

EDUCATING TODAY AND TOMORROW: A RENEWING PASSION



CONGREGATION FOR CATHOLIC EDUCATION (for Educational Institutions)

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Ch. 3: CURRENT AND FUTURE EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGES

At the heart of Catholic education there is always Jesus Christ: everything that happens in Catholic schools and universities should lead to an encounter with the living Christ. If we look at the great educational challenges that we will face soon, we must keep the memory of God made flesh in the history of mankind – in our history – alive.

Catholic schools and universities, as subjects in the contemporary Church, are a place of testimony and acceptance, where faith and spiritual accompaniment can be provided to young people who ask for it; they open their doors to all and uphold both human dignity, as well as the dissemination of knowledge, to the whole of society, irrespective of merit.

First and foremost, they are places where the transmission of knowledge is key; however, knowledge too has undergone major changes that are affecting our educational approach. As a matter of fact, we are witnessing a remarkable differentiation, privatization and even expropriation of knowledge.

Schools and universities are also living environments, where an integral education is provided, that includes religious formation. The challenge will be to make young people realize the beauty of faith in Jesus Christ and of religious freedom in a multireligious universe. In every environment, whether it is favorable or not, Catholic educators will have to be credible witnesses.

People who work with faith, passion and professionalism cannot be forgotten; they deserve all our attention and encouragement. We should not also forget that, for the most part, this educational mission and professional commitment are principally sustained by women.

First of all, we must express the anthropology underpinning our educational vision for the 21st century in different terms: it is a philosophical anthropology that must also be an anthropology of truth, i.e. a social anthropology whereby man is seen in his relations and way of being; an anthropology of recollection and promise; an anthropology that refers to the cosmos and cares about sustainable development; and, even more, an anthropology that refers to God. The gaze of faith and hope, which is its foundation, looks at reality to discover God's plan hidden therein. Thus, starting from a profound reflection on modern man and the contemporary world, we must redefine our vision regarding education.

The young people we are educating today will become the leaders of the 2050s. What will religion's contribution be to educating younger generations to peace, development, fraternity in the universal human community? How are we going to educate them to faith and in faith? How will we establish the

preliminary conditions to accept this gift, to educate them to gratitude, to a sense of awe, to asking themselves questions, to develop a sense of justice and consistency? How will we educate them to prayer?

Education requires a strong alliance between parents and educators to present a life that is good, rich in meaning, open to God and others as well as the world; this alliance is even more necessary, since education is a personal relationship. It is a journey that reveals the transcendental elements of faith, family, Church and ethics, highlighting their communal character.

Education is not just knowledge, but also experience: it links together knowledge and action; it works to achieve unity amongst different forms of knowledge and pursues consistency. It encompasses the affective and emotional domains, and is also endowed with an ethical dimension: knowing how to do things and what we want to do, daring to change society and the world, and serving the community.

Education is based on participation, shared intelligence and intelligence interdependence; dialogue, self-giving, example, cooperation and reciprocity are also equally important elements.

Challenges for Catholic Schools

Nowadays education is going through rapid changes. The generation to which it is addressed is changing quickly as well, therefore each educator must constantly face a situation which, as Pope Francis put it, “provides us with new challenges which sometimes are difficult for us to understand.”^[5]

At the heart of the global changes we are called upon to embrace, love, decipher and evangelize, Catholic education must contribute to the discovery of life’s meaning and elicit new hopes for today and the future.

a) The Challenge of Identity

The redefinition of Catholic schools’ identity for the 21st century is an urgent task. Going back to the documents issued by the Congregation for Catholic Education^[6] can be quite helpful in this respect, together with the experience that has been made over time in Catholic teaching, both in diocesan and congregational schools. This experience is supported by three pillars: Gospel tradition, authority and freedom.

Contemporary educators have a renewed mission, which has the ambitious aim of offering young people an integral education as well as assistance in discovering their personal freedom, which is a gift from God.

Spiritual poverty and declining cultural levels are starting to produce their dismal effects, even within Catholic schools. Often times, authoritativeness is being undermined. It is really not a matter of discipline – parents greatly appreciate Catholic schools because of their discipline – but do some Catholic school heads still have anything to say to students and their families? Is their authority based on formal rules or on the authoritativeness of their testimony? If we want to avert a gradual impoverishment, Catholic schools must be run by individuals and teams who are inspired by the Gospel, who have been formed in Christian pedagogy, in tune with Catholic schools’ educational project, and not by people who are prone to being seduced by fashionability, or by what can become an easier sell, to put it bluntly.

Many Catholic school students belong to a multiplicity of cultures, therefore our institutions must proclaim the Gospel beyond believers, not only with words, but through the power of our educators’ lives, which must be consistent with the Gospel. Teachers, school heads, administrative staff: the whole professional and educational community is called upon to present faith as an attractive option,

with a humble and supportive attitude. The model is provided by Jesus Christ and his disciples in Emmaus: we must start from young people's life experience but also from that of co-workers, to provide an unconditional service. Actually, educating young people to serve and give themselves freely is one of the hallmarks of Catholic schools, in the past as well as the future.

b) The Challenge for School Communities

If we think about our societies' rampant individualism, we realize how important it is for Catholic schools to be true living communities that are animated by the Holy Spirit. The friendly and welcoming ambiance that is established by teachers who are believers – who sometimes are the minority – together with the common engagement of all those who have educational responsibilities, irrespective of their beliefs or convictions, might allow students to overcome moments of loss or discouragement and open new prospects of evangelical hope. The complex network of interpersonal relations is schools' real strength, when it expresses love of truth, and teachers who are also believers must be supported, so that they might provide the leaven and benevolent power to edify the community.

In order for this to happen, a particular attention must be devoted to the formation and selection of school heads. They are not only in charge of their respective schools, but are also Bishops' reference persons inside schools in matters of pastoral care. School heads must be leaders who make sure that education is a shared and living mission, who support and organize teachers, who promote mutual encouragement and assistance.

Another challenging terrain for Catholic schools is relations with families, many of which are going through a deep crisis and need support, solidarity, involvement and even formation.

Teachers, parents and school heads – together with students – make up a broad educational community that is called upon to work together with Church institutions. Lifelong learning must focus on the promotion of a just community based on solidarity, that is sensitive to individual needs and is able to systematically help poorer students and families.

c) The Challenge of Dialogue

The world, in all its diversity, is eager to be guided towards the great values of mankind, truth, good and beauty; now more than ever. This is the approach Catholic schools should have towards young people, through dialogue, in order to present them with a view regarding the Other and others that is open, peaceful and enticing.

Sometimes, when relating to young people, asymmetry creates a distance between educators and learners. Today, the circular character of communication between teachers and students is being appreciated a lot more: its greater openness is remarkably more favorable to mutual listening. This does not mean that adults must relinquish their role as authority figures, but a differentiation must be introduced between the kind of authority that is only linked to a specific role or institutional function, and the authority that comes from credible testimony.

Schools are communities that learn how to improve, thanks to constant dialogue among educators, between teachers and their students and amongst students in their relations.

d) The Challenge of a Learning Society

However, we should not forget that learning does not take place exclusively within schools: in the current context, which is strongly characterized by the pervasiveness of new technological languages and new opportunities for informal learning, schools have lost their traditional educational primacy. Our contemporary age has been defined as the age of knowledge. Today, people talk about the



knowledge-based economy. On the one hand, young people are required to achieve unprecedented learning levels and abilities, on the other hand, schools have to deal with scenarios where information is more broadly available, in massive and uncontrollable amounts. Some degree of humbleness is necessary when considering what schools are able to do in times like these, when social networks are becoming more important, and learning opportunities outside of schools are increasingly widespread and impactful. Since schools are no longer the only learning environment for young people, and not even the most important one, and virtual communities are acquiring a remarkable importance, schooling must face a new challenge: that is, helping students develop the necessary critical tools to avoid being dominated by the power of new media.

e) The Challenge of Integral Education

Educating is a lot more than just instructing people. The European Union, OECD and World Bank highlight instrumental reason and competitiveness and have a merely functional view of education, as if it were legitimized only if it served the market economy and the labor market: all this strongly reduces the educational content of many international documents, something that we see reflected also in several texts issued by education ministries. Schools should not yield to this technocratic and economic rationale, even if they are exposed to outside forces as well as market attempts to use them instrumentally, even more so in the case of Catholic schools. We do not mean in any way to belittle the demands of the economy or unemployment's seriousness, but students need to be respected as integral persons and be helped to develop a multiplicity of skills that enrich the human person, such as creativity, imagination, the ability to take on responsibilities, to love the world, to cherish justice and compassion.

Proposing an integral education, in a society that is changing so quickly, requires a constant reflection that is able to renew it and make it increasingly rich quality-wise. Anyhow, there is a clear stance that must be taken: the kind of education that is promoted by Catholic schools is not aimed at establishing an elitist meritocracy; the pursuit of quality and excellence is indeed important, but we should never forget that students have very specific needs: they are often going through difficult circumstances, and deserve a pedagogical attention that takes their needs into account. Therefore, Catholic schools must engage in high-level global debates about inclusive education^[7] to provide the benefit of their experience and educational vision.

An increasing number of students have been wounded during their childhood. Poor school performance is rising and requires a preventive kind of education, as well as specific training for teachers.

Nowadays, school systems are asked to promote skill development, and not just to convey knowledge; the skill paradigm, interpreted according to a humanistic vision, goes beyond the mere acquisition of knowledge or abilities: it involves the development of students' total personal resources, establishing a meaningful bond between school and life. It is important for schooling to enhance not only skills that are related to knowing and knowing how to do things, but also skills that apply to living alongside others and growing as human beings. These are reflective skills, for instance, by which we are responsible for our actions, or intercultural, decision-making, citizenship skills, that are becoming increasingly important in our globalized world and affect us directly, as is the case with skills related to consciousness, critical thinking and creative and transforming action.

f) The Challenge of Limited Means and Resources

Schools that are not subsidized by States are facing increasing financial difficulties to provide their services to the poorest students, at a time of dire economic crisis, when the choice to introduce new

technologies becomes inevitable and costly. All schools, whether they are subsidized or not, must deal with increasing social divisions due to the economic crisis. Of course, this situation mandates diversified pedagogical approaches that are addressed to everyone; but this choice requires financial resources, in order to be feasible, as well as human resources, namely well trained teachers and leaders. Undoubtedly, missionary openness towards new forms of poverty must not only be safeguarded, but also further stimulated.

Teaching is not simply a job but a vocation that we must encourage. Nowadays, teachers have to deal with an increasing number of tasks. Some countries are having problems in finding school heads and teachers for specific subjects: many young people would rather work for businesses, hoping to receive a higher salary. Plus, teachers are not valued by society as they used to be, and their job has become more cumbersome because of increasing administrative duties. This leads many school heads to look for volunteers. The challenge will be for them to keep motivating and encouraging volunteers in their unconditional gift.

g) Pastoral Challenges

A growing number of young people are drifting away from the institutional Church. Religious ignorance or illiteracy are rising. Catholic education is an unglamorous mission. How can students be educated to exercise their freedom of conscience and take a stance in the immense domain of values and beliefs in a globalized society?

In many countries, Catholic schools do not receive adequate pastoral guidance in the multireligious context they are supposed to evangelize.

As far as educators are concerned, “deculturation” is limiting their knowledge of cultural heritage. Easy access to information, which nowadays is broadly available, when it is not selected with critical awareness, ultimately favors widespread superficiality among both students and teachers, not only impoverishing reason, but also imagination and creative thinking.

The number of educators and teachers who are *believers* is shrinking, hence making Christian testimony more rare. How can a bond with Jesus Christ be established in this new educational context?

In some Bishops’ Conferences, Catholic teaching is not considered as a pastoral priority. But once the crisis hits, parishes realize that Catholic schools are often the only places where young people encounter the bearers of Good News. In many instances, these schools have become open to cultural and religious pluralism and, in some countries, priests and religious men and women are not present there. This is an unprecedented situation, which requires the presence of committed lay people, who are well prepared and willing to engage in a very demanding task. In many cases, this awareness has led many lay Catholics to organize their action but, quite often, their commitment is also characterized by diffidence towards the institutional Church, who has become uninterested in Catholic schools. Hence, one of the major challenges for some Bishops’ Conferences will be to urgently redefine their relations with the laity, in order to cater to the Gospel’s proclamation. Bishops must urgently rediscover how, among different modes of evangelization, an important place must be given to the religious formation of new generations, and schools are a precious instrument for this service.

h) The Challenge of Religious Formation for Young People

In a number of countries, Catholic religion courses have been threatened and risk disappearing from syllabi. Since religion courses fall under the responsibility of Bishops, it is extremely important to always remember that this teaching cannot be neglected, although it should constantly be renewed.

Religion courses require an in-depth knowledge of young people's real needs, because this will provide the foundation on which the proclamation can be built, although the difference between "knowing" and "believing" must be respected.

Since, in many countries, the population of Catholic schools is characterized by a multiplicity of cultures and beliefs, religious formation in schools must be based on the awareness of the existing pluralism and constantly be able to be meaningful in contemporary society. This scenario is extremely diversified, therefore religion cannot be taught in the same way everywhere: in some situations, religion classes can provide the occasion where the Gospel is proclaimed for the first time; in other circumstances, educators will provide students the opportunity to experience interiority and prayer, prepare for the sacraments, and invite them to engage in youth movements or social service activities.

Since international organizations are dealing with religious matters increasingly often, it will be important for Bishops' Conferences to put forward their own proposals about religion courses that are able to provide knowledge and critical learning concerning all religions in our society. And they should also be able to clearly differentiate between the specificity of religion courses and others dedicated to responsible citizenship. Otherwise, governments will come up with their own agenda to educate free citizens, who are able to be supportive, compassionate and responsible, without the contribution of Christian and Catholic views in school syllabi.

i) Specific Challenges for Multireligious and Multicultural Societies

The multiculturalism and multireligiosity of Catholic school students are a challenge for all people who have educational responsibilities. When schools' identities are weakened, several problems arise, due to the inability to deal with new situations. The answer cannot be to seek shelter in indifference, nor to adopt a kind of Christian fundamentalism, nor – lastly – to define Catholic schools as schools that support "generic" values.

Hence, one of the most important challenges will be to foster a greater cultural openness amongst teachers and, at the same time, an equally greater willingness to act as witnesses, so that they are aware and careful about their school's peculiar context in their work, without being lukewarm or extremist, teaching what they know and testifying to what they believe in. In order for teachers to interpret their profession in this way, they must be formed to engage in the dialogue between faith and cultures and between different religions.: there cannot be any real dialogue if educators themselves have not been formed and helped to deepen their faith and personal beliefs.

Promoting cooperation among students of different religious persuasions in civil service initiatives is an opportunity that should not be underestimated, where learning contexts are pluralistic. Would it not be wonderful if, as a minimum, all Catholic schools provided their students with opportunities to engage in civil service, accompanied by their teachers or, perhaps, their parents?

j) The Challenge of Teachers' Lifelong Training

In this kind of cultural context, teacher training becomes essential and requires rigour and depth; without this, their teaching would be considered as not credible, unreliable and, therefore, unnecessary. This kind of training is urgent, if we want to rely on teachers who are committed to and concerned with our Educational Project's evangelical identity and its implementation in the future. It would not be advisable to have a "double population" of teachers in Catholic schools: what is needed, instead, is unity among the teachers, who together are willing to embrace and share a specific evangelical identity, as well as a consistent lifestyle.