

The Contribution of a Confessional University to Society

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Introduction [Slide 2]

The Pontifical Catholic University of Paraná at Curitiba, Brazil, “PUC”, as we call it, is a Catholic, private, non-profit, philanthropic “communitarian” University run by the Marista religious congregation, fully accredited by State authorities and open to all faiths and those who profess none. I myself am professor and head of postgraduate programme being a Lutheran. So while to be Catholic is by no means a precondition to enter the university, be it as student, administrative staff or as a faculty, the identity can be felt quite clearly throughout teaching, research and outreach. PUC currently has about 20.000 students in over 60 undergraduate and 16 graduate programmes.

Among its goals are:

- I. [...] To promote intellectual, physical, artistic, civilian, moral and spiritual culture;
- II. To prepare professionals with a solid humanistic formation, notable by their knowledge, capable of an efficient exercise of their tasks and role with a sense of social responsibility and citizenship;
- III. To contribute towards the development of society; [...]

These values show that the university is very clear on its goals for education and formation which go far beyond the ingestion of knowledge in its more restricted sense. Formation is for socially responsible citizens that are committed towards developing and transforming society. I shall briefly present what this means as I present three theses:

1. Science is not done in an Ivory Tower – practice of science [slide 3]

PUCPR is oriented by ethical, Christian and Marista values and has as its mission to “develop and spread knowledge and a culture of promoting integral and ongoing formation of citizens and of professionals committed to life and to the progress of society”. Its motto is “scientia, vita et fides” – science, life, and faith, which we can explain as the articulation between the practice of science – the impact on life – and the meaning provided by and the motivation through faith.

PUCPR seeks to “promote dialogue between science, faith, culture, and life, and solidarity”, forming professionals that are conscious of their human vocation in whatever they do, being guided by ethical principles. Science, thus, never on its own, but responds to demands from society and addresses the need for meaningful transformation. This is, obviously, especially needed in an emerging country like Brazil which has enormous social disparities and many precarities of daily life that need to be addressed, responded to and solved.

I now pass on to the second thesis: [slide 4]

2. There are distinct tasks, but there is mutual fecundation and cooperation between sciences (“Wissenschaften”) – impact on life

Since I have joined PUC last year after 16 years of working at a Lutheran Theological Seminary, I have noted that there is a great interest and willingness to co-operate between the different areas, the various sciences. I call all of them sciences in the German sense of “Wissenschaften” that includes the Humanities as sciences, rather than the Anglo-saxon distinction between science and humanities. Such co-operation driven by fulfilling the mission of fostering humanity and serving society, has become even more tangible as the pandemic presses for an immediate response. I shall present some of the actions performed by one or more of the graduate programmes:

Health Sciences found out details about how the virus functions and what this implies for correct treatment. Too much ventilation by the respiration machine can damage the lungs, and anticoagulation drugs must be applied to avoid embolism.

Health Technology together with Design developed simple, cheap but effective Individual Protection Gear (like shields, masks and aprons) for doctors, nurses, police, firemen and other professionals. Equipment is also provided for ragpickers who have to continue collecting materials for recycling to have a daily income for survival. 1000 protection items are handed out to them on a daily basis. Furthermore, respiratory ventilators are produced at high functionality, low cost and fast assembling.

Artificial Intelligence [slide 5] developed a method for detecting COVID-19 from X-Ray images, which provides a diagnosis that is much faster and cheaper than other means.

Mechanical Engineering [slide 6] developed a nanotechnological revestment of metal surfaces to avoid contamination of hospital equipment.

Law is providing counselling for legal issues as well as analysing and commenting such issues involved in the pandemic.

Management is carrying out surveys to compare population behaviour with public policies to test their effectiveness. It also analyses the role of media in this process and promotes webinars on how to survive as a small and middle sized business in the midst of the pandemic.

Production and Systems Engineering [slide 7] developed Individual Protection Equipment for health professionals in the two university hospitals using 3D-printing.

Hotmilk Innovations and Ecosystems, PUCs interdisciplinary innovation institute, developed a robot that can approach ICU patients to be able to interact through a tablet with their parents as they cannot be physically visited during isolation.

The **Humanities**, namely the Philosophy, Theology, Education as well as Human Rights and Public Policies, cooperating with Bioethics and Health Sciences, are contributing with reflections and online presentations on the Human Being in Times of COVID-19, what it means to have hope in such times, and the need for spiritual assistance of health personnel and other front workers, like grave diggers.

The **vice-rector for mission, identity and outreach** is working closely with community leaders in the nearby slum and providing basic food items, shelter and spiritual attendance. He regularly interacts with the academic community to express gratitude, inspire hope and trust and strengthen commitment.

The **vice-rector for research, postgraduate studies and innovation** [slide 9], with colleagues from **Artificial Intelligence** and **Urban Management** developed an algorithm that allows to reasonably predict, based on data from the past days and weeks, the curve of infections and deaths of the next week or two, predicting the occupation of ICU beds and, thus, the degree of lockdown needed. The local TV journal has presented this as an important contribution towards public policy and transparent information and prediction.
[Traffic Light – Slide 10]

3. Science is knowledge and wisdom – meaning and motivation through faith [slide 11]

Biblical tradition – in the Hebrew Bible as well as in Jesus' teaching and acting – says a lot about wisdom, which is, put in a simple formula, to know how to live. The biblical God is a God of life and of love, and theology, as Brazilian educator and public intellectual, the late Rubem Alves would have said [slide 12], is “a game that is played when life is at stake” (“teologia é um jogo que é jogado quando a vida está em jogo”).

While technical and specific knowledge is needed towards leading with life and indeed to live well, it is also experience and the wisdom how to deal with everyday life that has to be valued and fostered through teaching, cooperation and empowerment within and beyond the university. Therefore, the whole academic community has been working tirelessly towards finding technological solutions as well as harvesting and showing examples of concrete solidarity that give meaning and are motivated by faith and convictions, in teaching, research and outreach: the practice of science – the impact on life – and the meaning provided by and the motivation through faith. Thank you very much.