

Before the Extreme Anthropological Dryness, Intercultural Dialogue as a ‘Thirst-Quenching Water Spring’.

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Introduction

I congratulate all of you, who come from different European countries to reflect together on Catholic education. This is actually a very important mission.

I propose a short reflection on two questions. The first question is the following: in our present time, in the culture in which we are immersed, should there be a place for religion and Catholic education, or is it something that belongs to the past, to the ancient times, totally old fashioned? Should there be a place for religion in today’s culture?

The second question is: should the Catholic school be more than a school or a different school, rooting its difference in its foundation in Jesus Christ? What does it mean to be a Catholic school? Is it something more than the “air we breathe” or getting a good place in rankings?

A Time of Extreme Anthropological Dryness

In December 2013, the Congregation for Catholic Education published an orientation document titled: *“Educating to Intercultural Dialogue in Catholic Schools. Living in Harmony for a Civilization of Love”*. This is definitely a pertinent, topical and very demanding proposal, which challenges the Catholic schools all over the world.

There are today about 58 million pupils in Catholic schools, in many places of the Earth. Their action is of a huge importance and their responsibility is not negligible if we consider the specificity of their mission.

In Portugal, there is no substantial presence – as in France or Germany – of populations coming from other continents, other cultures and beliefs. Catholics are still the majority and within the Catholic schools, which welcome about 9% of the Portuguese pupils in primary and secondary education, there is not yet much diversity of religion. However, the diversity of cultures and the important social inequalities that exist in this small country are a major challenge for education, and particularly for Catholic schools. About 25% of young people do not complete secondary education (twelve years of schooling), which is an obstacle to social democratization and equal opportunities.

The question of cultural diversity within school education is, however, broader and deeper.

We need to be clear and speak without fear: we experience in Europe a cultural climate in which one seeks to eliminate from the dominant culture, and thus from the public space, any transcendental dimension, any relevance of the reference to the profound human issues on life and death, on their sense, on good and evil, preventing in that way any public religious expression (relegating all this to the private sphere, without the need or opportunity for public expression).

However, we know that religious experiences have a huge value within cultures, as a nest or a source where are lived and from which emanate the deepest concerns of man, helping human beings to understand themselves and each other, to learn to respect each other and live together in peace.

Questions like: Who am I? What is the meaning of my life? How can I deal with the disorientation in which we live? Why so many evil and its apparent triumph in so many wars and attacks, from Syria to Kenya, from the attacks in New York and those in Paris, from Crimea to Afghanistan. Why?

In Portugal, the Catholic cultural tradition has contributed to influence positively the history of the country and the choices of Portuguese people, infusing them with important humanist values like the promotion of the common good, solidarity and dignity of any human being.

Our present time is no longer a time of “dependence” between Church and State or a time of “Christianity”.

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For the last three centuries, we have been witnessing a progressive and positive separation between the Church and the State, and an increasing secularisation of cultures. But it is also true that from “laicity” – a principle achieved through many cultural efforts and throughout several centuries – one often evolves today toward “laicism”, that is to say toward a cultural environment in which there is no place for a religious dimension of life, in which one stimulates confrontation and ideological “guerrilla” and in which there is a divide based on cultural differences, in which an extreme anthropological dryness of social and political proposals is increasing, in which one promotes a human and social dialogue focussed on the superfluous and the spectacular, a culture that loses its reference to the meaning of life and what unites us as human beings, human beings who anxiously seek to live together and in peace.

This dryness goes with the investments, more and more neuralgic, of scientific research or large multinational companies related to communication and information technology, concerning the automation of all social activity and a lot of human activities, seeking to overcome all the shortcomings, all the faults, failures, diseases, and even death. This is what some people call “*transhumanism*”, this cultural and intellectual movement through which people seek, from technology and especially automation, immortality. This dryness is also caused by the adoption of economic development models based on the exploitation of the poorest and defenceless, and the insatiable pursuit of profit, as if it were the most important social and human values. Before this dryness, it is urgent to become aware of the inestimable value of education and in particular the Catholic school, because it is urgent that we perceive it as a spring, a well where we can go to drink and quench largely our thirst. Beside and within a lot of corruption and misery, there are also a lot of life and hope, because the Holy Spirit is continually working, sowing the seeds of love, hope and joy.

Intercultural Dialogue and Catholic Education

It is around these same reasons that religious education has an important place in our societies, to the extent that education has the responsibility to make people “*aware of their own roots and provide points of reference which allow them to define their own personal place in the world*” (John Paul II, “Dialogue between Cultures for a Civilization of Love and Peace”, message for the celebration of the World Day of Peace, 2001, n° 20). The human being, every child, every young person in our schools must not only be deeply respected in the “search for the truth of its own person”, but also be supported by parents and teachers in order to be capable to grow and develop (to reveal its unique and irreplaceable nature) in its fullness, and unique and eternal truth, with its own vocation and capable to reveal, in its own way, its Creator. Intercultural dialogue is one of the important pillars of education: in our schools, one can and must grow either in knowledge or in attitudes and behaviours that promote the emergence of a deep spirit of humanity that inhabits us, revealing itself in all its splendour, in other words in the multiple dimensions, expressions, signs and symbols, space and time.

“*Culture is specific way of man's “existing” and “being”*” (John Paul II, Address to UNESCO, 1980, n° 6): if we give up on this manifestation of the humanity of the human beings who are our pupils, we cut these human beings from the possibility to be actually, rejecting their culture and transforming them in people withdrawn to themselves, condemning them to individualism, making them be real and effective consumers in a profoundly unjust economy. Consumers from the beginning of a “dominant culture” and the “politically correct”, passive buyers (preferably while sitting in a chair) of a culture that is foreign to the human being, disseminated by the media and practiced in zapping, a culture that has no place for us, but that we have learned to consume in spite of ourselves, giving up on each of us and our human richness.

The human being is essentially a relational being, which only reveals itself in the encounter and only shows what it is made of in the relationship, starting with the relationship with parents and teachers. It is love that makes us loved persons and, consequently, persons ready to love; we fulfil ourselves through love and in fraternity, which only makes sense if it is a universal fraternity involving every human being, referring all to a same Father. Love is the method and goal of life itself (Congregation for Catholic education, “*Educating to Intercultural Dialogue in Catholic Schools. Living in Harmony for a Civilization of Love*”, 2013, n° 41).

Schools are cultural environments in which there are people who grow with the right and duty to grow “in wisdom and in grace” and not environments where cultures fight or barely tolerate each other, even if, in politically correct terms, we practice “tolerance”.

I make here a short remark:

Be careful about the tolerance that you are taught: often it is only an “elegant” way for someone to move forward remaining retreated into its own world, without communication, in indifference and lack of love.

In fact, as D. António Couto says, if the practice of freedom would consist in “not causing injury”, not harming others, then it would be enough that everyone refrain from doing anything to comply with this policy for life. However, this same form of life “*is easy to practice: I don’t care much about others*”. As a Portuguese bishop says: “*it is urgent to replace the old conventional and mind-numbing aphorism “my freedom ends where yours begins” by this implicative and still disturbing adage “my freedom begins where yours begins. (...) Our freedom (in truth) is much more than that: it is the freedom to choose to do the good. It is a freedom which implies the other, so it is to the other, starting with the most vulnerable, the voiceless, those who have fallen on the road, that my freedom is addressed. There is no other freedom that is truly human.*”

The cult of tolerance can mean the cult of the lack of love. For not harming others, for tolerating them in their huge diversity, but not just for loving them, all we would have to do is staying withdrawn to ourselves, focused on ourselves and those who are our equals. This is what the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman calls the “community of equals”, a world closed on small communities of people equal to each other. When we go on our way and when, like the Samaritan, we get involved with others; this is the beginning of our freedom and joy!

In truth, the human person, every human person, is at the heart of education, and education aims at the full development of the person in a cultural environment of understanding of differences, recognition of the other’s point of view in the respect of the different moral orders, in the context of equality and freedom of each and every human being; the school must always promote the good of everyone, a community in search of the common good (the good of each and of all).

Should Education in Catholic Schools be a Different Education?

Love, in the light of mystery of the trinity of God, is the strongest cement of education. (And this, we do not dare to say it, especially in the public space. Talking about education as an act of love is something strange in the public discourse. When I tell people that education is an act of love, they sometimes consider me “a little bit crazy” because for many people, what is important in education is to prepare to become a productive citizen and to face the challenges of economy; why then talk about love?) Not only a love that encourages us to respect others and promote their growth but also, and above all, a love as a present, free, as a gift, received and given (Congregation for Catholic Education, “*Educating to Intercultural Dialogue in Catholic Schools. Living in Harmony for a Civilization of Love*”, 2013, n° 47).

The first ones to spread love in the school should be the educator and the headteacher, creating a stimulating environment for human development of each and every pupil.

Similarly, the Catholic school must be a witness, avoiding like that the way leading to competition and continuous rivalry, which then extend to the rest of life and in a broader (and more deteriorated) social context.

In this context, Catholic schools have a very particular responsibility. They can and must contribute very specifically to this intercultural dialogue, in different ways and according to the contexts; but always making sure not to lose, under various pretexts, the reasons for their existence and their Christian inspiration.

I work with many schools, State schools and private ones, denominational or not. Catholic schools in their majority are similar to other schools. Their “Catholic” inspiration is a bit lost either in the name of the institution or in the “air we breathe in”, or in any crucifix hanging on the walls. Moreover, they practice a teaching model, included in an educational and pedagogical model that follows the more or less acephalous programme of any State school (which, in Portugal, by constitutional obligation, may not organise the teaching of any philosophy, ethics or religion).

In fact, Catholic schools are sliding with a relative ease to indifference, for very obvious reasons: the imposition by the State of norms and rules, the need to respect them in an exemplary manner, impositions to families... In addition, having been created as Catholic schools and managed by their founders to welcome and educate the poorest, they completely lose this foundation today and turn into extremely elitist schools, a model toward which they have been “pushed”, so as they say, by the social research of quality education. The problem, ultimately, is not the existence of these schools, but the fact that there are Catholic schools that get lost in terms of identity, seeking for “results” built without regard to the values of Christian humanism and evangelical charity.

In such a consumerist and uncritical cultural context, where religion trends to be banished from the public space, in societies regulated by competition and individualism, educational projects inspired by the Gospel need to assert themselves especially by their identity. The Catholic school must be a clear and unequivocal witness, inside and outside, of the missionary Christian presence in today’s reality, a reality full of small signs of hope, starting with the availability of our pupils for love as a gift and active solidarity.

A Catholic school is a dialogal educational institution, open to plurality and differences, which welcomes everyone and promotes each to the maximum of its “capabilities”, thus we can say that “*Catholic schools are, by their very vocation, intercultural*” (Congregation for Catholic Education, “*Educating to Intercultural Dialogue in Catholic Schools. Living in Harmony for a Civilization of Love*”, 2013, n° 61). The horizon in which this dialogue is developed in the Catholic schools consists in a valuation of alterity – the other and its culture, humanity and the richness of its diversity, the world and its heterogeneity – as the best way for the rediscovery and harmonious development of the identity. This horizon can be very stimulating for a school culture that values critical capacity and self-criticism, as well as responsibility, civic participation and commitment to others, educational activities that imply commitment to the poorest and most abandoned in the communities where the schools are located. A Catholic school withdrawn to itself, in which pupils are not open to the world and to those who need more attention and hospitality, can fulfil its “school” role, can even be ranked among the best schools in national rankings, but it cannot fulfil the mission related to its identity, which is in Christ, the foundation of its educational project.

It is not easy, it is not easy at all, for Catholic schools created in a predominantly Catholic context with very low secularization, to maintain their specific profile in a society like ours, at the beginning of the XXI century. It is really necessary and urgent to rediscover the mission of Catholic schools today, which means among other things:

- (i) a long process that requires time and perseverance, which must involve everybody, including teachers and pupils, parents and families, which must follow a clear and defined line (I work with schools where this is being done, but it is a very demanding and long process);
- (ii) the need to create places for dialogue and rediscovery of the Catholic identity among teachers, in the framework of specialised continuous formation (this is very important and I see it in my contacts with schools: for many years we have appointed teachers for any kind of school and then we want they to work in a Catholic school; that is not easy);
- (iii) the need to develop “projects for the rediscovery of the mission” with various aspects, including “human formation” of pupils in the values and Christian values, the support of the discovery of the true human “vocation” of each of our pupils, and the support of the development of skills and behaviours like the gift to the poorest, mutual respect, critical mind, honesty, proactivity, trust, hope, ability to solve the problems of those who need it most... (For all this, we must create concrete projects and support opportunities for teachers and pupils in the discovery of this real human vocation).

Maybe we lack, in Catholic schools, good sharing spaces between headteachers and teachers, willing to open to each other and listen to the voices of today’s world and the challenges of growth and disengagement of children and young people, in the perspective of a new commitment in the educational community and the mission of the Church.

Which quality of education are we interested in? (Because we justify all the ways that we are currently tracing saying that we should not lose the sense of quality and our commitment to quality. But we should be very clear about this quality.) What is the added advantage in the choice by families of a Catholic school? (Sometimes, families say that they choose a Catholic school because there is a very safe atmosphere. Even if they are not Catholic, these families consider that “it cannot hurt the children”. It is thus not a very positive choice. We must therefore help families see the advantage offered in a Catholic school.)

The questions echo and the answers are rare.

Participating in the salvation mission of Christ and his Church, the Catholic schools may not reject their specific mission, even if the “fog is dense” and we sometimes lack force.

God will never fail us!

Porto, February 2015