IFCU
International Federation of Catholic Universities

katho
Katholische Hochschule Nordrhein-Westfalen
Catholic University of Applied Sciences

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 katho

Bernward Robrecht
Chancellor of katho

Dr. François Mabille
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

Mrs. Khrystyna Hapanovych, MSc
Director of a Strategic Communications Center, Ukrainian Catholic University

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. What Makes Us Different: Promote Innovation and Reimagine Academic Learning
Marvin Hackfort, Dr. des. Sabrina Marquardt, Pia Zimmermann (katho)

1b. Brand Voice and Communication Strategies
Jesica Paola Guerrero Hernandez (Universidad Mesoamericana de Guatemala)

1c. Sustainability as Part of a University's Identity: A Whole-Institution Framework
Dr. Nils Großmann, Dominik Schneider (katho)

1d. Attracting Value-Aligned Communities
Yazan Al-Zubaidy, M.A. (Bethlehem University, Palestine), Kofi Amegashie (St Mary's University, Twickenham)

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 at German Brewery**

9:00 AM W E L C O M E

9:30 AM **Opening Keynote**

From Mission to Influence: Catholic Universities in Global Public Spaces

Prof. Dr. Hans Hobelsberger
Theologian, Professor and former Rector of 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
Prof. Martin Osita Anagboso (Executive Vice-Chancellor, Madonna University, Nigeria)

2b. Visibility as Expression
Suzana Obrovac (PR Manager, Catholic University of Croatia)

2c. Influence as Outcome:
"CUZ & katho - Joint (Blended) learning on Sex Education & Social Work"
Prof. Dr. Karla Verlinden (katho)

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

1:30 PM **Workshops**

Best Practice Sessions
Learning from Experience

3a. The Role of Catholic Universities in Times of Social and Political Polarization and De-Democratization
Prof. Dr. Norbert Frieters-Reermann (katho)

3b. Catholic Universities in a Secular Society. Social-Theoretical and Historical Remarks on the Intersection of Academia and Religion
Prof. Dr. Marc Breuer (katho)

3c. From Reputation to Influence: Strengthening the Public Voice of Catholic Universities
Ing. Mario Alfredo Ochoa (Secretary for Planning at UCASAL)

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

3:45 till 4:45 PM **Collective Synthesis**
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 katho

9:45 AM W E L C O M E

10:00 AM **Podium Discussion**

Leading Change:
Catholic Universities Facing the Future

Prof. Dr. Markéta Rusnáková
Vice-Rector, Catholic University of Ruzomberok

Prof. Benny Munyaradzi Nyambo
Vice-Chancellor, Catholic University of Zimbabwe

Prof. Álvaro Barbosa
Vice-Rector, University of Saint Joseph in Macao

Claudia Merino Calzadillas
Strategic Communications Projects & Planning Coordinator, Universidad Francisco de Vitoria in Madrid

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

11:45 AM **Closing Session**

Looking Ahead Together

Bernward Robrecht
Chancellor of katho

Loïc Roche
Head of Communication and Strategy of IFCU

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

MEET THE SPEAKERS

Mrs. Khrystyna Hapanovych, MSc

serves as the Director of the Strategic Communications Center at Ukrainian Catholic University. Khrystyna has a master's degree in economics and several professional credentials in complexity management, design thinking, digital marketing, and asymmetric competition. She combines deep expertise in integrated marketing, university communications and brand management with a focus on Catholic higher education specifics and broad community development. Khrystyna's presentation will deliver insights into a rigorous analytical framework on the brand positioning of UCU, as well as into the university's methodology on translating institutional values into a cohesive visual and narrative identity that elevates academic reputation globally.

Prof. Dr. Hans Hobelsberger

is a theologian, educator and former Rector of Catholic University of Applied Sciences North Rhine-Westphalia (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 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

Monday

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. What Makes Us Different: Promote Innovation and Reimagine Academic Learning
Marvin Hackfort, Dr. des. Sabrina Marquardt, Pia Zimmermann
(Digital Learning and Services Center, katho)

1b. Brand Voice and Communication Strategies
Jesica Paola Guerrero Hernandez (Communication and Audiovisual Production, Universidad Mesoamericana de Guatemala)

1c. Sustainability as Part of a University's Identity: A Whole-Institution Framework
Dr. Nils Großmann (Research and Knowledge Transfer, katho)
Dominik Schneider (Sustainability Management, katho)

1d. Attracting Value-Aligned Communities
Yazan Al-Zubaidy, M.A. (Director of Marketing and Communications, Bethlehem University, Palestine)
Kofi Amegashie (Senior Lecturer in Business Management, St Mary's University, Twickenham)

STRATEGIC PANEL

BRAND, CREDIBILITY AND INFLUENCE

CATHOLIC UNIVERSITIES IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE

Tuesday

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

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
Prof. Martin Osita Anagboso (Executive Vice-Chancellor, Madonna University, Nigeria)

2b. Visibility as Expression
Suzana Obrovac (PR Manager, Catholic University of Croatia)

2c. Influence as Outcome
"CUZ & katho – Joint (Blended) learning on Sex Education & Social Work"
Prof. Dr. Karla Verlinden (katho)

WORKSHOPS

BEST PRACTICE SESSIONS

LEARNING FROM EXPERIENCE

Tuesday

The afternoon shifts from strategic reflection to practical inspiration. During 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. The Role of Catholic Universities in Times of Social and Political Polarization and De-Democratization
Prof. Dr. Norbert Frieters-Reermann (katho)

3b. Catholic Universities in a Secular Society. Social-Theoretical and Historical Remarks on the Intersection of Academia and Religion
Prof. Dr. Marc Breuer (katho)

3c. From Reputation to Influence: Strengthening the Public Voice of Catholic Universities
Ing. Mario Alfredo Ochoa (Secretary for Planning at UCASAL)

PODIUM DISCUSSION

LEADING CHANGE

CATHOLIC UNIVERSITIES FACING THE FUTURE

Wednesday

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 past 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.

Prof. Dr. Markéta Rusnáková
Vice-Rector, Catholic University of Ruzomberok

Prof. Benny Munyaradzi Nyambo
Vice-Chancellor, Catholic University of Zimbabwe

Prof. Álvaro Barbosa
Vice-Rector, University of Saint Joseph in Macao

Claudia Merino Calzadillas
Strategic Communications Projects & Planning Coordinator, Universidad Francisco de Vitoria in Madrid

INFOS + REGISTRATION

VENUE

Catholic University of Applied Sciences
of North Rhine-Westphalia | Department Cologne
Wörthstraße 10, 50668 Köln, GERMANY

REGISTRATION

Fee: 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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