

THE SPIRITUAL GROWTH OF THE CHILD (1)

The Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools is the only religious congregation which is an "active member" of the BICE (*Bureau International Catholique de l'Enfance*, International Catholic Bureau of Children). This may seem somewhat paradoxical being that teaching congregations, in principle, are concerned first and foremost with children. Consequently, they should unite their efforts to those of this international Catholic organization in the defense of the rights of children and for the promotion of their well-being, their dignity, and their spiritual and human growth.

The readers of *Lasalliana* perhaps are not totally familiar with the activities of BICE. This organization is not essentially a funding agency as are so many other international organizations, but rather it is an organization which thinks about the problems related to children, comes to a deep understanding of them and then proposes and initiates action in view of ameliorating the conditions of children throughout the world.

With a view to making the programs which they have implemented more effective, the BICE maintains active relations with other organizations in the Church or in the United Nation which are also concerned with children. These numerous relations directly contribute to the impact of its action. Here are some recent examples of this.

Among the "Major Programs" recently initiated and implemented by the BICE, we refer to:

- * The International Year of the Child (1979), an initiative of BICE which aroused considerable awareness throughout the world because it was accepted by the UNESCO and its various organizations;

- * The problem, which is so great and lamentable these days, of "children of the street". For the past several years, the BICE has contributed to arousing a consciousness of this problem through colloquies which were organized, for example, in Marseille, Bogota, Bombay, and Abidjan. Thanks to this awareness and sensitivity and to the publications which flowed from them, various kinds of concrete assistance programs were inaugurated. It became necessary to create a new international organization which can continue to pursue the activity. This organization is "Childhope", which was

temporarily based in New York but which is now based in Guatemala.

For the past four years, the BICE has been carrying out efforts on the vital but complex theme of "THE SPIRITUAL GROWTH OF THE CHILD" in today's world. Several particular programs within the greater overall program are already in progress. This was the object of a first evaluation and reflection of inner working organizations at the last General Congress of the BICE, held in Rome at the beginning of 1986.

These programs concern the following problems:

- * the child and the spiritual life within the family;
- * children and the media;
- * the incultural and interreligious education of the child;
- * the spiritual and non-material needs of children refugees;
- * the spiritual growth of children who are handicapped physically, in their sense, or mentally;
- * the spiritual growth of children deprived of a normal family life;
- * maltreated children;
- * child prostitution and pornography;
- * one child helping another child: an older child looking after the health and welfare of the younger children.

With this as the framework of thought on particular problems, the BICE has drawn up a preliminary general text on "the Spiritual Growth of the Child" which can be read here below at length.

It seems to me that this text, in whose elaboration I participated, will be of great interest for all the Brothers and for all other Lasallians whose main task is to work together for this spiritual growth of children who are under their care in school, in group movements, and outside of schools.

As one can see by reading it, this text adopts a large perspective the only true one — with regard to the spiritual in the child and in every human being. Because of that, it seems to me particularly interesting for the understanding of our apostolic ministry of education, above all for those of us who work in a milieu which is largely non-Christian and who ask ourselves sometimes about the meaning of our activities and about the orientations which we give to them. It will be easy for us to find in these thoughts of BICE a field of action which is as vast as it is fundamental for the education of youth and a rich choice of elements for an educational project in common with our colleagues of different religions or even with non-believers.

Preliminary remarks

1. Since tens of millions of children in our times are growing up in a world which attributes little

place to spiritual concerns, a positive answer should be sought for the varying demands deriving from such a situation. It is therefore essential to search for ways and means to give spiritual nourishment to those children. It is imperative, not only to satisfy their material needs such as food, sports, health, etc., but also to respond to their intellectual, cultural and spiritual needs; school, pastimes, arts, religion, etc.. Such nourishment inevitably raises certain problems related to the child's environment.

At the present time however, the ICCB has to face a more fundamental question. It is aware of the urgent need to set free the spiritual energy within each child, that source of growth which will enable the child to build its own spiritual life a growth process that will continue throughout its entire lifetime.

2. Such action touches a decisive and radical aspect of the child's identity as a human person; for the ICCB it is a specific part of its mission. Indeed, the ICCB believes very firmly in the spiritual dimension of the child as part of its very being, its nature, the dynamics of its growth. Created in the image of God, man became inhabited by the Spirit at the very moment he emerged from animality. Because the child is the offspring of man, it is of divine race. Therefore, the child is unable to attain fullness of being, balance and happiness unless it has developed spiritually as well.

3. Although the ICCB is quite conscious of its specific task as an International Catholic Organisation, it feels that the ideas which are expressed hereafter do not follow exclusively from the Judeo-Christian tradition. The faiths specifically derived from that tradition are based upon the Bible and hold that in the spirit there is a divine seed, the image of both God and man. There are other creeds arising from other spiritual traditions, be they Islamic, Buddhist or still others. There are moreover agnostics and men of goodwill who, even if they do not always make explicit reference to the Judeo-Christian interpretation nevertheless recognize the spiritual dignity of man.

The Spiritual Growth of the Child

Every child is born with a sum of basic physical, psychic, intellectual and emotional potentialities, but also with an innate spiritual potential. The development and the accomplishment of its being in its uniqueness, its entirety and its authenticity, are nothing other than the full achievement of its potentialities. That is the condition for the child becoming "in all truth" a human person. However, we should ask ourselves several questions: what is the meaning of such spiritual growth? Which is the way toward it? Who are its authors?

I - The sense of spiritual growth: analysis and description

The "spiritual" in the human being is of such density that, to analyse it, one needs to distinguish three different aspects, which have to be globally united afterwards, such as three facets of a diamond or three tributaries of one and the same stream.

1. The anthropological or constitutive aspect: TRUTH of the BEING.

This is the most *fundamental* aspect of the "spiritual" in that it answers for the specific nature of the dignity of the human person, as source and principle of human rights. This aspect is to be recognized in the founding event, which makes man, that is the moment when he emerges from animality. It is indeed in that sudden original mutation which produces him that *the spirit enters man*. The attentive observer will recognize three major expressions of this "spiritual":

— the passage from the instinct based on capture and enjoyment to LOVE, which is sacrificial and freely given. Man as an animal is possessed by the instinct to take more to have more: that means that he wants to grow in being through possessing more: such is his instinctive drive. However there is also a different movement in man, a drive which is also innate as the expression of the spirit and which tends to give, to offer, and consequently to lose: this is love, which may be defined as an act of "having less" in order to "be more". Through loving, one becomes more human.

— The passage from sensitive knowledge (by images) to abstract knowledge (by ideals). The second fruit of the spirit in man is the emergence of INTELLIGENCE, which consists of reflecting (i.e. conceiving ideas), reasoning (articulating ideas), judging (discerning among ideas).

— The passage from determinate and automatic conduct to the FREEDOM of choice by freeing oneself from enslavements and servitudes and mastering caprice: in man this is the third fruit of the spirit.

— This threefold ability for love, understanding and freedom is the constitutive element of man's specific nature, of his dignity and his identity: such is his fundamental spiritual being. Therefore it is of the greatest importance that the "servants" of children seeking their development "in truth" should give priority to this emergence, this awakening, this coming of the spirit. From this point of view there exists at the present time a terrible void, which brings about a regressive evolution leading in turn to human degradation and menacing the human species as such. Urgent action is needed.