

**THE CHRISTIAN SCHOOL
AND THE EVANGELISATION
OF CULTURES
(1/2)**

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The meaning of the Brothers' presence in schools is made clear in the Rule: "...the Institute desires to be present to the world today as part of the Church's work in spreading the Gospel" (R 11)

A school is a place for cultural exchange, and in our day several aspects of culture are handed down by the school. Those aspects are:

- a) Scientific and technical.
- b) Popular or traditional family.
- c) Mass culture.
- d) Youth subculture shared among peers.

In Christian schools our aim is to hand down the Gospel which perfects and questions all other cultures.

Our role with respect to cultures circulating in schools is first of all to learn about them, for you can hardly evangelise a culture if you don't know it. After learning as much of each culture as to know how to act like a Christian and Religious in each surrounding, you try to perfect those surroundings and question them from the Gospel point of view. (1)

This is not only an intellectual task. The anthropologist Gregory Bateson has pointed out that cultures do not have only ideas but also an "ethos" or value system, which is shown by the sense of adhesion or repulsion. (2) To hand on these values with enthusiasm and without false dramatics, you have to have strong, deep-rooted convictions. Therefore in order to influence a culture you have to:

- 1) have reflected rationally and on Gospel principles.
- 2) have acquired a certain feeling which among Christians comes from prayer, and results in enthusiasm directed by the Holy Spirit.

It is necessary to bring the quality of our witness to each of the cultures we have mentioned.

1. Scientific and technical culture:

The first thing is to find out how it works. At the present stage of modern society, technology is in the forefront, because rapid change demands frequent adaptation.

According to the sociologist Pedro Morandé, modern society is characterised by a functional differentiation in human relationships, which has taken the place of the old differentiation based on oligarchy and the more primitive differentiation based on blood relationships. (3) Functions cease being the attribute of fixed states and move to specialist groups, formed of people who are able to take on these roles rather than having possessed them since birth.

For the philosopher Martin Heidegger, technology consists in the ability of material or social systems to accept replacements in the functions of their organisations, in order to adapt themselves better to needs which arise. (4) Economic systems make quick replacements for what they produce, and this needs old and new workers, able to produce these new things. The entertainment industry has a very rapid turn-over of "products" to ensure that the masses do not get bored and in order to keep ahead in the communications business: entertainment carries on even if you need to change your radio, your actors and your message.

Neither personal identity nor salvation belong to the functioning proper to the society in which persons live nowadays, and which affects their spontaneous way of valuating. Evangelisation has to penetrate and transform culture in the pursuit of truth as understood by each person and which we get to know through God's gift in Jesus Christ. Therefore the church encourages discernment, and in its prophetic role, refuses to conform to urban and industrial culture into which science and technology are trying to lead us these days.

Evangelisation aims at true liberty for mankind; not simply by the absence of external coercion and oppression, even if these are still prevalent in many social sectors, nor by the choice between several different functions or proposals, but by the readiness to meet the Word, who, through grace, reveals to each person his meaning, his vocation, where he belongs and his personal identity.

When St. John Baptist de La Salle set up science teaching and professional programmes in his schools, decades before the French industrial revolution, he gave the Brothers the role of mentor based on faith. Christians were not to reject science and technology, as some fundamentalist and integrist groups were doing; the Brothers were to offer these subjects in relationship with the teaching of the Church.

The charisma of De La Salle, declared patron of educators by Pius XII, leads teachers to be people of

faith, inculturated in modern science and technology. We always need to keep our perspective up to date, looking on science and art with the eyes of faith, in case we get drawn into some kind of idolatry and become unknowing propagators of an idolatry of science and technology. (5)

The Gospel encourages us to perfect scientific and technological culture by injecting into it human and Christian attitudes and values by:

a) an earnest search for truth through investigation and careful experimental analysis rather than by rote learning (methodical study of the truth);

b) bringing about syntheses, by logically linking and deciding on priorities among the information acquired in the search for wisdom, instead of merely machine-like accumulating them. The students participate in the process by intelligent questions (humanistic reflection and dialogue);

c) the desire for coherence between art, science and faith, (6) in which all teachers must take part as in a Christian educational project (interdisciplinary reflection to unite faith with science and technology);

d) showing the worthwhileness of work well done and on time, which in the societies now open to world markets is required by the demand for excellence (responsible productivity).

The Gospel also requires us to question scientific and technological culture:

a) its supposed self-sufficiency and the way it despises philosophical reflectiveness on the meaning and values of life, knowledge, scientific propositions themselves, and hence its rejection of the Christian faith as relevant to knowledge, an error with which certain teachers, even religious ones, concur, when they become too absorbed by the discipline they teach, without linking it with life in general, an attitude which results in their becoming slaves of scientism and secularism. (DP 315; 435);

b) its aspects of the "Enlightenment" not of the eleventh but of the eighteenth century, ignorant of the limits of epistemological methods: the boundaries for scientific pronouncements, the provisional nature of its statements and theories, the way various realms of knowledge complement without contradicting one another;

c) its assertion that it is objective and free from subjective values, although it encourages a mentality of individualism, competitiveness, urgency for efficiency, an aggressive productivity which is predatory, consumerist, hedonistic, unbridled in its eroticism

(that is without sincere commitment to spouse and children);

d) its inability to draw up ethical regulations and social aims for science and technology, which would result from humanistic wisdom and faith, things outside the realms of science and technology;

e) the way it despises ethical, aesthetical and mystical values, by emphasising the means instead of the end;

f) its exaggeration of the functional aspects of social relationships, instead of the affective aspects, those of gratitude, trustworthy intimacy, personal identity;

g) its actual discrimination among those who might benefit from progress, concentrating modernisation among groups who have social and economic power and leaving primitive ways of life to the majority (DP 417).

Evangelising scientific and technical culture in schools supposes adequate training of teachers and a pastoral outlook among them based on sound theology.

Notes

(1) **Vatican Council II: Decree "Ad gentes" on "the missionary work of the Church"**, N° 11

(2) **G. Bateson**. "Steps towards an Ecology of the Mind", Buenos Aires, Carlos Lohlé, 1973 (N.Y. Ballantine, 1972). "Mind and Spirit", Buenos Aires, Amorrortu, 1985 (N.Y., Dutton, 1979). Cit. **Morris Berman**, "Re-enchantment of the world", Santiago, Four Winds, 1990 (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1981).

(3) **Pedro Morande**, "Tensions and challenges between Church and the Culture of modernity", in: Sepac. "Evangelising cultural modernity", Bogotá, CELAM, 1991, 145-160, p 148s.

(4) **M. Heidegger**, "The question of Technology", Santiago, University press, 1984, cit. Pedro Morande, opus cit 145-160, p 152.

(5) **III General Conference of the Latin American Bishops**, "Evangelisation now and in the future in Latin America". Puebla Document. Bogotá, CELAM, 1979 (abbreviation: DP)

(6) **Sister Isabel Vrancken**, "Assignments and Christian Vision in the World", Santiago, Pauline press, 1982. **Ana Maria Amarante**, "Evangelisation through assignments". Buenos Aires, Stella, 1991.