44–50. For further interpretation, see Knoll, 1994, 175–200.

⁵ Cf. Guardini, 1981, 49; Beltramini, 2023, 6–9.

⁶ Cf. Vidal, 2014, 161–182.

Cyprus and Greece in December 2021 and another instance during his Apostolic Journey to Marseille in September 2023.

In this novel, the Pope offers a critique of what he perceives as an erroneous interpretation of equality. This interpretation, as he argues, fails to adequately consider the fundamental status of human beings and the necessity to ensure that all life plans are afforded equal consideration. He calls it “un nuovo ‘umanitarismo’ che annulla le differenze” (‘a new humanitarianism, cancelling diversity’). The Pope has indicated that he has observed the phenomenon: “quel mondo progredito ma cupo, descritto da Benson, dove tutti sembrano insensibili e anestetizzati, pare ovvio scartare i malati e applicare l’eutanasia, così come abolire le lingue e le culture nazionali per raggiungere la pace universale, che in realtà si trasforma in una persecuzione fondata sull’imposizione del consenso” (‘in a world run by machines, is gradually diminished and social bonds are weakened. In the technically advanced yet grim world described by Benson, with its increasingly listless and passive populace, it appears obvious that the sick should be ignored, euthanasia practised and languages and cultures abolished, in order to achieve a universal peace that is nothing else than an oppression based on the imposition of a consensus’).⁷ In other words, the concept of equality is challenged by the notion that all lifestyles will become indiscriminate beyond the fundamental aspects, when cultural distinctions become less pronounced and notions of normality extend into standardisation. If the same social media filter of beautiful colours is to standardise all life situations, then according to the papal conclusion, there is no longer a place for what does not fit into this pattern. Consequently, anything that falls through the grid of what is socially or health-wise normal is superfluous. This includes the young man with alcohol addiction as well as the young woman who is homeless, the elderly gentleman with a severe disability due to Alzheimer’s as well as the girl who is forced by her parents to beg on the street. Such individuals challenge the prevailing notion of uniform normality.

The standardisation of concepts of life is not a perspective espoused by Christianity. Christianity defends equality in principle and partiality in situations of vulnerability with great fervour. Indeed, in John Paul II’s encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (no. 42), the priority of the poor and those in need is identified as a criterion of Catholic morality in official teaching: “the option or love of preference for the poor. This is an option, or a special form of primacy in the exercise of Christian charity, to which the whole tradition of the Church bears witness. [...] this love of preference for the poor, and the decisions which it inspires in us, cannot but embrace the immense multitudes of the hungry, the needy, the homeless, those without medical care and, above all, those without hope of a better future. It is impossible not to take account of the existence of these realities.”⁸ The Christian faith, as espoused by the Catholic Church and its associated theology, posits that all individuals are inherently equal in fundamental terms. In its active love, however, it prioritises those who live under unequal conditions. Those who are seriously ill, socially excluded, or situated on the margins of society. This conviction also gives rise to a fundamental question for a Catholic university: on what basis do we conduct science? Should the perspective be that of the companies that can finance projects, or that of the state bodies that oversee the institution, or that of the church structures that have contact with the wealthy and

⁷ Pope Francis, 2023, 557.

⁸ In his encyclical *Centesimus annus* (no. 11), Pope John Paul II refers to this passage and assigns the concern of this encyclical to the option for the poor Cf. Mifsud, 2002, 141.

middle classes of society? Alternatively, should the perspective be that of those on the margins of society, who have cancer, come from other countries, deal with severe disabilities, or are drug addicts?

Gaudium et spes 59

The third reference text in Pope Francis' speech is the encyclical *Gaudium et spes* (no. 59). The reference made by Pope Francis in the *Gaudium et spes*, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, can be located in Part II, Chapter II, Section II and is entitled "Some Principles for the Proper Development of Culture".⁹ The Pastoral Constitution was formally adopted on the final day of the Second Vatican Council, 7th December 1965.¹⁰ It is one of four constitutions that are considered to represent the pinnacle of doctrinal authority with regard to the decisions of the Council.¹¹ The document is divided into two principal sections. The initial section is entitled "The Church and Man's Calling", while the subsequent section addresses specific matters such as the advancement of marriage and family, economic activity, life within a political community, and the dedication to peace and the development of the international community.

In his address at Pázmány Péter University, Pope Francis refers to Chapter II, Section II, which is entitled "The Proper Development of Culture". In paragraph 53, the advancement of scientific knowledge is explicitly identified as a component of cultural development. In the sections addressing the complex interrelationships between the Gospel and culture (GS 58) and the diverse dimensions of the appropriate cultivation of human cultural forms (GS 59), it is asserted that: "the Church, sent to all peoples of every time and place, is not bound exclusively and indissolubly to any race or nation, any particular way of life or any customary way of life recent or ancient" (GS 58). Its mission is universal, which also means that everything we call culture has independent claims to validity. It is, therefore, not surprising that the theme of this 59th edition of *Gaudium et spes* – which the Pope quotes – is the freedom and autonomy of culture and thus of science. This freedom is explicitly formulated in relation to the state and to religions:¹² "this Sacred Synod affirms the legitimate autonomy of human culture and especially of the sciences" (GS 59).

This implies that any institution engaged in scientific pursuits, irrespective of its sponsorship status, is entitled to this freedom in accordance with Catholic doctrine. This encompasses the liberty to corroborate specific findings and the freedom to challenge them. From a scientific standpoint, it is constrained by the methodological justification of its assertions. As articulated by the Pope in his speech: "Questo è lo spirito dell'università [...]. È aprendosi agli altri che si conosce meglio sé stessi. L'apertura, aprirsi agli altri è come uno specchio: mi fa conoscere meglio me stesso." ("That is the spirit of the university [...]. It is by openness to others that we come to know ourselves better. Indeed, opening ourselves to others is like looking in a mirror, we come to know ourselves better.")¹³

⁹ The texts of the Second Vatican Council are quoted accordingly (Flannery, 1999).

¹⁰ Cf. Hünemann, 2006, 386–423.

¹¹ Cf. Schickendantz, 2021, 217–220.

¹² Cf. O'Malley, 2018, 18–20; Bevans, 2020, 136–154, 44.

¹³ Pope Francis, 2023, 558.

Conclusion

The three reference texts of the papal speech at the Catholic University of Pázmány Péter can be interpreted in the form of three theses. 1) The Christian perspective on the status of the human being is characterised by the radical idea of equal and unavailable human dignity.

2) The Christian conviction of the priority of all those who find themselves in situations of special vulnerability poses a question to all disciplines of a Catholic university: from what perspective do we conduct science? 3) The ecclesiastical principle of a "legitimate autonomy of human culture and especially of the sciences" (GS 59) requires a Catholic university to perceive itself as a forum for the free exchange of ideas. This freedom can either be asserted in opposition to state, church and civil society institutions, or it can be eroded through dependence on them. "È questo che le Università sono chiamate a coltivare e la fede ad alimentare. Auguro dunque a questa e ad ogni Università di essere un centro di universalità e di libertà, un cantiere fecondo di umanesimo, un laboratorio di speranza" ('And so I take this occasion to express my hope that this University, and indeed every university, will always be a beacon of universality and freedom, a fruitful workshop of humanism, a laboratory of hope').¹⁴

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¹⁴ Pope Francis, 2023, 559.

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**AZ EGYETEM: A HUMANIZMUS TERMÉKENY MŰHELYE,
A REMÉNY LABORATÓRIUMA.
FERENC PÁPA BESZÉDE A PÁZMÁNY PÉTER KATOLIKUS EGYETEMEN**

BLEYER, BERNHARD

2023. április 30-án, vasárnap Ferenc pápa látogatást tett a Pázmány Péter Katolikus Egyetem Információs Technológiai és Bionikai Karán. Ez volt a magyarországi látogatásának a vége. A pápa a beszédében a különböző technológiák hatására összpontosított. A beszédben az volt a szembetűnő, hogy különböző motívumokat ötvözött egyetlen üzenetbe. A következő szövegeket értelmezte: Romano Guardini (1885–1968) levelei a Comói-tóról, Robert Hugh Benson (1871–1914) *A világ ura* című regénye és a II. Vatikáni Zsinat *Gaudium et spes* kezdetű lelképásztori konstitúciója az Egyházzal a mai világban. Ez a cikk ezt a három írást a „Gondoskodás: spiritualitás és vezetés” című konferencia (2024. április 17–18.) keretében tárgyalja.

Kulcsszavak: Romano Guardini, Robert Hugh Benson, *Gaudium et spes*, Ferenc pápa, egyetem