

The Catholic university, distance learning and religion teacher training in colombia

Edith González Bernal¹

Resumen

Por encima de todo, la universidad católica es una comunidad académica orientada a contribuir al desarrollo crítico y riguroso y a la promoción de la dignidad humana animando, la investigación, la formación y ofreciendo diferentes servicios a las comunidades locales, nacionales e internacionales. En medio de un mundo globalizado, se requiere de una Universidad plural, ecuménica e interreligiosa, capaz de incorporar a las minorías, consciente de la necesidad de la unidad entre todos los seres humanos. Esta Universidad asume el desafío de la educación de a distancia para formar a maestros de religión, como una contribución al desarrollo de sociedad justa y del cuidado.

Palabras clave

Universidad católica, educación a distancia, formación, maestro, ciencia, religión.

¹ This paper forms part of the research: "Training Religion Teachers at Catholic Universities in Colombia" and was financed by the Academic Vice-President's Office of Pontificia Universidad Javeriana. Edith González Bernal, researcher teacher. Translation from Spanish to English: Juan Manuel Pombo. Translation Service – Pontificia Universidad Javeriana. Research Group Academia. Acknowledged by Colciencias COL0000069, classification A.

Abstract

First and foremost, the Catholic university is an academic community bent on contributing to the critical and rigorous development and promotion of human dignity by encouraging research, imparting training and offering several different services to local, national and international communities. In the midst of a globalized world that calls for it (the University) to be plural, ecumenical and inter-religious, capable of incorporating minorities and aware of the need for unity among all human beings, this University takes on the challenge of distance education in order to train religion teachers as a contribution to the development of a fair and caring society.

Key words

University, Catholic, distance education, training, teacher, science, religion.

The University conceived as a place where the frontiers of knowledge of all orders are stretched to their limits, where the human vocation for truth without restrictions is accomplished. The University as a spiritual community of teachers and disciples inspired by a common spirit: that of training and forming the intellect through science and qualified teachers and teaching.

Orozco (1988)

The above epigraph defines the relationships that the university establishes with both knowledge and the development of science, relationships which in turn constitute its being and purpose. Since science and knowledge are the university's duties, it is its responsibility to maintain, pass on, investigate, and push forward their frontiers. It is also responsible for the integrity of the education it imparts, so that it embraces the individual as a whole, considering that the human being is not only science, careers, and professions, but inter-relationships, constructive work, affectivity, emotions, projection, and accomplishments, all these important dimensions which the university can not overlook.

So that when we reflect on the Catholic university in Colombia and the training of teachers of religion, we are still speaking of the responsibility which the

former has towards society and knowledge. The Catholic university is one with its own nuances, with its particular characteristics and its responsibility to contribute to the development of knowledge.

In this article we describe the concept of university with a specific nuance in that it is Catholic and that it offers programs for the training of religion teachers using distance education as the main strategy. What we want to get across is the importance of religion teaching within a plural and globalized world. We followed the comparative studies method because it allows us to approach the subject matter by first subjecting it to a historical analysis and then proceeding to the comparative analysis which in turn will enable us to interpret the similarities and differences between two educational models: the one implemented by Universidad Javeriana and the one in use at Universidad Santo Tomás. The sources we consulted are basically secondary ones and all of them are to be found in the libraries of the two aforementioned universities.

The concept of Catholic University

In order to approach the concept of a Catholic university, we must first consider those things that define the university in general terms: it is a

corporate institution², it is scientific³, universal⁴ and autonomous⁵. The Catholic university is basically an academic community bent, as already said, on contributing to the critical and rigorous development and promotion of human dignity by encouraging research, imparting training and offering several different services to local, national and international communities⁶. Therefore its mission can be none other than that of training and forming people capable of facing up to the problems of their times, of participating in the political arena in order to curb the erosion of democracy caused by the power structures, and of building spaces propitious to peaceful coexistence, the development of science, and the respect for religious plurality and the new emergent cultures. Therefore, its function and meaning of life lies in the education of intellectuals committed to the realities of a changing world in need of ethical principles and of solidarity among human beings.

A Catholic university is characterized by the fact that it reveals a Christian presence in the university milieu by means of a critical analysis of the problems to which society and culture are prone. "In a Catholic university, the Catholic ideals, attitudes, and principles are spread through and constitute all campus activities, according to the nature of these activities and respecting their autonomy. In short, it

has to be both a Catholic institution and a community of scholars that stand for the different fields of human knowledge; that is, an academic institution where Catholicism is a vital presence"⁷.

The Catholic university is "the place where scholars examine the real world in depth using the methods that best fit each discipline, and thus contributing to the enhancement of human knowledge. Each discipline is systematically studied and then put into dialogue with other disciplines so that they all enrich each other"⁸. In other words, the university is the place of knowledge par excellence, and it is produced by the relationships established between the different disciplines; it is also the place for freedom of speech and opinion and one where the nation's problems are well known and where attempts are made to solve them. Moreover, the Catholic university, in addition to professing universal knowledge, by choosing Jesus' message, is capable of answering the deep questions of faith and transcendence that men and women face in their daily lives in the mist of the limitations of the times they live in. In this sense, the Catholic university is constituted as a place where evangelization takes place, thus following Pope Paul VI's words in his encyclical *Gospel Nuntiandi*:

To spread the Good News to all human milieus and, with its influence, to transform from within in order to renew humanity in itself... the idea is not only to preach the Gospel in ever larger geographical zones or among ever increasing numbers of peoples, but with the help of the Gospel, to reach and transform the judgement criteria, the main and determining values, the points of interest, the lines of thought, the sources of inspiration, and the ways of life which mark a contrast with the word of God and with the plans of salvation⁹.

Hence, the Catholic university is in effect constituted as an apostolic endeavour within the wider spectrum of universities but, being Catholic, it must

² The university is corporate, since it is constituted by teachers and students from all walks of life and origins, and their relationships are established basically to produce knowledge.

³ Its main functions are the scientific endeavor, the continuous search for knowledge, and the advancement of science in the national and international context.

⁴ The university is characterized in its universality in that it allows for an academic interchange in the huge seas of knowledge and interacts in an increasingly plural and globalized society.

⁵ The autonomy derives from the power of science that empowers it to establish its own methods, norms and limits of size and purposes for the benefit of the individual, the society, and the natural environment that surrounds it. Likewise, autonomy is a constitutional guarantee for its self-regulation, self-determination, and self-government.

⁶ *Magna Carta of European Universities*, Bologna, Italy, 18-IX 1998. Fundamental Principles.

⁷ *Apostolic Letter*, John Paul II (1990). Catholic universities. The Catholic university's identity.

⁸ John Paul II. *The Catholic universities*. 1988, pg. 13.

⁹ Paul VI. *Nuntiandi Gospel* 1975

present itself as a sign of the presence of God, of Jesus who walks and accompanies every human being in his daily struggle, as well as being the place par excellence for the development of science, for reflection, and for research. Therefore, its mission as an institution for further education must be based upon the knowledge of human history, of the present circumstances within the context where men and women are immersed, and in the ability to give reasonable answers suitable to the people's identities and commitments.

Today more than ever, the Catholic university acknowledges the existence of multiple opportunities for communication, integration, and interdependence in a globalized world which demands that it be plural, ecumenical, and inter-religious, capable of incorporating minorities and aware of the need for unity among all human beings.

In Cardinal Newman's words:

The concept of university stems from the idea that it (the university) is a place to teach all human knowledge, and this therefore means that its goal should be, on the one hand, an intellectual and not a moral one; on the other hand, that such a goal basically consists in spreading and furthering knowledge. Now, if the objective of the university is to be the practice of scientific and philosophical research, I don't see why it shouldn't have students; and if its goal is to impart a religious education, I don't see why it can't be as well a seat for literature and science... in essence this is how a University should be¹⁰.

Cardinal Newman states very clearly that a denominational University must be understood as an institution where education takes place, and where intelligence is fostered for the benefit of creating thought capable of dealing with any science or

profession, all as a result of the free and responsible choice of the individual.

Cardinal Newman, when alluding to the sense and meaning of theology in a Catholic university, said that,

Understanding the influence of any one science on any other and the use that each one of them makes of the others, as well as the particular situation, the limitations and the careful consideration of the group as a whole belongs, in my opinion, to a type of science different from all others. Moreover, the systematic omission of any of the sciences hampers the precision and the comprehensive nature of our knowledge in the same proportion as the importance of the omitted science¹¹.

From this, we can gather that the Catholic university must be interdisciplinary and also feed itself from the sources of Christian humanism.

Whereby, in being a Catholic university, the dialogue between faith and culture will occupy a place of privilege, in order to facilitate a better understanding of the ways in which people relate to science from the perspective of the Christian message, which humanizes and gives meaning, since "the purpose of the presence of Christian thought in a university is to work for the good of society via serious research, committed teaching, and comprehensive education"¹².

Distance learning and the Catholic university in Colombia

To speak of distance learning in a Catholic university implies, among other things, to refer to the historical process that distance education has

¹⁰ Newman, John Henry (1852) *Discursos sobre el fin y naturaleza de la educación universitaria*. Traducción de José Morales, 1996, prefacio.

¹¹ *Ibid.* Third Discourse, 4.

¹² <http://www.ucn.cl/ofec/>

gone through in the general context of campuses and universities, and also to the processes that have encouraged denominational institutions to offer distance educational programs.

In Colombia, distance teaching at the higher education level was started in the 70's with programs whose aim was to train teachers. Therefore, both Universidad Javeriana and Santo Tomás, being Catholic institutions, decided to form teachers and catechists in order to help them improve their performance wherever they were working. This was how several theology centers and institutions for the layperson were founded.

In 1975, Universidad Javeriana founded a Distance Learning Institute of Theology for laypersons with the specific purpose of educating and training the latter in present day theological problems, by means of the distance teaching methodology, an institute and a methodology which allowed the students to pursue theology courses at their leisure, and at the same time carry on with their other professional or pastoral activities. In 1982, the Institute was completely incorporated into the University, and became what was to be known as the professional degree course in Religious Sciences, conferring titles duly approved by the Icfes.

Later, in 1992, after a request put forward to Icfes by the program's directors, the former institute authorized the change of the major's name from Religious Sciences professional to that of graduate teacher in Religious Sciences. This change took place in answer to the fact that most of the students pursuing this major were teachers and therefore needed the title of 'Licenciado' in order to enter and go up the official national official promotion ladder. Finally, in 1998, and in order to comply with the requirements of the aforesaid accreditation, the graduate teaching status was sustained and the major directed its efforts towards offering comprehensive training to all teachers or any other person interested in this area, so that, by means of an education in the Faith while in the midst of the real circumstances of contemporary men and women, they could all establish a dialogue capable of

transforming the different historical events within the educational and pastoral realities of the everyday life they lived in, all from the perspective provided by the Christian values.

On the other hand, Universidad Santo Tomás offered, from 1965 onwards, a program of Theology for the layperson, a program which, in 1976, became a distance learning degree course in Philosophy and Religious Sciences. In 1982, Icfes established that the degree in Philosophy and Religious Sciences should also be a degree in teaching. Accordingly, from that date onwards the degree title awarded by the University became a teaching degree in Philosophy and Religious Sciences.

By offering this last degree program, Universidad Santo Tomás aim was to provide the students with the tools necessary to visualize the historical overview of the reality they were living and experiencing, and to prompt in them a critical, creative, and judicious sense when considering the world, with a theology channeled towards the needs and situations of history and culture. In 1998, in order to obtain the aforesaid accreditation, the major was then changed into a teaching degree in Philosophy and Religious Sciences, and today aims towards the training of teachers who, by means of their professional skills in Theology, Philosophy, and Psycho-pedagogy, are capable of directing their own pupils in the search for the meaning of life and history in the light of both Christian faith and reason.

Each of these universities of Catholic denomination has a particular educational and theological model, which characterizes its spirituality. In this paper, we will focus on each of the educational models adopted by Universidad Javeriana and Santo Tomás. Both institutions have been known for their leadership in the distance learning model for the training of religion teachers.

As far as the Catholic university was concerned, distance teaching meant its presence in the remotest areas of the country. It was as well a challenge to modernize its pedagogical and teaching methods,

since to begin with, it was forced to think again about such things as pedagogical problems, the very limited coverage of university education, and the marginalization and exclusion that conventional educational systems generated; secondly, it had to think again about such things as the coherence owed to its spirituality and its pedagogical model plus its commitment toward the very poor.

The widening of the university, that the Religious Sciences distance programs made possible, gave many people access to higher education, who otherwise weren't able to attend regular classes offered by the conventional systems, whether for employment, economic, geographical, residencial or any other reason. Both institutions committed themselves to the continuous promotion of training, up-dating, and betterment of working teachers in the remotest regions of the country.

Both of their programs have been characterized by their openness and flexibility, based on the implementation of truly autonomous learning with no time, location, employment, or age restrictions for the student whatsoever. The strategies they have both turned to, so that their students can systematically access the knowledge they want, have been multiple: from printed material, known as learning modules with their respective feedback and evaluation formats, to the use of the telephone, the video, the teleconference, and, more recently, the introduction of all the latest computer and communication technologies, such as the Internet and the virtual platforms.

Another characteristic that both institutions have in common is the fact that both have maintained a central head office responsible for the production of all the material, the development of the courses, and the issuing of degrees, diplomas, and certificates; another thing in common is the existence of a broad series of support centers distributed all over the country and known as Regional Centers, whose function is that of giving advice and orientation to all students at all times. Also, both institutions are characterized by a bimodular structure,

that is, they both have a system whereby education is offered to attendees who sit through classes and to distance learners, and in many cases both share the same teachers and guidance.

Pontificia Universidad Javeriana

Its educational model is inspired by the pedagogical teachings of Loyola, who stressed "the continuous and systematic incorporation of methods coming from different sources if it so happens that they can contribute to the better comprehensive intellectual, social, moral, and religious education of the individual.... Loyola's pedagogy is deeply human and therefore universal; it embraces context, experience, reflection, action, and evaluation"¹³. This type of pedagogy is also known as Loyola's paradigm which has proved itself to be an appropriate answer for the problems which those involved in the educational fields have to confront.

The main components of this paradigm are experience, reflection, and action, thus becoming an almost compulsory reference for all those who have acquired the responsibility of teaching, in order better to

tend to their pupils and make learning and maturing easier through the encounter with truth and the sense and meaning of life. It is a paradigm capable of supplying answers and transcending the purely theoretical level to become an efficient and practical tool in the ways we teach and the ways our pupils learn¹⁴.

The experience, reflection, and action inherent in the paradigm are elements that can offer themsel-

¹³ http://www.puj.edu.co/pedagogia/documentos/Documentos_Corporativos_Compania_Jesus.pdf

¹⁴ *Pedagogía Ignaciana un planteamiento práctico* (1993) pg. 326. at: http://www.puj.edu.co/pedagogia/documentos/Documentos_Corporativos_Compania_Jesus.pdf

ves as an essential dynamic in the interaction that takes place between the teacher and the pupil. The idea behind this is to bring about the encounter of the student with his/her own experience, where at the same time, the teacher will play an active and creative role that goes well beyond the traditional repetitive teaching based on memory skills, and constitutes a step forward towards the building of collective knowledge, via the critical and thoughtful socialization of the processes of understanding, analyzing, implementing, synthesizing, and evaluating different types of knowledge. The idea is to keep up an attitude of constant reflection,

by means of which the students are encouraged to consider the human meaning and importance of what they are studying and to incorporate such meaning responsibly, in order gradually to mature into competent, conscious, sensitive, and compassionate individuals¹⁵.

The education imparted at Universidad Javeriana, following the Loyolan or Ignatian paradigm which proclaims the idea of God and Christ as model, has everything to do with the total, integral development of the individual. Concepts such as “magis”, discernment, excellence, teaching community, social dimension (to teach from the perspective of the poor) are all key guidelines that reveal the essential features of this pedagogy¹⁶.

¹⁵ Ibid pg. 328

¹⁶ Characteristics of the Saint Ignatious' Pedagogic Model, summary of Loyola's educational legacy: A) The image of God. It asserts the reality of the world and helps the comprehensive education of the individual within the human community. For Loyola it is an image capable of transforming society, and transcends the individual and history (the Kingdom). The individual's fulfillment comes from something which has been given to him for free: the condition of a son. The religious dimension permeates all education by promoting the dialogue between faith and culture. B) Human freedom. Loyola speaks of a radical freedom, since the individual is called to be free in order to work for true happiness. From these are derived the stress over individual care and interest for every person, the importance of the student's participation and activity, and his open disposition to growth throughout his/her life.

To teach following the guidelines of this paradigm implies focusing on the person, on his/her historical context in such a way that the outcome should be men and women capable of democratic exercise and participation, of justice and solidarity, all as a

↳ Christ as model of the individual. Loyola's vision is centered on the historic Jesus Christ, model of all human life, thanks to his total response of love for the Father in the service of others. Education proposes Christ as model and provides the appropriate pastoral care, which in turn encourages the knowledge of His message in freedom and the personal relationship with the Christ of faith, whereby the Christian commitment is gradually enacted. D) Action. Loyola asks for an active and total commitment on the part of men and women in order to imitate Christ better and more completely, thus putting into practice his ideals in the real world of the family, the profession, the social and political structures, etc. Education is a preparation for a commitment in real and active life. And it works for the faith that fulfills justice and manifests a special concern for the poor. E) In the Church. For Loyola the response to Christ's call is done in and by means of the Church. Education for the Society of Jesus is an apostolic instrument that prepares the students for an active participation within the Church and the local community. F) The «magis». Loyola's most constant concern was to better serve God, which in education can be translated into excellence in the educational process; an excellence that attempts to form leaders in service, multipliers. Academic excellence on condition of human and Christian excellence. And personal excellence according to the possibilities of each student. Excellence we should now say, encouraging diversity. G) The community. Loyola shared with other colleagues his spiritual and human experience right from the beginning. Education is a common mission based on mutual communication among teachers, directors, administrative personnel, the Jesuits, and the lay persons. Ideals, the educational project, and the responsibilities of governing are shared. The family-school dialogue, the student's participation and a creative and constructive relationship with old alumni are encouraged. The school's structure should facilitate the educational mission. H) Discernment. Loyola and his followers took decisions based on a process of personal and communal discernment, always accompanied by prayer. The Centers of the Society of Jesus should promote constant reflection and evaluation in order to achieve their goals more efficiently and better adjust to places and people. Constant professional training is required, particularly for the teachers. From 'La Pedagogía Ignaciana Hoy. Introducción Histórica y Pedagógica' at: http://ww.puj.edu.co/pedagogia/documentos/Documentos_Corporativos_Compania_Jesus.pdf



result of a solid intellectual education that “presupposes the command of the basic humanistic and scientific disciplines achieved through careful and extended studies supported by well-motivated, good quality teaching, which in turn brings about an increasing ability to think reflectively, logically, and critically”¹⁷.

The most important feature of this pedagogical mode is the religious dimension which pervades all of its educational efforts and which contributes to the better understanding of the real meaning of human life: “The Society of Jesus’ educational project tries to stimulate and promote the spirit within each person, offering opportunities for reaching an answer of faith in God, but perfectly aware that faith can not be imposed”¹⁸.

Universidad Santo Tomás

Its educational model is “the expression of a pedagogical concept and tradition present in the history of the institutions which have embraced it; the model has its roots in the thoughts of Thomas Aquinas, its main characteristic being the centrality given to anthropological thought, whereby the human being is understood as an individual”.

Since Aquinas’ doctrine falls in line with what is known as Aristotelian empiricism, the individual person is conceived of as a comprehensive whole modelled and built within a concrete sociocultural reality. Thus, as far as the Thomist pedagogical model is concerned, when dealing with this “building-up or construction of the individual person”, what really matters are the being and the knowledge. In other words, both the education of the person and the build-up of knowledge. Having said so, we now want to propose the current concepts of ‘educability’ and ‘teacheability’, frequent in contemporary pedagogical thought, as

the articulating axes of the Thomist pedagogical model, which in turn are given expression in the university’s curriculum”¹⁹.

The Thomist anthropological concept is innovative, not only if compared with the reductive concepts of Aquinas’ times, but also in relationship to contemporary anthropological trends. In fact, its originality lies in conceiving the human being as an individual person, entitled to a dignity of its own both by origin and destiny; a person in open and permanent dialogue with his/her fellow men/women, with him/herself, with all other creatures of nature, and with transcendency.

At the same time, the Thomist anthropological concept acknowledges the individual as a being in process, in constant development and change, and always learning, a fact which opens up the possibility for every human being of improving the quality of his/her life by strengthening his/her qualities and skills.

As far as the Thomist pedagogical proposal is concerned, Saint Thomas asserted that education is self-fulfilment and therefore can not be done without self-control, without being masters of ourselves and our actions, without being the creators of our own convictions and criteria.

He also believed that the teacher can not “produce” knowledge in his disciple if the latter doesn’t (initially) have the conditions (the potential) to do so. All the teacher can do is to place at his pupil’s disposal the means he/she needs, so that he or she then reaches for truth; in other words, learns. For Thomas, then, the goal of education is not to train, form, or manipulate, but rather to awaken the persons involved²⁰.

¹⁷ Ibid No 26.

¹⁸ Paul VI. Lecture addressed to the members of the General Congregation, May 31, 1965.

¹⁹ From documents for the previous accreditation of the decree in Philosophy and Religious Education, 1998, Thomist Model.

²⁰ Ibid, Thomist Pedagogical Model.

Thus, the characteristics of his pedagogical model²¹

²¹ **Problem:** The Thomist pedagogy approaches knowledge through questioning, doubt, and relative answers, all of which facilitate controversy, a nuanced adopting of stances conducive to public debate as a way to incite the game between opposites and so gradually build up knowledge. **Inductive:** Because it is empirical and also because it aims to take as much as possible out of the personal experience of reality, the Thomist doctrine profiles its methodology as one of an inductive nature, whereby one starts from the concrete in order to reach a more comprehensive level of knowledge. For Thomas, thought is not possible without a previous knowledge of things. The fundamental principles enlighten and support what has been apprehended in reality. **Communal and participative:** Knowledge as a process, as proposed by the Thomist doctrine, demands everybody's participation, therefore highlighting the communal and collegial nature of the search for truth vis-à-vis a reality that in its problematic dimension demands comprehensive answers. That is why, according to Saint Thomas, the teachers mission is to "promote" the pupil so that he/she places him/herself in time and space and hence assumes his/her world and then, with autonomy and responsibility, devotes him/herself to work for his/her own good and that of all others. This type of education Thomas calls it "prudence" (Sum Tel. I-II q 53, a3, ad 1) "It is not possible that a single individual reach all things with his own individual reasoning... It is therefore necessary to live with many others so that they can help one another and then some take care of inventing some things and others other things". ("The government of princes" L.1,Cap.1) **Dialogical:** From the Thomist point of view, the dialogical character (of knowledge) acquires obvious relevance insofar as the fact that within all personal interrelationships the dynamic dimension of both the reality and the method to approach it becomes apparent. Knowledge, therefore, is constructed through the encounter. Thomas shows the dialogical nature of knowledge in his "Suma against the Gentiles", where he establishes a pedagogical dialogue with non-believers, starting with monstrative and demonstrative arguments to explain the coherence between reason and faith, the rationality of the evangelical message, and the help that faith can give to reason. **Emancipatory:** Of its own nature, the Thomist doctrine has an emancipatory dynamic inspired in Jesus' Gospels, the Good News that announces the plan of a humanity free of all ties and servitude. Emancipation, from the pedagogical Thomist point of view, must be understood as reflexive, responsible, and autonomous action. It presupposes discovering one's own voice, and this is only possible under a condition of justice and equality based on the premises of natural law which stresses on principles such as that of "equal opportunities".

commit the university to the shared responsibility of educating with the sole purpose of "developing the authentic Christian humanism in the light of Saint Thomas's thought and contributing through its actions to furthering and advancing higher culture to all levels of society"²².

Hence, a university in line with Saint Thomas' thought should have as its goal the search and promotion of wisdom as a gift of the Holy Ghost. His theology helps us to understand the uniqueness of wisdom in the latter's close ties with faith and divine knowledge. It (wisdom) knows inherently, presupposes faith, and formulates its correct judgement based on faith's own truth. "Wisdom, a gift granted by the Holy Ghost, is different from acquired intellectual virtue, since the latter is obtained by human effort whilst the former comes from above, as James the apostle said"²³.

Constructivist: Since any person is a being in process who is gradually becoming, knowing, and forming him/herself in the midst of the interactions with his/her fellow beings, the Thomist pedagogy declares itself as a continuous road of development for both the individual and the community, which means that, while capable of making good use of the necessary resources toward that end, it still is an unfinished proposal that supposes flexibility and continuity. Thomas himself acknowledges that "the process of teaching can not be infinite and therefore it is necessary that men (and women) get to know many things by inventing and discovering by themselves". ("On Ethics", Book 2, Lec. 1). **Integral (or comprehensive):** The 'integrality' of the Thomist pedagogical doctrine means or implies the possibility that the individuality of the different knowledge areas and subjects can in effect contribute to the clarification, be it of a discursive thematic or of a social situation precisely because or due to the very diversity of the fields of knowledge as well as that of the subjects that know. From documents for the previous accreditation of the decree in Philosophy and Religious Education, 1998. Thomist Model.

²² Universidad Santo Tomás. Proyecto Educativo Institucional, No. 1 p. 28.

²³ Fides et Ratio, No. 44.

Training teachers for religious education

The subject of training Catholic teachers at the university is quite complex, so that, even if it is true that both Universities, Javeriana and Santo Tomás, have indeed shown concern for this important actor in the educational process, we still think it is necessary to take a look at what thinking about a Religious Sciences program has meant for these institutions, a program which would take care of the training of teachers to teach religion.

The degree in Religious Sciences came about in very good measure in response to the Catholic training processes which took place in Colombia and Latin America. The Colombian Political Constitution of 1886 established in its article No. 41 that: "Public education will be organized and guided in agreement and harmony with the Catholic Religion". Accordingly, articles 3 and 5 the Constitution put forward the idea of forming men sufficiently informed on all basic knowledge, healthy in body and soul, praiseworthy, and capable of being good citizens. Thus it was the principal's and the school's responsibility to encourage the children's religious and moral sentiments and inclinations; the teachers would be appointed by the departmental authorities and should be very well behaved and profess the Catholic religion.

The 1887 Concordat stated the following in its article 12: "At all universities, schools, and any other educational centres, public education and training will be organized and guided in accordance with Catholic morals and dogmas. Religious education and teaching will be compulsory at all such centers and institutions and in them the pieties and rituals of the Catholic religion will be observed. Furthermore, article 13 stated: "Consequently, in the aforementioned centers and institutions, the respective regular bishops or their special delegates will have the right to inspect and revise the texts in all that concerns religion and morals".

Towards 1945 in Latin America, facing the need for unity among all Catholic teachers in order to

defend the principles of Catholic education, church leaders created the Consejo de la Confederación Interamericana de Educación Católica (Interamerican Confederation of Catholic Education Council) and the Confederación Interamericana de Educación Católica was established. The bishops saw the need to put Catholic education in the hands of priests, monks, nuns, and laymen and women committed to the cause and acquainted with the problems and solutions in their field of work. That very same year, the first Interamerican Congress for Catholic Education took place. Its aim was to collaborate with the governments in finding a fair solution to educational problems and to contribute as efficiently as possible to cultural and scientific development as well as to improve the social welfare of the peoples of America"²⁴.

Constanza Arango, in her paper on Catholic Schooling in Latin America, holds that it (Catholic instruction) does have an identity embodied in a proposal which in turn answers questions as to why, what for, where to, and how to find our way in order to achieve the total humanization and liberation of men, women, and society, so as to transform the structure of sin and make real and present the Kingdom of God in the classroom. This constitutes the plus of such education, its specific contribution²⁵. At the same time, she asserts that the training of teachers has been a constant concern of Catholic education and that this has been done with crystal-clear commitment and from a broad spectrum of different points of view; i.e., self-awareness of personal dignity, the proper valuation on the part of society of the teaching profession and of the education centers where they work, their fair payment, and their present need to receive social welfare as well as their right to organize in unions.

In Colombia, Law 20 of 1974, which confirmed the Concordat between the republic of Colombia and the Holy See, states in article 1: "The state, in

²⁴ Arango, Constanza FMA (2003). *La escuela católica en América Latina*. Paper presented at the IV Congreso Nacional de Educación Católica CONACED, Bogotá.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

deference to the traditional Catholic sentiments of the Colombian Nation, considers that the Roman Catholic Religion is an essential element for the common good and for the development of the national community". Article 121 of the same law establishes that: "The State will favor the creation, at higher education level, of institutes or departments of religious sciences where Catholic students get the opportunity of improving their culture in harmony with their faith". Furthermore, Law 133 of May 24, 1994, ratifies: "The State still acknowledges the legal status and public ecclesiastical rights of the Catholic Church and of any entity or entities founded or to be founded as established in Article 1 of Law 20 of 1974, whereby the Concordat was approved".

Thus, the 1974 Concordat meant for many Colombian universities the creation of institutes for the study of Religious Sciences, whose main aim was to offer theology for the layperson. Later, and in answer to the demands of the population that joined these institutes to form and train themselves, the Catholic institutes at the universities considered the possibility of adjusting their programs in such a way that they were conducive to awarding professional degrees, and so it was that, by the end of the 70's and the beginning of the 80's, distance learning degrees in Religious Sciences started to be offered, particularly by three prestigious universities: Universidad Santo Tomás, Pontificia Universidad Javeriana and Universidad Pontificia Bolivariana.

The main goal behind the creation of the degree in Religious Sciences was to train and form teachers of religious education and catechesis. To do so, it was necessary to train them with both theological knowledge and pedagogical skills, so that they could perform their job backed-up by the basis of Catholic theology. All students aspiring to obtain this degree had to take, among others, the following courses: Old and New Testament studies, Christology, Ecclesiology, Fundamental Morals, Sacraments, Catechesis plus all those other subjects related to teaching skills. In this way, proper training in teaching methods together with the needed theological and Biblical studies, was guaranteed for

the layperson, who on his/her own accord, wanted to help his/her Church by means of pastoral work at the school, this latter conceived as a place of evangelization and communion.

With the forming and training of the Catholic teacher, right from the start a contribution has been made to place the dignity of every individual as the cornerstone of any educational process arising from an evangelical proposal, thus encouraging the development of the human capacity to assume responsibility for his/her own development and that of his/her interpersonal relationships. At the same time, this education seeks to help the teacher acquire the knowledge needed so that he/she can establish a Faith–Culture, Faith–Life type of dialogue.

As Constanza Arango asserts²⁶, faith in Christ's incarnation nurtures the conviction that all men and women can only fulfill their transcendental future from within their world and their culture, in other words, from the starting point of their culture and the ensuing Faith–Life dialogue that commits us to read and interpret from our faith one of the essential dimensions of human existence: our growth towards maturity.

Current challenges for the Catholic university

The Catholic university is no days immerse in a highly competitive environment from which it can not withdraw and to which it has to answer with high standards and quality in the midst of our times. Pope John Paul II foresees the challenges the Catholic university faces vis-à-vis society:

In today's world, characterized by such rapid advancements in science and technology, the tasks to be undertaken by the Catholic university acquire ever increasing importance and urgency. In fact, if on the one hand, the technological

²⁶ Ibid



and scientific discoveries imply enormous economic and industrial growth, on the other hand, they inescapably impose the consequent and necessary search for meaning in order to guarantee that these new discoveries are used for the genuine good of each and every person and human society as a whole. If the search for such meaning is true for all universities, then the Catholic university is specially called upon to respond to this necessity; its Christian inspiration entitles it to incorporate the moral, spiritual, and religious dimension into its search, and to ponder the achievements of science and technology from the total and comprehensive perspective of the individual²⁷.

These great scientific and technological achievements in the world of communications, in the midst of globalization and the emergence of new cultures, represent a responsibility for the Catholic university in as far as the education of its students is concerned, and also in the commitment it has to the hopes that society expects from it. Today more than ever, the Catholic university is called upon to reinvent new forms and strategies, not only to educate but to make its active, evangelizing presence felt among the poor as the option that emanates from its own nature and confession.

This does not mean that it is the poorest of the poor who should enter the university and start degree courses, nor that the university should abandon its attempt to foster the academic excellence needed to solve the real problems which affect its social context. It means, rather, that the university should place itself intellectually among the poor in order to become the science of all those without a voice, the support of all those who, in their reality, are right and know the truth, often in the form of plunder, but that do not have academic reasons

to justify or legitimize their rightness and their truth²⁸.

The challenge, therefore, is for the Catholic university and its distance learning programs, to examine and devise pedagogic proposals that enhance the educational opportunities of people so that they don't fall behind the developments that the modern computer and communication technologies impose.

To offer programs through the strategy of distance learning might very well be an opportunity to answer to the needs of our society. The alternatives that the use of computer technology (Internet and other electronic media) open could rub out the frontier that separates actual presence in a classroom and distance learning, making the university an open space easy to access.

Today, those old times when it was unilaterally thought that the only way to train and teach was to focus on the teachers and their students in a physical classroom seem very remote, as the times also seem remote when

universities taught and trained an aristocratic minority, based on their money or their social origins; today the university has to develop a great mass of people so that they can contribute to society's progress and answer respond to the needs of the labor market [...] access to higher education is still culturally restricted to certain social classes; this is the real challenge for the Catholic university to overcome if it aspires to create more social justice in the world²⁹.

²⁷ John Paul II (1990) Apostolic Letter. Catholic Universites.

²⁸ Ignacio Ellacuría, S.J., *La tarea de la Universidad Católica*. Lecture at Universidad de Santa Clara, June 12, 1982 (italics are ours).

²⁹ *Pedagogía Universitaria y formación integral* (2000). *Un proyecto para la Universidad Católica del tercer milenio*. [University Pedagogy and Integral Education (2000). A Project addressed to Catholic Universities of the Third Millenium]. Federación Internacional de Universidades Católicas, p. 31

Other challenges for the Catholic university have to do with the plurality of cultures, the need to educate in such a way that we all learn to coexist within diversity, having in mind that it is possible that within one and the same individual several cultures can express themselves, sometimes to the point that some fragmentation might be experienced.

The religious pluralism that today demands an ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue, urges the university, precisely because of its serious, investigative, and systematic nature, to become a privileged space for that dialogue to take place.

In a country like Colombia, mostly Catholic but antagonistically marked by cruel violence, poverty, and exclusion rates, plus collapsing institutions, it is the university's challenge to intervene from the academic sphere in order to create spaces for reflection where the awareness of those responsible for guiding the nation could be increased, so that conditions of equality and the possibility of a dignified coexistence could be created.

It is the university's responsibility as well to reflect on today's technology in all of its dimensions. It must be possible to humanize technology so that it allows for harmony, as in father Botero's words: "technological advancements depend on the ecological equilibrium of the physical environment which sustains life on the Planet and will be our legacy to future generations; we must be aware that it is our duty to safeguard the rights of humans in the future".

Conclusions

The Colombian Catholic university, true to its functions and characteristics, has directed its educational processes from the perspective of justice, peace, and harmony in society. Its position of preference for the weak and the marginal, inspired in the Gospel, have allowed it to go beyond the walls of its campuses in order to get to the remotest regions of the country and to train and form teachers interested in imparting religious education.

The Colombian Catholic universities have been pioneers in distance teaching and their programs have been directed towards the training of teachers, a fact which demonstrates that they have realized the importance of improving the educational processes by means of forming and qualifying teachers.

The Religious Sciences courses have meant theological training for lay people, who due to and through their Christian commitment, contribute to an education in our faith by teaching religion in the school. The Catholic university's commitment toward the development of society has been in keeping with its interpretation of the particular historical moment and the continuous search for answers that have some bearing on the development of new individuals that go beyond the frontiers of knowledge and through them make significant contributions to the different disciplines of knowledge.

The challenges which today's Catholic university must take on are opportunities which in turn maintain the institution in a tension vis-à-vis events that generate uncertainty, fears and hopes, but that at the same time force it to project itself towards the development of the individual, and the development and diffusion of science for the benefit of society in whatever circumstances it must act.

Bibliography

- Arango, Constanza FMA (2003). *La escuela católica en América Latina*. Ponencia presentada en el IV Congreso Nacional de Educación Católica CONACED, Bogotá.
- Carta Apostólica de Juan Pablo II (1990). *Universidades católicas*. Identidad de la Universidad católica.
- Carta Magna de las universidades europeas*, Bolonia, Italia, 18–IX 1998. Principios fundamentales.
- Documentos para la acreditación previa de la Licenciatura en Filosofía y Educación Religiosa*, 1998. Modelo Tomista.
- Documentos para la acreditación previa de la Licenciatura en Ciencias Religiosas de la Universidad Javeriana, 1998.
- Fides et Ratio, No. 44.
- http://www.puj.edu.co/pedagogia/documentos/Documentos_Corporativos_Compania_Jesus.pdf <http://www.ucn.cl/ofec/>
- Ignacio Ellacuría, S.J., *La tarea de la Universidad Católica*, lecture addressed at Universidad de Santa Clara, June 12, 1982 (italics are ours).
- Juan Pablo II (1990) *Carta Apostólica*. Universidades Católicas
- Juan Pablo II. *Las universidades católicas*. 1988.
- Newman, John Henry (1852) *Discursos sobre el fin y naturaleza de la educación universitaria*. Translation by José Morales, 1996.
- Pablo VI. *Evangelio Nuntiandi* 1975
- Pedagogía Universitaria y Formación Integral (2000) *Un proyecto para la Universidad Católica del tercer milenio*. Federación Internacional de Universidades Católicas.
- Universidad Javeriana. Proyecto Educativo.
- Universidad Santo Tomás. *Proyecto Educativo Institucional*, No. 1 p. 28.