

EDUCATION FOR THE POOR (1)

De La Salle and Education for the Poor

Let us be conscious of the fact that, in such fields as human promotion, development, justice, and the rights of the individual, the Church wishes to always be at the service of man, and of man in the light of the Christian anthropology that she has made her own. She need not have recourse to systems and ideologies in order to love, defend and assist in the liberation of man. In the very heart of the message which has been entrusted to her and which she proclaims is found the inspiration to act in favor of Brotherhood, justice and peace, against all dominations, slavery, discrimination, violence, attacks on religious liberty, aggression against man and all that is injurious to life itself. (His Holiness John Paul II, *Opening Discourse*, Third CELAM Conference Puebla, Mexico. 28 January, 1979).

I) THE SPIRITUAL JOURNEY OF THE FOUNDER

Can the evangelical journey of St. John Baptist De La Salle cast some light on the choices that the Brothers of Latin America must make about their educational activity both now and for the future?

This basic question finds some answers in the document called "The Charism of De La Salle: A Reading from a Latin American Viewpoint" drawn up by a team of Latin American Brothers.

As they do, we point out that the first biographers of the Saint felt that the beginnings of the teaching vocation of our Founder are to be found in the scholastic and catechetical currents that characterized the life of society and of the Church in the 17th Century.

Our Founder was thus marked by — and incarnated in — an historical movement that gives rise to the *popular Christian school*, and the best preparation of its teachers.

All of these efforts are unmistakable signs of an awareness that was had of an urgent need, as well as a firm will to remedy the situation. The teaching communities that they tried to form are each born in very different circumstances but are never conceived as fleshless projects. Rather they are rooted in the needs of children and young people that were economically and spiritually deprived.

"In speaking of this process it's best to think of it as reciprocal multiple influences. Each of these founders could see what the others were trying to do; they could mull over their successes and their failures; they communicated their own ideas; they asked questions and visited around. Finally they adapted, putting the

stamp of their own genius on the projects that local imperatives called for". (Brother Yves Poutet).

Persons, events and concrete institutions then, little by little catch De La Salle up into this movement of catechetical and school renewal. It is enough to remember Canon Roland in Rheims, Father Barré in Rouen, the Seminary of Saint Sulpice, Adrien Nyel himself.

"Two different circumstances (says the Saint in the 'Memorial') caused me to become interested in schools for children: they were a chance encounter with M. Nyel and a request made by this lady (Mme. de Maillfer). Previous to these, I hadn't the slightest notion of schools even though several of Canon Roland's friends tried to suggest the idea to me, but it never really entered my head, nor did I have the intention to take up such a work". (Paragraph cited by the three biographers of the Saint: Bro. Bernard, Maillefer and Blain).

To perceive an "historic trend" and to become involved in it little by little under the guidance of the Spirit seem to be "God's pedagogy" in the case of our Founder. (Cf. Circular No. 412, page 67 and foll.). Might not this also be the experience of the De La Salle Brother in the Latin America of today?

II) POPULAR EDUCATION AND CURRENT EDUCATIONAL TRENDS IN THE LATIN AMERICAN CHURCH

A. Popular Education

The concept and the experience related to the expression POPULAR EDUCATION have been much more thoroughly worked on outside the realm of Catholic education. For that reason it's important to fix our parameters for the term. This isn't an easy task. It is a term in constant evolution and it is loaded with ambiguities, according to whatever angle it is studied.

In general the expression "popular education" includes a consciousness raising for the people involved and their organization as a human community. In other words, we strive to form up a critical conscience of the reality in which we live, which leads further into the planning in community of an "historical project" for a just and free society — and to furnish the efficacious means to bring this all about.

Circular No. 412 points out a certain resistance among the Brothers to an analysis in depth of what we've stated, and even to the use of some of the terms, as if they had become hopelessly "contaminated".

"...Some even seem to deny the very existence of such a world, believing it is merely an extreme fringe of society... The formation received, in effect, caused us to grow up in the protected world of the religious life. Now we must become more aware of current ideas that will help us appreciate the situation of the men of our times. (Circular No. 412, page 26).

Nevertheless, to be on the side of the interests of the poor supposes that we'll be with them in their "historic project" which is precisely where their interests have crystalized. If this isn't the case all that we will be doing is applying band-aids to mortal wounds.

The defense of the poor is not an itself popular education. Popular activity, popular promotion and popular education are a much broader working reality, which includes educational processes but which is not hemmed in by that term.

True popular education has a strong political load, and we must understand that term in its original and

broad sense. It is a societal project. Popular education can never be assistentialism nor any direct or veiled form of paternalism or protection of the poor.

The basis of popular education is "awareness". From this springs the perception of self, of the world, of what I am expected to do in the world (subjectivity, objectivity, inter-subjectivity). From here rises the historic response: the social praxis in the form of a societal project.

So, then, the term "popular education" can include cooperatives, basic literacy programs for adults, popular medicine, popular press, technology, etc. Its validity as popular education is in direct proportion to its relation and coherence with the project of society towards which the group tends.

There are two tendencies in popular education:

a) the cultural or pedagogical tendency: This is abstracted from the concrete conditions of injustice; it is the end product of an historical project;

b) the radical tendency (going back to the roots): this starts out from the concrete conditions of injustice in order to begin and deepen the historic project and, from within that, the educational process. It supposes a critical knowledge of society, a correct and concrete theory of change, and a continuous relationship between theory and practice.

It is from within this second perspective that educational techniques must be applied so that the poor are made to feel that indeed they can, that they are able, that they are capable of organizing and directing their own destiny.

Authentic popular education comes to fruition in planned activity. It is for this reason then that so many co-called "thinkers" cannot enter into real, live contact with the popular sectors.

Once the initial insecurity has been overcome, the poor person can discover in himself his enormous capacity of thought and action. The learning process comes about through a confrontation with the world that surrounds him: persons, happenings, social phenomena. So he goes on discovering and interpreting his reality. There is no "Knowing" which is true and complete if it not be accompanied by "Doing". To learn is not a matter of memory but of creativity. In popular education any technique is valid which promotes the full exercise of the personal faculties, the free expression of feelings, ideas and projects.

Popular education carries with it a theory of education, strategies and methodologies which are consistent with the historic project that has been adopted. If this be not the case we would be left with mere activism or theory. Action alone does not have in itself the necessary elements to formulate theory and methodology. The clarity of the objectives depends on the initial vision of the project, and its position with regard to the poor and their world. If this doesn't take place one never gets beyond good intentions and there can be no popular education there.

Concrete steps

1. A real command of the situation in which the sectors where we are working happen to be developing.

2. Priority for those sectors where injustice is the most evident.

3. The adoption, from the very beginning, of a pedagogy of participation in which the target group has a real rôle in their own process of education and struggle. Thus a bureaucracy is avoided in the planning, and all the while a greater autonomy is achieved between the groups and the exterior support persons: they learn to define and confront their own problems and acquire skill in the use of methodology and the necessary techniques.

4. Training on different levels:

a) at the ground level, for joint action;

b) at the level of leaders that form from the base groups;

c) at the level of popular educators.

Popular education needs to study and systematize experiences. It isn't enough to get wrapped up in populist activism.

Techniques

a) For the illiterate = popular art, audio-visuals, graphics, socio-dramas, popular theater.

b) For the literate = popular reading materials, popular press...

The dynamic process of an authentic popular education implies then: consciousness-raising, organization and the struggle for a societal project.

It is truly curious to note that these three elements are present in the following paragraph of the "DECLARATION OF MEXICO" (December of 1979) drawn up at the end of the Regional Conference of Ministers of Education for Latin America and the Caribbean and sponsored by UNESCO:

"What is of the greatest urgency is to intensify educational action as a necessary condition to achieve an authentic development and to steer educational systems along the imperatives of social justice, in such a way that they contribute to form *consciousness, participation, solidarity and organizational capacity*, especially among the *less favored groups*".

Doesn't it look like they were defining the concept of POPULAR EDUCATION without using the term as such?

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