

Speech by Rector René Chamussy, s.j.

## **The University in the age of globalization**

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Excellencies  
Rectors of the Universities of Lebanon  
Ladies and Gentlemen,  
Presidents of Professional Associations  
Instructors  
Representatives of the General Services Staff  
Students' Delegates  
Presidents of Alumni Associations  
Dear Friends,

It never wearies to always reflect upon such a strange institution as the University. "It never wearies" because here is the meeting place for men and women who are already endowed with remarkable skills and usually anxious to share their knowledge. "It never wearies" because here is the meeting place for young people who are usually receptive and all anxious to prepare for an unusual future. "It never wearies" because here is the meeting place for all those who would perhaps like to change

the shape of a certain society. In short, the University remains that stronghold of all hopes, for both youngsters who are hungry for knowledge and skills and nations that are keen on developing and being able to give their best.

Nevertheless, the history of universities in our world is not the history of some entity that never changes; the history of universities invites us to discover the ever changing relations of men and knowledge, of knowledge and societies, of knowledge and people's development. There was the time of masters and disciples; there was the time of mandarins and followers; then came the time of more dense flows of students who were not all yearning for knowledge in itself, but for the degree, that inevitable key to tomorrow's job market. The University was sometimes able to turn into a degree manufacturing plant. This was not, and is still not very heartening.

This is how a new step was made. The University had to find, here and there, a new breath: it was in the field of research. The different forms of teaching had to get away from those sterile repetitions and become the product of ever renewed research. At the political plan as well as at the economic and scientific plan, the decision-makers had to discover all that could be brought to them by all sorts of researchers. Science at universities had to begin to serve science itself as well as societies that are eager to develop in a sustainable way.

Then the third mission of universities became naturally vital; that of being in the service of the community. The University was once able to claim to be a solitary island in the heart of the world; it was becoming an essential part of the societal machinery. The University had to be there, not only to feed up

enterprises or to boost some multinationals in the name of some “merchandizing”, but also to make a whole social system eager for innovation and newness and able to function. Finally, the University had to be there for the populations to be taken care of, in all their segments, from the poorest to the richest.

The University was made to develop minds; it has become the melting pot for any research; it is now open to all possible commitments at the heart of our world. It would not be uninteresting in this perspective to review the different approaches of such dimension as adopted by the Universities of different countries. Here, they simply talk to us about “service to the city” whereas on another continent, they mention the required “social commitment”. In another place, the case is even more developed: the University needs to be open “to the City, to the Region, to the World”; it also needs to embark “on services to society, solidarity actions, international cooperation”; it finally needs to be “an engine of economic development”. Here we actually recall what our own charter tells us on the “cultural mission of the University...for the promotion of human beings” (Article 2). We also recall what was the concern of an academic who has just been beatified by Pope Benedict XVI in England and who could only reflect upon the university according to society. Newman wrote: “The university education is the great habitual means to reach all usual great ends. It seeks to raise the intellectual level of society, educate the public opinion, purify the national taste, offer real subjects to popular enthusiasm and a safe ideal to the masses’ aspirations...” (John Henry Newman. *The Idea of a University*. Septentrion 1997 pp. 177-8). He did not say that the University should allow earning money; he did

not say that the university should only be a resonance chamber for socio-political quarrels of every nation... He said that the University had as a primary task to change the world. And this certainly involves research, but also inevitable personal investments, a certain free commitment.

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So the University is no longer what it used to be and the student should no longer be a mere disciple or apprentice, he should also be a researcher, a citizen, a social worker, a promoter of a different society, the leaven in the dough just due to the qualities acquired at the University. But if this is the case, it is not only a result of an inevitable growth; it is also because the world around us is no longer the same either, because the time of globalization has come.

Globalization is not new; specialists do certainly tell us so. But it is now taking new forms and is provoking us in a very specific way, because if it really opens horizons and creates new relations, if it has today become a sign of mobility and sharing, if it helps break the frontiers, it does draw us into a universe with new outlines that should not be ignored. In an address to the Jesuit managers of higher education, Father Adolfo Nicolas, Superior General of the Society of Jesus (Compagnie de Jésus), expands this perspective at length.

Allow me to quote him:

*« When we can have access to as much information as quickly and as easily, when we can express ourselves and tell the world our own reactions as quickly and without thinking in a blog or a micro-blog; when the last editorial of the New York Times or El Pais, or the latest video can be broadcast as quickly throughout half of the globe to shape perceptions and feelings, so the arduous task which consists of making use of critical and in-depth thinking is often bypassed.*

*When we can “copy-paste” without resorting to critical thinking or using our fine writing, or even reaching personal conclusions that are carefully thought; when pleasant images coming from consumers’ dream traders invade your computer screens, or when disagreeable noises can be avoided by listening to the digital walkman, so the vision or perception of reality, or even desires, remains very superficial. When we can become “friends” as quickly and even without any effort, with simple acquaintance or even with strangers through social networks – and if we can easily “withdraw from our list of friends” another person without making any effort of encounter or, if need be, confrontation and then reconciliation – so, relations can as well become superficial.*

*When we are overwhelmed with a spectacular number of choices, values, beliefs and visions of life, so we can easily slide into the lazy superficiality of relativism or of simple tolerance of others and of their visions instead of engaging in the arduous task that consists of forming communities of dialogue, seeking truth and understanding. It is certainly*

*easier to do what we are asked to do than to pray, take risks or decisions.*

*(...) Our new technologies as well as the underlying values, such as moral relativism and consumerism, are shaping the internal world of many persons, particularly the young people who are left in our care, thus limiting the real development of individuals and limiting also their responses in a world craving intellectual, moral and spiritual convalescence.*

I don't think it is easy to contradict a certain view of things. Globalization may have its advantages – doesn't it open the way for new solidarities? – However, it takes us very often, in the name of an evident relational easiness, to visions of the world that are perfectly impressionistic, where nothing holds. Superficiality, relativism, consumerism: so many features of a new world against which all kinds of fundamentalism and extremism stand immediately; so many challenges that are ahead of us and that we need to face. The superficial character of relations stemming from globalization, as also noted down by the Superior General of the Jesuits, sets a real challenge for us because behind it a whole dehumanization process appears. Here we recall what sociologist Edgar Morin said recently: “Globalization, instead of reviving a global humanism, is favoring abstract cosmopolitanism of business and returns of closed particularisms...” (Le Monde, 09/01/11) It is up to us to react by discovering how in our teaching we can combine depth of thought with true imagination. This means, as F. Nicolas says, that it is up to us to lead our students, beyond excellence in their professional competence to that creative solidarity that our societies need much.

The few words that are drawn from the Jesuits' Superior General's reflections are mainly a matter of statement of fact. Globalization is what it is and it would be futile to deny it, it has its own consequences. It is important for us to consider them not as fatalities but as challenges that need to be faced, as warnings that should lead us to work differently, to place ourselves in a very specific way in the big hustle and bustle that is shaking the world today, to discover how, in specific fields, we are bound to act in such a way that, from our faculties and institutes, men and women will come fully prepared to stand up to the problems of our time.

It is thus important in this case to specify the objectives that we cannot hide in such a context. The men and the women we wish to form must be capable of assuming them with no hesitation. Three main axes should be stressed here: an environment that is declining, poverty that is expanding, relational and spiritual crises that are getting even more dramatic.

A declining environment... I would not dwell long on such a burning subject. But how could we neglect evoking here water pollution, air pollution, overexploitation of natural resources, and destruction of natural habitats? And how could we not evoke the consequences of such harmful practices: global warming, draining of ground water, deterioration of the quality of life, inexorable decline of a biodiversity that has been a true source of pride for Lebanon? Such a picture is fearful and requires from our universities some solid commitments in the training of our students, a training that should be attached to anything that could be concealed by the concept of "sustainable development", to giving them all instruments necessary for

building a viable/bearable/equitable world, a world where the concern for the protection of the environment is linked to that of the economic development as well as to that of the social and cultural development. The Bonn Declaration on Education for Sustainable Development in the teaching establishments (UNESCO-2009) recommends the integration of issues of sustainable development into all levels of education and in all its forms according to an integrated systemic approach and encourages the realization of scientific research in all the fields. It is up to us then to act by embarking with no hesitation on the review of our training programs as well as on the execution of efficient programs of resources management in both the institutions and the campuses in such a way that the concepts of economy, recycling and reuse of what could be reused become the key words for our lifestyle. We do not order the ecological transformation of a University, but we work on it and this is a task for all actors of the university community. We cannot either play on such concepts as sustainable development without wondering about the investment we are making in these fields. The University has developed in the field of research at the health level; it must do the same with regard to new energies and new technologies. This will be, again, a development that can only happen for Lebanon and the whole region.

Because living with the developments we have just mentioned obviously means living with what is being done in the country and in the region. Now more than ever maybe, the University has to be keen on looking at the real life of the populations who hold it. The good economic health of Lebanon and the region must be our main concern. As we have mentioned above, the second axis of our University should be “the spreading poverty”...

It would certainly be legitimate to accuse us of making a somehow hasty judgment. Haven't we said time and time again that Lebanon was able to avoid the economic crisis of 2008? Isn't it obvious that reconstruction sites have been increasing throughout 2009-2010, even if the trend seemed to reverse by the end of last year? However, it would be too hasty to content ourselves with such rough estimates. It is true that Lebanon has not been swept away by the crisis that hit the West, however it does not live with the development of the Asian populations. It is true that there are people who can afford owning high price apartments, but there are many others who must curb their expenses. It is true that, between 1997 and 2004, according to the UNDP experts, extreme poverty or "strong" poverty rates dropped (by 8% for the former, 28% for the latter), but as of 2004, the movement has been reversed: prices have been growing but not salaries and terrible disparities have emerged, creating gaps between the populations of the various mohafazats; between the pupils of different schools, between men and women even. The consequences of such disparities cannot be ignored by the university community, and here also, it is at the level of our programs as well as at the level of an awakening or a well-thought mobilization of our students that we need to act. Because tolerating such disparities means undermining the notion of citizenship itself, which concerns, as rightly recalled by the abovementioned UNDP report, the political and civil rights of every individual as well as the social rights. So it is up to us to invent the forms of training that will awaken those who will follow them to new dimensions of their citizenship, it is up to us to multiply the possibilities of voluntary on-site

interventions in the image of what has been taking place since 2006 with the “Opération 7ème jour” and in what we call today “activities in the service of the community”. Here we come to the famous third mission of the University. We cannot escape it.

But we already mentioned it: it goes without saying that for us the social commitment of the University cannot be limited to involvements – although very thorough – in the sustainable development or the struggle against poverty; in fact, there can be no question for us to evade the problem we evoked with the Superior General of the Jesuits which reveals the pernicious fruits of globalization the primary consequence of which gets us back to a deep crisis of culture and an estrangement as to any spirituality. It goes without saying for us that such a collapse of the essential values that make us live cannot be but catastrophic. It is translated into incapacity to communicate in depth with the other and to elaborate a thought that cannot be summarized in a few slogans without spirit. It is translated a contrario into the return of some to attitudes, behaviors and words that are fanatic as well as narrow-minded; in any case, nobody communicates anymore with anybody since there is nothing left to communicate, except for some hazy stereotypes, except for some ready-made formulas coming from distant catechisms.

Faced with such situations, it is up to us academics to give back a meaning to the words, to make our intelligences live again, to teach to all those who are around us about the weight of the real and living things. No course is to be invented for all this. There is only the need to live with all those who are there by respecting them, by showing them that there are paths of truth, important gatherings that are thousandfold more valuable

than the shortcuts discovered on Internet. There is only the need to make all efforts in order to make everybody understand that beyond the one million discoveries of the new technologies, there are innovations that can be born from silence, from meditation or from an in-depth exchange between researchers. Globalization, as it appears, can destroy man, crush him; it can also be the starting point of a reconquest of man's humanity as well as his openness to God, to the infinite, to the Other, to the completely Different. Academics can drown and fade away in the world of knowledge as it appears today, they can become those beings with no relief who live in herds by the flash lights; but they can, they should in fact set themselves back as creators. All our education today must be an education on innovation and creativity according to values that remain intangible for us.

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Faced with a globalization that is as it is now, we have mentioned the requirements that seem to be essential for us: we should be working on sustainable development in this world, devote ourselves always to helping the poorest, revive in us the living values that will help us breathe and create. These are indeed essential requirements, which will definitely allow us to really live together. This is indeed the essential base to any commitment in the service of a society that is still to be built, and we come to finish off the thing to which everything should converge: life in society. In this age of high globalization, you have families to build, you have a university and professional community to shape, you have a country that should finally finish tearing itself apart. But how?

We have mentioned what should be the “base”, what could be used by us as a springboard, we should mention finally what should always accompany us, the personal requirements that are, that should be ours in order to make the world fit to live in. There are values, forms of behavior, choices of insertion that we cannot ignore and that are essential.

Values? Why should we eternally revert to this chapter? It is in fact essential for all that can be said, done, lived by the social group to which we belong. Our university community only exists, beyond the individuals who compose it, based on these concepts that should structure the composite personality of those who live in it: the permanent concern for truth and justice, the will to commit to serving everybody, the acknowledgement of the spiritual dimension that should occupy the heart of each one, the respect of all the others, the dream of kindness that could live in us...

In the background of such a setting, there is of course what makes the hallmark of our University, a Catholic university but one that is totally open to all those who live other religious traditions, to all those who adopt other, more secular, ways to think of their civic commitment. In fact, what should count for us here is the never-ending affirmation of a necessary coexistence of persons who are all different, all having culturally specific features. This is how Lebanon has been built; this is how it is up to us today to continue this endeavor, at our level as well as at many others.

There remains the last part of our research. Those good principles that we have just enumerated, we will have to live them and to live them together. In family, we know in general

how to deal with the situation even if the relationships between parents and children are not all ideal. At the other end of the societal spectrum, at the level of the big groups, we have already said it when evoking globalization, things are not going well, citizens are hit by the multiple currents that take them to relativism and dispersion and to self-withdrawal and sectarian hardening. In the intermediary structures, it is up to us to invent specific “live-together” ways and this is not very obvious. We can tell ourselves that rigid interventionism is not the solution; we can also estimate that representative democracy is no longer efficient; we can dream of a participatory democracy that would allow the involvement of citizens who continuously increase in number in the elaboration of methods of living. It is among these three structures that we should surf with the hope to see one day this contact of all with each one, allowing a clearer vision. One thing is certain, it is that the openness of all to all, sign of the new globalized order, can only incite us to continuously open ourselves to the other and to the others, to do a networking with them, to tell ourselves in fact that what is important today is to always remain linked to decision-makers as well as to those who prepare those decisions.

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Our University, Ladies and Gentlemen, lives like many others with the changes occurring in our world. And these changes are not always heartening. We have just quoted Edgar Morin. We must listen to him again: “The walk towards disasters will become more pronounced in the next decade. The blindness of

the homo sapiens whose rationality lacks complexity is joined by the blindness of the homo demens who is possessed by his fits of rage and hatred. The death of the totalitarian octopus was followed by the wonderful outburst of that of religious fanaticism and that of financial capitalism. Everywhere the forces of dislocation and decomposition are progressing”. It is obvious that in the heart of this Near-East where evil carriers are rife, tensions are also very sharp. It is up to us to know how to confront all these mutations, by opening ourselves to others with no hesitation, by inventing new commitments, by remaining faithful to traditions that were the source of happiness for many old generations and were based on the respect of universal rights: right to knowledge, right to respect, right to creative capacity. It is not a matter of choice between this and that. This is how our university community shall fulfill its mission.