

THE NEEDS OF YOUNG PEOPLE TODAY

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The work of St John Baptist de La Salle was a response to the needs of the young people of his day. Seeing that children from working class backgrounds were deprived of instruction and Christian education, St John Baptist de La Salle established schools for them, trained teachers and advocated suitable teaching methods. He wanted schools that led children to God, that gave a meaning to their life, that developed their personality and prepared them to take their place in society.

The approach of St John Baptist de La Salle was apostolic, prophetic, generous and practical. Any new educational project, any new Conduct of Schools, should be drawn up in a way that reflects this.

In our own days, competent and dedicated lay people work side by side with the Brothers. As in the days of the Founder, they too are concerned for the needs of young people.

There are, of course, many books dealing with methodology and psychology, which offer much useful information about the various stages of development of children, and the most appropriate methods to use in educating them. A Lasallian teacher takes this information into account, but he does so in the context of a careful consideration of the expectations of the young people of today.

Observation, study and analysis of our society, reveal the existence of gifted young people with the possibility of a bright future, but who are faced with real difficulties and dangers.

Values

Heading the list of values are love, friendship and family. Next, there is money, and then freedom, justice and solidarity. Their attachment to these values leads young people to reject intolerance, corruption, racism and all forms of constraint. They are willing to commit themselves to humanitarian causes (Médecins sans Frontières, Amnesty International, etc), peace and ecological movements. Such commitment is spontaneous and generous, but is often short-lived.

While very attached to their family (96% state they get on well and even very well with their mother, 83% with their father), they do not accept authority and do not intend to lead the same kind of life as their parents.

They are sceptical of what adults say, but are sensitive to what is authentic and are won over by such great figures as Martin Luther King, Mother Teresa, etc.

Their relationship with God is sincere, very personal and rather secret. Regarding religious practice, they prefer small communities or large and festive gatherings. They rarely go to parish services and are very critical of positions adopted by the Church. Religion for them is something serious, they are spiritually inclined, and when they find themselves in serious difficulty, they naturally and fervently turn to God.

Young people show the same kind of reticence when it comes to expressing patriotic feelings. For them, their country is first of all the region in which they live, then Europe and then the world. Frontiers no longer exist. However, it is enough for a natural disaster to occur, for a member of the royal family or a famous politician to die, even sometimes for a national sports team to win, for their nationalism to come to the surface and to be expressed with a great deal of enthusiasm. It is clear that religious sects and right and left-wing extremists recruit young people searching for an ideal. They have a need for commitment which schools must refine and direct. Schools must train them to be socially responsible, so as to prevent them from drifting off and becoming involved in one of the many forms of fanaticism, whether it be racial, political or religious.

Difficulties

These young people belong to our age - an age of consumerism, materialism and conformism. They are very much influenced by it. They claim to be non-conformists, but they care about the way they look, they practically all wear the same uniform: jeans, sweat shirt, bomber jacket and trainers. 80% of the money of 15 to 18 year olds goes on going out, cigarettes, clothing and games. They look for instant pleasure: the senses often prevail over reason ("I feel like it"), morals are loose ("Everybody does it").

What is more worrying is the increasing loss of incentive. The reasons for this are numerous: the prospect of unemployment, the lack of stimulating opportunities in society, apprehension regarding the future, the instability of relationships, disgust with political gamesmanship.

They react by blocking reality out by rock music, noise, speed, sex, drugs and sometimes suicide.

The picture of adult society offered them by the media and lying advertisements inevitably destabilises them: they see family conflict, an atmosphere of selfishness, waste (nothing is repaired any more, everything is thrown away), dishonest politicians (business and bribes), the commercialisation of sex, the absence of scruples, racism (ethnic cleansing), the overriding power of money (the way multinationals work), violence on the streets and in sports grounds. Finally, in spite of the Gospel message, which has lost none of its relevance, in spite of a spiritual renewal, one has to admit that the Church as an institution has lost its attraction to people, and that it is difficult for it to give effective witness to the unique and life-giving love that God has for each and every one.

In a context such as this, how can a young person become enthusiastic about an ideal or even simply find meaning in his life?

What future awaits young people?

For them it is not a case of perpetuating an existing society which does not inspire confidence, but of preparing themselves to face new challenges.

– Since it seems that full employment will no longer be guaranteed for everybody, it is important to lead them to accept work-sharing by appropriate courses in sociology, and to teach them to live on a modest income, by courses on financial management. Schools will have to teach them how to occupy their increased free time with intelligent leisure activities: social activities, sport, culture (the arts, reading, visiting museums, etc), and also how to be active and creative in their pursuit.

– Since they are going to live in a Europe without frontiers in which people can move around freely, young people will need to learn several foreign languages, accept other lifestyles, learn about different cultures, and be warned against all kinds of racism.

– Since people constantly change careers in our present age, schools need to give young people a good basic education and teach them how to approach retraining. They need to accustom them to the idea of ongoing formation - a process that calls for self-confidence, dynamism, flexibility and adaptability.

– Since the firms and companies that will survive are those that aim at overall quality, young people, even when they are at school, will have to learn to work as part of a team, to produce high quality work, to learn to make critical judgments, to take the initiative, but also at the same time to work on their characters so as to be pleasant, patient and sociable colleagues that inspire confidence.

– Since the rapid evolution of technology has rapidly taken us from the age of Gutenberg to that of increasingly sophisticated telecommunications and computers, schools need to introduce pupils at a very early age to these new languages, not only so that they can decipher them clearly, but also in order that they can master them and the means that transmit them. This will enable them to communicate independently with all those who already, and those who will do so in the future,

use these new means of communication to speak about essential things.

– Finally, faced with the extraordinary progress made by science, young people need to be taught to recognise, with admiration, humility and gratitude, the greatness of the future God has mapped out for mankind, and to be made aware of the underlying responsibility involved at this high level of scientific development.

Responses to the needs of young people today.

As in the time of St John Baptist de La Salle, young people are living at a time of economic, social and moral crisis.

A Lasallian School needs to establish for them a framework, a type of life and relationship, a type of teaching approach which will make possible:

1. the discovery of a "reference" person - God - who gives meaning to life and to death, who involves them in a personal relationship of friendship and love, which will permeate all their other relationships;
2. the establishment of a framework of values, which will motivate their actions, guide their decisions, and enable them to assess themselves;
3. the creation of a community where they can find understanding, develop as persons, express themselves; a community where it is possible to discuss, share views, learn from the experience of others; a community where one can celebrate, rejoice and pray.

As a conclusion to these few thoughts about the needs of the young people who will usher in the New Conduct of Schools, we can make the following observation: while certain adults nowadays try hard to get themselves noticed by the media, doing important and sometimes, ineffective things, Lasallian schools aim to teach young people to do small things humbly in the sight of God, things that are useful for everybody, and to do them well like St John Baptist de La Salle and St Mutien Marie. •