

Articles and Interviews

Nuestro Tiempo (Pamplona) January-February of 2000

Interview by Miguel Ángel Jimeno and Fernando López Pan, published in the magazine Nuestro Tiempo, Pamplona, Spain.

Is the University of Navarre in the year 2000 what its Founder, Blessed Josemaria Escrivá, imagined it would be?

Without a doubt, yes. Blessed Josemaria promoted numerous initiatives all over the world. And he conceived of many others that have not yet been born. These were the fruit of his apostolic zeal, of his enterprising, creative, optimistic spirit. He used to make these plans with other persons who also had a creative spirit, who instead of simply complaining about problems sought for ways to solve them. But he never felt that he was the one in charge of those projects; rather, he saw himself as a “sower”—a sower of ideas.

Blessed Josemaria often told us about his “dreams” for the University of Navarre: it would be a place where people could study peacefully, where their freedom would be respected and

they could live in harmony, serving one another. I am sure that, if he were alive today, he would greatly enjoy walking around the campus, chatting with the professors, workers and students, as he often did when this adventure was just beginning. But what he would most enjoy would be seeing that the university is being born anew each day from the work, the prayer and the dreams of those who work there.

What should be the role of the university in society today? Which of the university's traits should be permanent and which can and should be adapted to changing social, economic and cultural circumstances?

The university should not merely “adapt” to new circumstances, but should itself be at the origin of change, to borrow words of Blessed Josemaria which he used in a different context. This innovative approach means appreciating the accomplishments of the past, as well as, of course, the values which cannot change.

The university is the soil where ideas and projects capable of generating social progress are cultivated. In recent years, new institutions devoted to research have been born, and some of these have ample resources to carry out specialized work. But the university continues to be a privileged forum for transmitting wisdom.

A comprehensive vision, awareness of one's own mission of service, the primacy of the person, an innovative spirit, devoting sufficient time to study and research—these are some of the traits which, in my judgment, the university should preserve if it is to continue being on the cutting edge of progress.

Scientific knowledge is growing so quickly that researchers have to focus on very specialized topics, which means that they run the risk of losing sight of the "big picture." Do you think it's possible to combine specialized research with respect for the fundamental truths about man, and could you give some examples of how this can be done?

I think it's not only possible but essential to do so. I think it's very important for a university professor not to lose sight of the "big picture": all work should help us to grow in knowledge about ourselves and about the world and to integrate these convictions into a consistent life-style. In my opinion, professors must give students knowledge that is philosophically sound, which will help them discover the meaning of life. It's not enough to teach students how to produce, how to show a gain, how to make money. What really matters is that they learn to live rightly.

I realize that it's not easy to keep sight of the whole. There is little time and much to do. If I had to give a piece of advice (though I would rather ask professors for their advice), I would say, do whatever possible to broaden one's outlook: read the classics, follow important current events and issues, take a sincere interest in

the work and ideas of one's colleagues, foster communication and dialogue among the different fields of study, be open to the truth and have the humility needed to correct one's ideas and to begin again as often as necessary.

What are your expectations as regards the research work of the professors? What would you say to professors and researchers of the University of Navarre?

I would ask those who work in the university to continue confronting issues that have broad social repercussions. A Christian researcher finds in his faith an incentive and light to penetrate more deeply into the pressing issues of his time: the dignity of the human person, human rights, respect for life, the demands of solidarity, the building of peace and so many other issues that require a new concept of university research, research that is always aware of its mission of service to man.

There comes to mind the Pope's insistence on the need to study and find ways to solve the public debt of the Third World countries. I think a university like Navarre has to discover and accept the challenges inherent in these kinds of questions, which are very complex and require a high level of specialized knowledge as well as a deep respect for the human person.

The relationship between the professor and students has lost some of the formality it had in the past. Now the relationship is closer and more fluid. Can this close rapport help sow great ideals in

the hearts of students? How can a professor combine a close rapport with his students (which is so helpful for the latter's formation) with the proper distance and respect?

That is quite an interesting question, since Blessed Josemaria had it very much in mind when this alma mater was taking its first steps. In this too one can discern what is permanent and what changes over time in the university. Nowadays, university life has outgrown a certain rigidity it had in the past; at the same time, it retains the courtesy that is a sincere sign of respect.

I think the professor-student relationship should strike a balance between these two coordinates: friendship and mutual respect. Such an atmosphere facilitates a dialogue that enriches both parties, because not only the student but also the professor has lessons to learn and ideals to share, which transcend cultural and religious differences. At the same time, common sense dictates that the student remembers that he is a disciple and that he has to know how to listen.

It would seem that at times the academic freedom that characterizes the work of the university professor could give rise to conflicts with the governing body of the university. How can one make the legitimate freedom of the teaching profession compatible with respect for that authority?

Personal freedom is not a threat to the unity of aims and the coordination of work that a university requires.

Evidently, any professor who joins the faculty of a university knows the values, history, spirit and style of that institution. Respect for others is one of the hallmarks of the University of Navarre, which all those working at the University strive to foster. The University does not have a uniform approach to questions that arise in any particular school—and this is true of theological and philosophical issues as well. Anyone is free to adopt the line of thought he thinks best, as long as it fits within the faith and morals taught by the Church. There are many ways to reach the truth, and no one should claim that his is the only way. In this respect, it's easy to understand that to work at the university presupposes sharing ideals, working together to make a specific project a reality, doing so in an atmosphere of freedom and collaboration. Then, in the day-to-day work, decisions have to be made; particular solutions will need to be adopted which means that other possibilities will have to be dropped, choosing from a wide range of opinions. This way of working—which will always have its share of errors as well as positive results—is quite normal.

I think it's important to be realistic, to take into account people's views, to seek what unites and reject what divides, to avoid creating rifts in mutual dealings. Earlier we spoke about the friendship and respect that should characterize professor-student relationships. With much greater reason, friendship and respect should mark the relationship between professors and the governing body of the university.

But what criteria should the governing board of a university follow so as not to infringe upon the legitimate freedom of its professors? What principles should guide the government of a university at different levels?

The founder of the University of Navarre insisted that to govern is to serve. And that is the spirit the University has tried to follow from its beginning. I want to take advantage of this occasion to express my gratitude to all those who have helped in the administration of the University in any way, in its schools and departments. For a teacher or researcher to accept a position of administration often means a personal sacrifice, because that new job requires cutting back on the research and teaching he or she normally does and for which one has a professional vocation. I think it's a duty of justice to acknowledge with gratitude the dedication all these people display, seeing it as a service.

I have had the good fortune of hearing personally a great many suggestions for prudence in government from Blessed Josemaría. I can say that he never failed to mention two qualities: collegiality and trust. When decisions are not made by one person alone and when no one tries to impose his own opinion on the others, then a climate of mutual trust blossoms forth which allows people to work effectively, even though there may be small disagreements from time to time.

What attitudes should university students incarnate, and what should be their primary concerns?

I understand your question, but let me say that I don't think it's possible to give a specific answer. Each student is different. Each is a world unto him or herself, with their own personal history, personality, talents, desires and hopes. In any case, one could say that the common trait of any student is that he comes to the university to learn, to be formed. Each student is preparing to undertake a journey, and realizes that he has to decide for himself how to make it.

The University of Navarre seeks to be a suitable environment for the student during those years when one is making these big decisions in planning out one's life. At the University students are encouraged to ask themselves radical questions, and they are given a reference point to help guide them. They are encouraged to look at Jesus Christ, who is the Way, the Truth and the Life—the only one capable of satisfying our deepest desires. Then, each person decides freely and is responsible for his decisions and for his future, which will be good and useful if they conform with the Truth.

Should university courses be taught within the context of the Christian faith, even those that are more practical? Isn't this a lack of respect for the students' freedom?

At the very origin of this University, there was the desire to carry out a deep professional work, in the light of the Truth who has given himself for us: Jesus Christ. That is its *raison d'être* and the meaning of its present and future.

Faith is given to us so that it becomes rooted in the deepest recesses of our minds and hearts. It is a gift of God and a great treasure that imbues our entire life. A Christian lives his faith when he goes to Mass but also when he spends time with his family; when he studies, when he writes and when he prays. Faith is not something accidental, something added on, which one can take off and put on whenever it's convenient.

If a professor has received the gift of faith, he or she should come across in class not simply as a learned person, but also as a believer, because faith radically transforms all that we have and are. Faith is intensely human. That's why, for a professor to show his faith—in a way that is, of course, respectful of others—does not condition the student. On the contrary, it is a sign of consistency, and always constitutes a source of freedom.

How can the university help the spirit of Christianity flourish in society, and how, specifically, can the University of Navarre collaborate in the new evangelization which the Pope is calling for?

The recent encyclical *Fides et Ratio* attributes the secularization of the West in great part to the mistaken separation of faith from culture. It is there, in the same area where the break has occurred, that the mending must also take place. And this University, like many others where the faith and human sciences are cultivated, can be a good forum for re-opening the dialogue between faith and culture, and for fostering a science and a culture enlivened by the faith.

The great issues that concern contemporary man often lead him to ask fundamental questions about himself. Many of the persons far from God can find no one who understands their questions or who can help them find the answers to those questions. These questions come up in many areas, for example: What are the limits of scientific progress? What is the nature of marriage and the family? What is the rational basis for morality? What are the causes of poverty and how can one help solve it? We should not be afraid to acknowledge the close tie between faith and reason, and to explore that relationship—building on the foundation of a deep scientific preparation and attitudes that all dialogue requires: respect for others, ability to communicate, a desire to improve.

At the same time, let us not forget that the most important thing is that professors and students strive to follow Christ closely and give their university life an intense Christian meaning. Evangelization is carried out also with the language of deeds, and one of the most convincing arguments in support of the faith is the witness of a life consistent with it. For this reason, the apostolic responsibility the Church entrusts to us cannot be considered an overwhelming weight. We are not asked to do something impossible: what is required of us is authenticity, unity between what we believe, what we think, and the way we live. And here the university has much to contribute in its daily work.

There comes to mind the weeks I spent in the University Clinic some years ago. During those days, so unforgettable for me for many reasons, I

was the object of special attention and care on the part of doctors, nurses and other workers. Through many silent gestures, as well as through many kind words, I understood more deeply how attractive such professional service is when it is done with human perfection and love of God.

Whoever views the University from one of the windows of the rooms in the Clinic, sees it in a different way, and understands it better. It's worthwhile learning this lesson, which I have also learned in other departments of the University.

Pope John Paul II inaugurated the Jubilee Year 2000 a few weeks ago in Rome. How should one live the Jubilee at the University and from the University?

There is so much one could say about this! But let me sum it all up in one word: conversion. All the preparation for the Jubilee has really been preparation, with God's grace, for conversion. And conversion consists above all in a new meeting with Jesus Christ. It means to discover him anew each day, to strive to learn everything that he came to reveal to us, to make him the center of our soul. It means not allowing the many concerns and sufferings that are part of life to separate us from him, but on the contrary, to find Christ in them. That is the invitation which the Holy Father has been extending to every Christian and to all men and women of good will—to those who are seeking the deepest meaning behind their lives.

In the final analysis, conversion, metanoia, the change the Jubilee invites us to undertake, is nothing more

and nothing less than discarding our own spirit and daring to live according to the spirit of Christ, who re-creates a new Life in us: the life of the children of God. I remember with great joy having observed this disposition daily in my predecessors as Grand Chancellor of the University: Blessed Josemaria and Bishop Alvaro del Portillo.

How can the alumni of the University of Navarre help in this?

It's not easy to describe in a few words the rich relationship that exists between the alumni and the university (its professors, administration and everyone who works here). I think that this relationship is a two-way street: the alumni can help the university and the university can continue helping the alumni. To put it in a nutshell, the university must keep its doors open to its alumni: they are always welcome, because in some way they continue to form part of this body. Their ideas and suggestions, their collaboration in the work of teaching and research, their financial help are always welcome. We come back to what I said earlier: this university has been born of professional and apostolic yearnings, and it has taken the form of a common project, open to all: students, alumni and friends. All who share this Christian ideal of the university as a service to society can collaborate.

Of course, those who have passed through the classrooms of the university are in a better position to understand this ideal, and of finding a thousand ways to cooperate, and of thus playing an ever-greater role in this project.