

ASEACCU

The Association of Southeast
and East Asian Catholic
Colleges and Universities



The good life (individual flourishing)

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Acknowledgements

Good morning, my fellow colleagues and students from across the region. It is a privilege to address this distinguished gathering, and a joy to do so here in Yogyakarta – a city that has welcomed me warmly on every visit, through both its climate and the openness and generosity of its people.

I thank our hosts, Universitas Sanata Dharma and Universitas Atma Jaya Yogyakarta, for their welcome. And I thank the Association of Southeast and East Asian Catholic Colleges and Universities for the honour of delivering this keynote address.

Two years ago, Australian Catholic University was delighted to host the 30th ASEACCU conference, welcoming hundreds of Catholic higher education leaders and students to North Sydney, where one of our seven Australian campuses is located.

It is a pleasure to see many of those same faces, and many new ones, here for this year's conference.

Over the next few days, we will discuss the goal of fostering intercultural dialogue and encounter, and the themes of education, hope and human flourishing – the last of which is the subject of my keynote address this morning.

I'd like to express my gratitude to the organisers for kindly giving my address the title: "The good life (individual flourishing)". I hope they will forgive me, because I intend to spend some time this morning complicating it.

Old wine, new casks

I last visited Yogyakarta in April to launch the Indonesia-Australia Human Flourishing Centre, a joint venture between ACU and Universitas Gadjah Mada which brings together leading academics to address our region's most pressing challenges.

I want to begin my lecture with a question that was asked of me during that visit. I was here, at this very university, giving a presentation on human flourishing.

After that presentation, a member of staff here asked the question, which was expertly answered by my senior ACU colleague, Professor Michael Champion, from our university delegation.

“All this talk of human flourishing,” the staff member asked, “isn’t it a little bit like old wine in new casks?”

It was, and is, a fair question. It is true that human beings have been asking what makes a life good for almost as long as we have records of human beings asking anything.

So, what exactly is new here, apart from the packaging?

Let me begin where my questioner was pointing, back to a time many centuries ago, when people were – just as we are today – discussing the topic of human flourishing.

Some 2500 years ago, in Athens, Socrates was known to have a habit of stopping his fellow Athenians in the street to ask them questions they could not easily answer. One of his questions: What makes a life good?

He had his own ideas about what the answer might be. His student Plato answered it as a constant striving towards beauty, goodness and truth, for individuals and communities alike.

But it was Plato’s own student, Aristotle, who gave the account we more commonly draw upon today: *eudaimonia* – a word we now translate, perhaps imperfectly, as flourishing.

Two main things about Aristotle’s answer matter for us this morning.

The first is that, for Aristotle, flourishing is not a feeling or a mood. It is an activity – something a person does, over a whole life, with all of their capacities.

“One swallow does not make a summer,” he wrote, “nor does one day.” The work of one day does not, in Aristotle’s words, “make a man blessed and happy”. Human flourishing is the work of a lifetime.

The second is that flourishing is rarely, if ever, a solitary achievement. The human being is a political animal, Aristotle wrote, and their nature is to live with others.

Aristotle was also practical. He understood that flourishing rests on certain material foundations – health, food, resources, and decent conditions of life. But among these “external goods”, he

argued, the greatest is friendship. Nobody would choose to have all the good things in the world and yet live entirely alone.

Christian thought took up the inheritance of *eudaimonia* and carried it further.

In the 13th century, Aquinas read Aristotle closely and agreed that a life of virtue was a genuine human good – but an incomplete one. It was only fully realised, he argued, when combined with love of neighbour, and love of God.

In this tradition, friendship and community extended beyond the members of the elite in Aristotle's Greek city-state to embrace the whole community – and people could hope for friendship with God.

The person, too, is understood differently: made in God's image, and made to exist in loving relationship with others.

This Christian tradition extended the idea of flourishing in other directions as well, thinking about flourishing alongside human vulnerability, and grounding it in the life of the Christian community.

But Christianity has never been the only tradition with something to say on this topic. Century after century, many other cultures, philosophies and religious traditions have carried their own visions of the good life.

Indeed, one of the exciting things about studying flourishing today is working through these visions and frameworks to build accounts that can make a real difference to people's lives, their relationships, institutions, and communities.

More recently, the study of flourishing has been taken up by neuroscientists, economists, psychologists and policymakers, who have tried to measure what earlier generations were content to debate.

So, human flourishing is clearly not a novel concept. What, then, is new? Allow me to briefly offer three ideas.

First, we can now study flourishing in ways that Aristotle could not have imagined. Today, researchers are examining hundreds of thousands of human lives, across many countries and

cultures, asking in a disciplined way what makes those lives go well. I will soon say more about some of the things they're finding.

Second, the conditions under which we ask the question, 'What makes a life good?' have changed. We live in a time of profound uncertainty. Trust in institutions, in leadership, in the processes of democracy, is in decline across much of the world.

This matters for our subject because unpredictability and instability make flourishing a more difficult task. The question of the good life has become urgent precisely because its preconditions have become contested.

Third, new challenges pose new questions for human flourishing itself. When Pope Francis confronted the environmental crisis in *Laudato Si'*, for example, our idea of flourishing grew to include the health of our common home. How are our best lives tied up with the good of ecologies at a planetary scale?

Today, new technologies are also reaching into many elements of human life. How we learn, how we create, how we communicate, and how we attend to one another. This raises, for everybody, the very question that Catholic higher education has been grappling with all along: what is a human person for?

I will come back to that question. But first, let me answer the one I was asked on my last visit to Yogyakarta.

Yes, the wine is old. Only the casks are new. But the question 'what makes a life good?' is so important that it demands to be poured out and tasted again by every generation, under its own conditions, and in its own language.

Completeness in humanity

When I was here at Universitas Sanata Dharma in April, I learnt something new. The term 'human flourishing' does not translate neatly into Bahasa Indonesia. There is no ready equivalent.

The Rector of this University, Fr Albertus Bagus, a Jesuit priest who is here today, and who was recently appointed as Provincial of the Indonesian Province of the Society of Jesus, took this problem seriously.

He told the story of lying awake at night, searching for a way to carry the concept of human flourishing into his own language.

The phrase he arrived at is: *Kemanusiaan Paripurna*. *Kemanusiaan* is ‘humanity’. *Paripurna* is a word from Sanskrit meaning ‘full’ or ‘complete’.

Completeness in humanity. A life lived in all its fullness. Or, as St Irenaeus put it: the glory of God is a human being fully alive.

If we are to draw a lesson from Fr Bagus’s sleepless night, it’s that the lack of a ready translation should never be an obstacle to the pursuit of human flourishing. Indeed, there is no single global model of human flourishing that sits there waiting to be unpacked from a crate and installed – different languages and cultures will capture different elements of it.

Saint John Paul II’s *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* makes clear that how a Catholic university lives out its mission depends on its particular context – cultural, social, temporal, geographical. It asks each Catholic university to relate to the culture of the region in which it stands, to lean into its own specific strengths and charism.

Each of our institutions must therefore ask what flourishing means where we are: for our people, in our place.

Notice also what Fr Bagus’s Indonesian translation reaches for: not satisfaction, pleasure or even happiness. Rather, it is completeness. Wholeness.

Interestingly, wholeness is close to where the evidence around human flourishing – who has it, and who doesn’t have it – now points. Let me turn to that evidence.

The Global Flourishing Study

Over the past few years, researchers at Harvard and Baylor universities have been working on the [Global Flourishing Study](#): longitudinal research that follows some 200,000 people in 22 countries, across six continents.

It is arguably the most ambitious attempt ever made to measure human flourishing.

Importantly, it measures many things: happiness and life satisfaction, physical and mental health, but also meaning and purpose, character and virtue, social relationships, and financial and material stability.

When the first batch of data was released this year, the country with the highest median flourishing score was not Sweden or Spain. It was not the United States or Australia. It was Indonesia.

Some received this result with scepticism. This is likely because we've grown used to hearing that wellbeing is attached to financial wealth.

The World Happiness Report is another measure of global wellbeing, and it assesses it quite differently. It asks people a life evaluation question: imagine a ladder with the best possible life at the top, and the worst at the bottom – where do you stand?

On that measure, Indonesia ranks 87th out of 147 countries. On the human flourishing index, first. What we choose to measure determines what we're able to see. Measure life evaluation alone, and wealthy countries in regions like Scandinavia and the Mediterranean lead the world. Measure meaning, relationship, character and purpose – something closer, perhaps, to what Aristotle referred to – and the picture looks completely different.

One of ACU's own researchers, Associate Professor Xavier Symons, who is also an affiliate of Harvard's Human Flourishing Program, put it well: "Indonesians may not feel that they are living the best possible life," he writes, "[but] they nevertheless enjoy important features of a good life that a focus on mere happiness fails to capture."

Much the same is true of the Philippines and Mexico, which ranked just behind Indonesia on the human flourishing index.

We should be careful, however, not to romanticise these findings.

The high levels of human flourishing seen in Indonesia, the Philippines and other parts of this region are inevitably linked to improved social and economic indicators: higher-quality healthcare,

solid educational institutions, things that need to be functioning well in order for human flourishing to be enabled.

Indeed, financial stability is one of the study's own dimensions of flourishing, and the people of this region understand its diverse economic challenges and opportunities far better than any visitor could.

President Prabowo Subianto himself, [reflecting on the Global Flourishing Study](#), spoke of his people with candour. He acknowledged that some of them live with very little, “and yet they smile, and yet they hope”.

While Indonesia stands at the top of the flourishing index, my own country Australia sits in the lower half, alongside Western nations like the United States, Germany and Sweden.

Other studies show that life satisfaction in Australia has fallen to record lows – and similar things can be said of the US, of Japan, and much of wealthy Europe.

More wealth does not necessarily equal more flourishing.

So, what do the societies of places like Indonesia and the Philippines have that societies like my own lack, or are losing?

Perhaps the answer can be found in the Global Flourishing Study's emphasis on things like meaning, belonging, human connection and religious faith.

Across many of the countries of east and southeast Asia, family, community and faith continue to be the centre around which much of social life turns. It's where values are learned, where care is given and received, and where a person starts to learn who they are.

Sociologists have a name for what happens when that web frays. We call it individualisation.

Individual flourishing

Across much of the Western world, the settled structures that once carried a life – extended family, neighbourhood and congregation – have loosened their hold. Each person is asked to write their own story, celebrating when they achieve personal success, and carrying the blame alone when it falters.

In 1950, an American sociologist David Riesman wrote about this in his book *The Lonely Crowd*. We are more connected than any generation before us, and at the same time, we're lonelier.

The atomisation of our social world is antithetical to human flourishing.

Some five years ago, when I delivered my *inaugural lecture* as ACU's Vice-Chancellor and President, in the middle of the pandemic, I mentioned that the great lesson I took from the year 2020 was that we should never underestimate the importance of human connection – that we “can never favour separation over union, or isolation over relationship”. I believed it then, and I believe it even more now.

And so, we arrive back at the title of this lecture, and the reason I warned at the beginning that I would complicate it.

Individual flourishing is a real thing. Every person's flourishing is their own, and it is of infinite worth. Our Catholic tradition insists on this: the belief that every individual possesses inherent dignity. But the individual person flourishes through relationship with others, with wider ecologies, and ultimately with God.

You can know who you are, what your strengths are, what you're motivated by, and what you want to do in life. But if that doesn't have an ecosystem, a context, an environment and a community to exist in, you're not going to experience the type of flourishing we're talking about.

Aristotle knew it when he called us political animals and counted human friendship as among the greatest goods. The Gospel knows it. And now the empirical evidence is showing it. No one flourishes alone.

This is one of the reasons why my university puts such emphasis on collaborating with our university partners here in Indonesia and the broader east and southeast Asia region. We come not only to share, but also to *learn* about human flourishing from places that score highly on the flourishing index, and who are interested in exploring the reasons.

Flourishing in the age of AI

Earlier I offered three ideas for what I thought was new about our pursuit of human flourishing.

The first two were around new knowledge and new conditions. The third was around new challenges and new technologies.

As you all know, in May, Pope Leo released his first encyclical, *Magnifica humanitas*. I was fortunate to be in Rome on the day of its release, and I was astounded by the way it immediately entered the global conversation around artificial intelligence – a topic that everyone, it seems, is talking about.

This is among the most advanced technologies that humanity has ever produced, and yet the person the world stopped to listen to was not an engineer, a mathematician, or even a political leader, but a pope.

The reason may simply be in the encyclical's subtitle: *On safeguarding the human person in the time of artificial intelligence*.

As many others have noted, for a papal letter that is focused on AI, it devoted remarkably few words to the technology itself.

Pope Leo's concern is anthropological, not technological. Artificial intelligence, he is telling us, is a new social question that demands a human-centred answer.

Earlier this year, my university had the honour of gathering Pope Leo's early reflections on education and artificial intelligence into a single volume titled *Maps of Hope*, produced with the Dicastery for Culture and Education and launched at our campus in Rome.

Reading those texts and the encyclical side by side, one can see a pope who is unafraid of this new technology, and who refuses to let it define us.

Technology did not land on us from outer space. It is a human creation, an extension of ourselves. There is no place, in my view, for technological determinism. But there is a place for insisting that technology remains what it has always been at its best, a servant of the human person and the human community.

This matters urgently because the effects on us are real, and we are beginning to measure them.

Technology often promises to make us smarter – yet research increasingly suggests it can do the opposite. When information is always at our fingertips, the motivation to truly learn it diminishes.

Reliance on navigation software erodes our spatial memory. We forget things because they are so easy to google. Artificial intelligence, used uncritically, leads to what researchers call ‘cognitive atrophy’.

There is a paradox here: the super-accessibility of information can obstruct the pursuit of wisdom.

Pope Leo names the danger with precision. We have become experts in the smallest details of reality, he observes, while losing the capacity for an overarching vision – for connecting what we know into a coherent picture.

This is where we start to see a pattern. What individualisation has done to our social world, technologies now threaten to do to our knowledge and attention.

It should be no surprise, then, that Pope Leo has taken leadership in this space.

The person cannot be properly seen in an atomised form, and nor can knowledge. Both need to be part of a whole in order to be grasped, in order to be relevant.

So, what is the remedy? And what role can the people in this room play in helping to find one?

In *Magnifica humanitas*, Pope Leo gives us clear direction.

He begins his encyclical describing the history of modern Catholic social doctrine, from Leo XIII’s 1891 *Rerum Novarum* onwards.

Then, in the second chapter, he turns to the *principles* of these teachings, to “help us interpret the ‘new things’ of our time”.

This is where the Holy Father addresses academic institutions and universities directly, encouraging us to “give fresh impetus to these principles”.

I believe that the leaders of *all* Catholic universities should take this as a call to action.

Unifiers of knowledge

The university as we know it was born nearly a millennium ago under the authority of the Catholic Church, as an institution designed to hold knowledge together, to integrate it and unify it.

The name itself tells us so: *universitas*. A community of teachers and scholars, gathered across all the branches of learning, with a common aspiration to seek truth, wisdom, and the flourishing of persons and society.

Ex Corde Ecclesiae names the integration of knowledge as the first mark of research in a Catholic university, alongside a dialogue between faith and reason.

Pope Leo has now renewed that for our time.

The principal challenge for universities, he tells us, lies precisely in the integration of knowledge – in forming people with the capacity to connect what they know, who can grasp complexity and determine what is true from what is not.

Some ask whether this new age will make universities obsolete. [I wrote about this recently](#), about the argument that, with information now being so readily available via digital technology, who needs the institutions that once kept it?

My answer is that universities were never merely the holders of information and knowledge. They are sites of exploration, interaction, socialisation and personal growth.

As all of you here know, a student acquires far more at university than skills and credentials. They gain experience that shapes character, broadens perspective and cultivates wisdom. Higher education done well can be transformative.

Catholic universities are uniquely placed in this endeavour. We can integrate *knowledge* – bringing diverse disciplines into dialogue, resisting the fragmentation of learning into ever smaller specialisations.

And we can integrate *persons*, forming students in community and relationship, educating the whole person and being what Pope Leo calls “the place where new generations can learn to seek and love the truth”.

This formation is not something that can happen easily to an individual sitting alone in front of a screen. It happens to a person over years, in the company of other people.

As two American scholars, Eric Spina and Tim Driscoll, [put it](#), in response to the question of how universities should handle the rapid take-up of AI among our students: “Higher education must offer what AI cannot: shared time, trustworthy relationships and the slow work of teaching students to connect ideas across fields...”

The need for communion and face-to-face presence, for sharing in a common pursuit – these are such profoundly human qualities that they never age. No technology will ever make that redundant.

Universities should therefore remain among the institutions in society that build life around them. This is one of our strengths in the new age. It is our claim on the future.

The task ahead of us is not something that any institution can do alone. Just like people, universities flourish in partnership.

I saw this over three years as the president of SACRU, the Strategic Alliance of Catholic Research Universities spanning five continents. I see it in ASEACCU and the mature regional partnerships it fosters between our institutions.

Pope Leo said as much in a video message to the bishops of this region, gathered in Jakarta only last month, when he urged them to be bridgebuilders throughout Asia.

Bridge-building. Taking our bonds of communion, and using them to address the challenges we face together.

And from bridges, let me close with a story about a tunnel.

Collective flourishing

Two years ago, when the late Pope Francis was here during his apostolic journey to Indonesia, he visited the Istiqlal Mosque. He spoke of it as a living monument to the kind of flourishing community I’ve been discussing today.

The ‘tunnel of friendship’ connecting the Mosque to the Cathedral of Saint Mary of the Assumption is, in my view, a powerful and eloquent symbol – a concrete connection between the Catholic and Muslim communities of this country and this region.

A sign that difference can be marked not by division and conflict, but by peaceful encounter and the bonds of friendship.

There, the Pope and the Grand Imam signed the *Joint Declaration on Fostering Religious Harmony for the Sake of Humanity*, informed in part by Indonesia's foundational principle of 'Pancasila'.

Together they rejected inaction in the face of violence, disease and environmental crisis, and committed to working together for a "healthy, peaceful and harmonious living environment".

That declaration is, I would suggest, an indication of what collective flourishing can look like when we work together towards it.

It is in that same spirit that my university and Universitas Gadjah Mada established the Indonesia-Australia Human Flourishing Centre that I talked of at the start of my lecture.

It is a partnership built on joint doctoral training and collaborative research across health and wellbeing, justice and equity, interfaith and intercultural relations, education, and integral ecology.

You will notice how closely those themes echo the themes of this very conference, and that is no accident. They are a shared agenda of our institutions, and of our region.

Let me give you one early example. Through the Centre, researchers from ACU and the State Islamic University here in Yogyakarta are working on a project titled "From Faith to Flourishing", examining how Catholic and Islamic universities can lead their institutions so that all students and staff can flourish.

Both institutions are responding to the same pressures: rapid societal and technological change, and rising concern about student wellbeing and community cohesion. Both are asking how their own faith commitments can be put to work in answering them.

Two faith traditions, side by side, studying a shared question.

I mention the Human Flourishing Centre again less for what it is than for what it demonstrates. Human flourishing cannot remain a word on paper, an abstract ideal, or a slogan.

It requires energy, engagement, and patient work across the institutions of society –universities, governments, businesses, communities of faith – and across borders. It requires the type of collaboration that associations and alliances like ASEACCU exist to make possible.

The theme of our conference this week places one word between education and human flourishing. The word is ‘hope’.

That placement, whether it was deliberate or not, is apt because education itself is an act of hope – a declaration of faith in those who come after us, and in their capacity to grow and build our common future.

Pope Leo holds that hope, and his teaching invites us to hold it too.

The Holy Father closes his encyclical with an instruction I find genuinely uplifting. “Let us invest in education”, he writes, “beginning with ourselves!”

I find it a hopeful message because it rests on things that are within reach of each and every one of us. The way we teach, the time we give one another, the effort we make, and the care we take with how we engage with the world.

To finish, I want to return to where I started, with the local staff member who posed a simple question when I was last here speaking at Universitas Sanata Dharma, and who I hope is somewhere in this room.

When it comes to human flourishing, and the question of what makes a life good, the wine is most definitely old.

It is likely one of the oldest questions that human beings have ever asked – in ancient Athens, in Jerusalem, in Java, and wherever people have loved others and loved God.

Our task is not to invent a new wine. It is to pour the old one into new casks and taste it afresh, remembering – of course – that wine is never meant to be consumed alone. Thank you.

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