

INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS

19 to 21 October 2026

@ katho (Cologne)

BRANDING CATHOLIC
UNIVERSITIES

IN A CHANGING
HIGHER-EDUCATION
LANDSCAPE



INVITATION

BRANDING CATHOLIC UNIVERSITIES IN A CHANGING HIGHER-EDUCATION LANDSCAPE

**International Congress
19 to 21 Octobre 2026
@ katho (Cologne)**



This conference explores how Catholic universities can strengthen their identity and influence in a rapidly evolving higher education landscape. By aligning mission, values, and communication, institutions are invited to move beyond branding as a mere tool, and to consider it as a strategic expression of their identity and societal role.

In a context marked by geopolitical uncertainty, cultural shifts, and growing competition in higher education, Catholic universities are increasingly called upon not only to educate, but to contribute actively to the shaping of more just and sustainable societies.

Bringing together university leaders, communication professionals, and institutional stakeholders from across the world, this international congress will offer a space for reflection and exchange on how Catholic institutions can enhance their visibility, strengthen their credibility, and expand their global influence – shaping change rather than simply adapting to it.

ABOUT US

IFCU

The International Federation of Catholic Universities is a common home for 220+ Catholic universities and higher education institutions worldwide. It welcomes institutions of all sizes, traditions, histories, and levels of prestige, giving each one a voice.

katho

The Catholic University of Applied Sciences North Rhine-Westphalia is today Germany's largest church-sponsored private university with state certification. katho has campuses in Aachen, Cologne, Münster and Paderborn.

10:30 AM W E L C O M E

11:00 AM **Opening Session**

Prof. Dr. Barbara Schermaier-Stöckl
Rector of the katho

Bernward Robrecht
Chancellor of the katho

Dr. François Mabilie
Secretary General of IFCU

11:45 AM **Inaugural Keynote**

**Social Sustainability and the Mission of
Catholic Universities: The Foundations
of a Distinctive Brand in the Making**

N.N.

12:30 PM L U N C H

Hosting of the Conference

Prof. Dr. Joachim Söder
Professor of Philosophy
katho, Campus Aachen

Jennifer Jung
Lecturer in Applied Theology
katho, Campus Paderborn



1:30 PM **Open Space Session**

Learning from One Another:
"Visibility grows through dialogue.
Mission becomes credible when it is shared."

- 1a. Differentiation and Positioning in a Secular Academic Landscape
- 1b. Brand Voice and Communication Strategies
- 1c. Branding as the Expression of Institutional Identity
- 1d. Attracting Value-Aligned Communities
- 1e. Authenticity and Credibility in a Pluralistic Society

3:30 PM C O F F E E B R E A K

4:00 till
4:30 PM **Summary of the open groups**

C U L T U R A L P R O G R A M M E

6:00 PM **Dinner German Brewery**



9:00 AM W E L C O M E

9:30 AM **Opening Keynote**

**From Mission to Influence:
Catholic Universities in the
Global Public Spaces**

Prof. Dr. Hans Hobelsberger
Former rector of the katho

Mtra. Maricarmen Díaz de Sandi Gómez
Chief of the Rector's Office, Universidad del Valle
de Atemajac (UNIVA), Mexico / Coordinator of the
ODUCAL Communication Network.

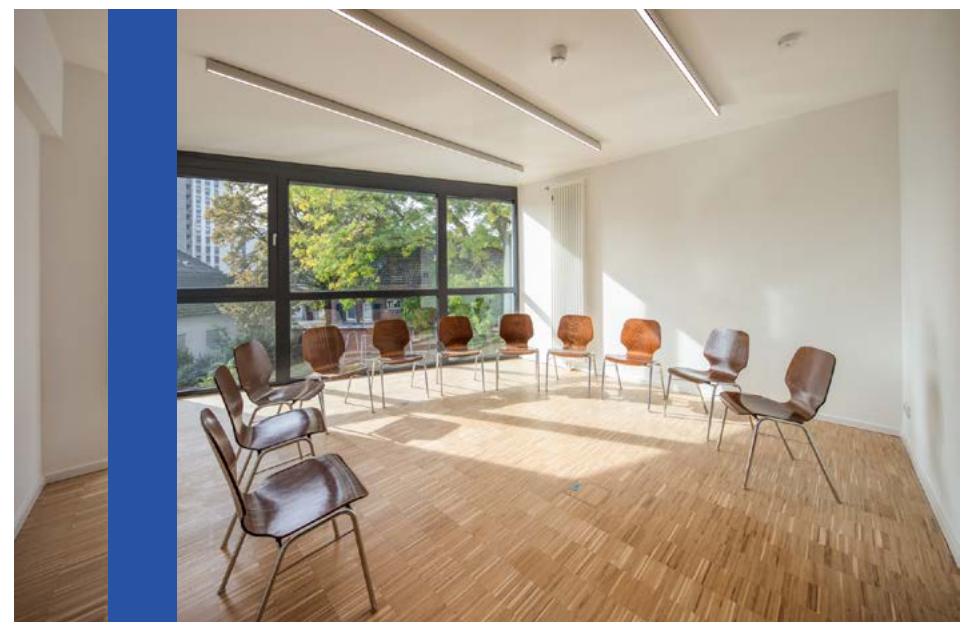
10:45 AM C O F F E E B R E A K

11:00 AM **Strategic Panel**

**Brand, Credibility and Influence:
Catholic Universities in the Public Sphere**

- 2a. Mission as Foundation
- 2b. Visibility as Expression
- 2c. Influence as Outcome

12:30 PM L U N C H B R E A K



1:30 PM **Workshops**

Best Practice Sessions
Learning from Experience

- 3a. Making Mission Visible:
Communicating Identity with Authenticity
- 3b. Building Communities of Purpose:
Engaging Students, Faculty and Partners
- 3c. From Reputation to Influence:
Strengthening the Public Voice of
Catholic Universities

3:30 PM C O F F E E B R E A K

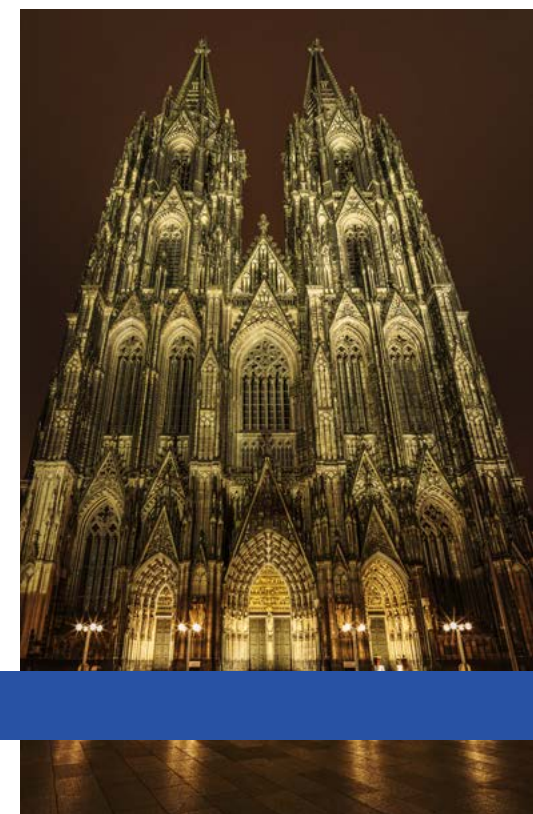
3:45 till **Collective Synthesis**

4:45 PM

From Many Voices to a Shared Vision

C U L T U R A L P R O G R A M M E

8:00 PM **Special Cathedral Tour at night**



9:00 AM **Celebration of the Eucharist**
at the Chapel of the katho

9:45 AM W E L C O M E

10:00 AM **Podium Discussion**

**Leading Change:
Catholic Universities Facing the Future**

11:30 AM C O F F E E B R E A K

11:45 AM **Closing Session**

Looking Ahead Together

12:30 PM E N D O F C O N F E R E N C E



MEET THE SPEAKERS

Prof. Dr. Hans Hobelsberger

is a theologian, educator and former Rector of the Katholische Hochschule Nordrhein-Westfalen (katho), one of Germany's largest universities of applied sciences in the fields of social work, health and education. Throughout his academic and institutional career, he has been deeply engaged in exploring the public mission of Catholic higher education, examining how universities contribute to social transformation, democratic life and the common good. Combining extensive leadership experience with scholarly reflection, he will invite participants to consider how Catholic universities can translate their mission into lasting credibility and meaningful influence in the public sphere.

Mtra. Maricarmen Díaz de Sandi Gómez

serves as Chief of the Rector's Office at the Universidad del Valle de Atemajac (UNIVA) in Guadalajara, Mexico. She coordinates the Communication Network of the Organization of Catholic Universities of Latin America and the Caribbean (ODUCAL), bringing together communication professionals from Catholic universities across the region to strengthen institutional identity, strategic communication and collaborative initiatives. A leading advocate of mission-driven communication, she has played a key role in promoting authentic narratives that reinforce the visibility, credibility and societal contribution of Catholic higher education.

Responding to the keynote, she will offer a Latin American perspective on how communication, networking and institutional cooperation enable Catholic universities to transform their mission into lasting public influence.



OPEN SPACE SESSION

These Open Spaces are designed as collaborative conversations where university leaders from around the world come together to share experiences, question assumptions and learn from one another.

Rather than offering ready-made solutions, they create an environment of openness, mutual trust and collective intelligence in which every participant brings a valuable perspective shaped by their own institutional and cultural context.

Across continents, Catholic universities face very different realities. Yet many of the questions they ask are remarkably similar. These conversations provide an opportunity to discover how institutions respond to common challenges in diverse ways, while building new relationships and strengthening the global community of Catholic higher education.

Each Open Space will explore one dimension of institutional visibility and identity:

- 1a. Differentiation and Positioning in a Secular Academic Landscape**
- 1b. Brand Voice and Communication Strategies**
- 1c. The Branding as the Expression of Institutional Identity**
- 1d. Attracting Value-Aligned Communities**
- 1e. Authenticity and Credibility in a Pluralistic Society**



**LEARNING FROM
ONE ANOTHER**

**SHARING PRACTICES
AND PERSPECTIVES**

Monday

The Strategic Panel brings together the central ideas explored throughout the congress and addresses a fundamental question: How does mission become influence?

Building on the reflections of the keynote, the discussion will explore how Catholic universities can move from institutional identity to meaningful public engagement by combining mission, authentic communication and societal commitment.

2a. Mission as Foundation

Catholic universities are distinguished by a mission rooted in human dignity, truth, solidarity and the integration of faith and reason. This mission provides the ethical and intellectual foundation of their identity.

2b. Visibility as Expression

Institutional communication, branding and storytelling should not create an artificial image, but reveal a coherent institutional reality. Visibility enables mission to become intelligible, credible and recognisable across diverse cultural and academic contexts.

2c. Influence as Outcome

When mission is authentically lived and effectively communicated, it generates credibility. This credibility enables Catholic universities to contribute to public dialogue, shape societal narratives, exercise intellectual leadership and serve the common good.



**BRAND, CREDIBILITY
AND INFLUENCE**

CATHOLIC UNIVERSITIES
IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE

Tuesday

The afternoon shifts from strategic reflection to practical inspiration. Through three parallel Best Practice Sessions, participants will discover concrete initiatives developed by Catholic universities around the world to strengthen institutional identity, communication and societal impact.

Rather than presenting models to be replicated, these sessions encourage participants to exchange experiences, discuss challenges and identify innovative approaches that can inspire action within different institutional and cultural contexts.

3a. Making Mission Visible: Communicating Identity with Authenticity

How can Catholic universities translate their mission into compelling institutional narratives, visual identity and communication strategies while remaining faithful to their educational vocation?

3b. Building Communities of Purpose: Engaging Students, Faculty and Partners

How can Catholic universities create communities that are inspired by their mission and foster a strong sense of belonging among students, faculty, alumni and institutional partners?

3c. From Reputation to Influence: Strengthening the Public Voice of Catholic Universities

How can Catholic universities become recognised contributors to public debate, build institutional credibility and increase their social and cultural impact?



BEST PRACTICE SESSIONS
LEARNING FROM
EXPERIENCE

Tuesday

PODIUM DISCUSSION

The concluding podium discussion looks beyond the conference itself. Rather than revisiting the themes already explored, it invites participants to reflect on the future of Catholic higher education and the strategic choices that lie ahead.

Understanding Change is not enough. The Challenge is to lead it together.

Drawing on the insights developed throughout the three days—from mission and institutional identity to visibility, credibility and public influence—the discussion will explore how Catholic universities can anticipate emerging challenges while remaining faithful to their educational mission.

Representing different continents, institutional cultures and leadership experiences, the speakers will offer complementary perspectives on the transformations that are already reshaping higher education: demographic change, digital transformation, artificial intelligence, geopolitical instability, new expectations from students and society, and the growing need for international cooperation.

The podium will bring together rectors, vice-rectors and other senior university leaders representing Catholic universities from different regions of the world. Together, they will share not only their institutional experience, but also their vision of the future and the strategic priorities that should guide Catholic universities over the coming decade.



INFOS + REGISTRATION

VENUE

Catholic University of Applied Sciences
Department Cologne
Wörthstraße 10, 50668 Köln, GERMANY

REGISTRATION

Fees: 300 Euro

For registration and more information:

wcu.academy

Registration deadline is 28th September 2026.

As the number of participants is limited,
we recommend early registration.

CONTACT

Should you have any questions on the IFCU Congress,
please do not hesitate to contact us:

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