

SABEL CAPELOA GIL HAS A BIRD'S EYE VIEW ON THE roles of both women in leadership and values in the business community. As the first woman to be named President of the International Federation of Catholic Universities (IFCU), Dr. Gil shines a light on the work of women throughout the organization, a global group of self-defined institutions that share the Catholic faith as a cornerstone.

She is also the second woman to ever serve as Rector of Portugal's Catolica University, home to one of the top business schools in Europe, ranked No. 1 in Portugal by the Financial Times. Dr. Gil is a full Professor of Culture Studies at Catolica and sits on the boards of the European Council of Foreign Relations, Pope Francis' Committee for Education in Rome and the Danish Institute of Research. Raised in Macao, China, she is a passionate advocate of international education and humanistic values and is the author of over 140 publications in six languages.

She spoke to us about multiculturalism, the roles of women and religion in leadership, and the need for ethics in the business world.

**How does it feel to be the first woman leader at the helm of the IFCU?**

It's an impressive step for the organization. Since the Federation was founded in 1924, women involved in governing were very scarce. Yet the first time a woman stood up as candidate for the presidency, she was elected with 65 percent of the vote—remarkable in a society as geographically, culturally and historically diverse as catholic universities. There are 1,100 Catholic universities around the world, IFCU membership stands at 250 across all regions. The concept of the Catholic University does not exist *per se*, in part because Catholic universities are founded by dioceses, lay Catholics or are completely independent. Also, the question of autonomy is central to the work of universities and the federation itself.

A woman president makes a difference, first and foremost in the attention to female leadership and the sponsoring of the support for other women leaders. I hire and mentor other young women leaders in academic institutions and also in the corporate world, to provide visibility to the great work other women leaders do.

**Are there more opportunities for women in Catholic universities than in the church at large?**

Yes, certainly. The church is an all-male club. I don't think it will remain as such. This Pontiff is very aware of the role of women, their dignity, and acknowledging the role that women can and should play.

**ISABEL GIL,** the first woman President of the International Federation of Catholic Universities, sees education and religion as twin forces driving ethical leadership. Brunswick's **ALEXANDRA ABREU LOUREIRO** reports.



# FAITH IN BUSINESS

**You were the first non-American in 143 years to speak at commencement at Boston College.**

**What was your message for those young people?**

First, the most difficult experience of growth, both in personal and professional life, is the experience of difference—to acknowledge those who act differently than yourself, to understand that difference is what allows you to become a whole person and grow. Respecting that difference is essential.

Second, I believe it is very important for institutions—Catholic universities to be sure, but all universities—to stand up against the abuse of human rights. They effectively shape the future and must raise awareness of the great challenges—climate

change, and the future of work, for instance—and to prepare this generation for a future that direly needs sound values and ethics.

Third, I urged them to acknowledge the role of women leaders and opportunities for more women to lead. We still have a glass ceiling not limited by law but by behavior—this is what we need to change.

**Do Catholic universities have a role to play in responding to abuses in power in government?**

It is part of our mission to deliver on our values out of the moral ground in which we grow—so I think we have no other choice but to act. If we don't live up to these values, we are not honoring our mission.

**You are the second female Rector of Portugal's Catolica University—only the second woman in six decades. How do you approach training business leaders there?**

Being the second woman is very important because it shows consistency. It says something about Catolica University—that it is forward looking, that it doesn't fear female leadership.

Ethics needs to cut across all courses taught in our programs. Ethics shape the way we teach finance, international management and corporate responsibility. We believe that we as educators have a role to play in shaping an economic model to create wealth but also to create more cohesive societies and fight inequality.

PHOTOGRAPH: COURTESY OF BOSTON COLLEGE

In 2019, Isabel Gil gave the commencement address at Boston College, the first non-American to be invited to do so in the school's 143-year history.

**Do you believe that, in general, religion can make a difference on leadership?**

Religion should be a force for good—and not a force for partisanship. In that sense, religion allows us to think of our role as instrumental to the development of others. This is about fighting individualism and egotism, values that have led to catastrophes, notably in the last financial crisis. We have to fight the use of religion for radical partisan purposes. That is not what religions are about.

**You are launching a new medical school at Catolica. Could you tell us about that?**

It is an international project—the first private medical school in Portugal, in partnership with the University of Maastricht in the Netherlands and Portugal's largest health provider, Luz Saude. The model is based on problem-based learning, to give students the tools to learn continuously. Learn to learn. Medicine is changing, not simply by tech tools that are now part and parcel in medical practice but also because science is changing very rapidly. If there is one profession that will never be done learning, it is medicine. We want to instill that in our students: Their education will never be fully done.

**You were raised in Macao, China. How important is that experience to your work now?**

Multiculturalism, an experience of cultures other than the one you are born in, is extremely important.

The multicultural environment I grew up in led me to understand that mine was one more perspective among many, in a context where the dominant culture was not my own. Other perspectives weren't necessarily worse than mine—just different. Even those that were radically different had a point of engagement with my own. To learn to build bridges, to understand what is radically different, was instrumental and led me to decide to pursue the area of Humanities, where that plurality of visions most lies.

**When you look back in three years, what would have you liked to have achieved?**

At Catolica University, to have developed education in a new campus and a landmark project in medicine with the new med school. With IFCU, to be able to cater to the different needs of my constituents and succeed in leading a strategy supporting the work of African universities, the rising continent.

**A personal dream?**

Susan Sontag once said, "I haven't been everywhere, but it is on my list." ♦

**ALEXANDRA ABREU LOUREIRO** is a Partner in the London office and heads Brunswick's senior advisory in Portugal. She was formerly an award-winning broadcast journalist and served as Head of Communications in the Portuguese government.