

**INTEGRATED  
LASALLIAN EDUCATION  
IN A SECULARISED CULTURE (1/2)**

**Providing at one and the same time  
a human and Christian education**

**Brother François Kerdoncuf**

*"Cultures, values, Faith...Taken separately or together, they remind us that our schools must engender a thirst for truth in young people, and help them believe in their own ability to think clearly".*

(Brother John Johnston, Strasbourg)

A.

**1. We are witnessing the break-up of a culture**

The fact that this is happening before our eyes has both speeded up the process and made us more aware of it.

The balance that used to exist has gone and we find we have to cope with two factors:

**Death:** the disappearance of structures which, for many years and perhaps all our active life, have engendered attitudes, patterns of behaviour, institutions.

**Discovery:** accepting to operate with a newly-found intellectual independence, by exploring an open and pluralist culture, by abandoning educational approaches based on a hierarchy of traditional values. From now on, schools have to take into account a number of moralities and religions. Schools have a key-role to play in intercultural and interdenominational education.

"This is a task which Christianity should have taken to heart, for it can find its fulness only in the freedom of conscience and in values which give a framework to the lay state" (G. Coq).

**2. As a reminder, in case there is need for one, let us mention some of the cultural factors which have caused this break-up.**

+ **Society has freed itself from the authority of the Church**

This can be seen from the following facts:

- The absence of religious inspiration in culture.
- Religion is no longer a point of reference in public life.
- Religion has been relegated to private life. There is no wish to get rid of religious belief, but it no longer serves as a unifying factor for a person's life, nor an asset in society.
- Man is independent, the ruler and master of a world, all of whose mysteries have been revealed. He seeks the meaning and purpose of his life in himself.
- The Church itself has taken up a position, speaking of the "legitimate autonomy of terrestrial reality vis-à-vis faith" (Vatican II, Gaudium et Spes).
- The search for modernity is, therefore, an affirmation of human nature, the freeing of its potential forces and creativity, through science, technology and morality.

+ **These liberated forces can be:**

- perverted by unrestrained and unlimited individualistic and materialistic consumerism (I can, I want, I like...);
- distorted by the media and all forms of communication

which concentrate on what is superficial, emotional and ephemeral;

- uncontrolled, because of the increase in nationalism, racism, fundamentalism, widespread migration and all kinds of social exclusion;

- reinstated, to satisfy unrequited needs, allay fears and fill vacuums, by new forms of religiosity, belief and sects.

*"There is a critical absence of landmarks and points of reference, a crisis of conscience and freedom. There are no more external points of reference: a person has to orientate himself from within. The urgent task that faces us is to re-examine our own view of freedom and the way we think as Europeans"* (Cardinal Martini. Le Monde, 4/01/94).

We can draw our first conclusion (1):

In the past, we lived in a culture in which acceptable social behaviour was based on recognised and inherited values. These shared roots, this common identity, this shared established way of distinguishing between the human and the inhuman, which we all respected, is something which seems to be missing now.

In these days, when there are innumerable religious movements, when increased awareness of a multicultural society brings us up against religions and traditions we had previously only seen from a distance, it has become more and more urgent for people to link their convictions or beliefs to a tradition.

Lasallian education, with its traditional concern for the individual, his social background and his needs, should now, more than ever, direct its attention to individuals who identify strongly with the cultural situation in which they live (Cf. Conduct of Schools, p. 32: "The Brother Director will become acquainted...").

**3. We have to take into account**

+ **A different kind of person**

This change in attitude is well described by Selucky of Prague University: "In the past, thanks to the benefits of Christianity, education made it its duty to respect others because they were *Sons of God*. Nowadays, education is trying to find its way, and we have to respect others because they are *different*".

Faced with a different kind of person, we have to ask ourselves a few questions.

> **How can we define this person?**

He is characterised by his cultural roots, his identity, his traditions, his life, his view of life, the way he thinks, his values, his concern for humanity in general. What can we do to ensure that his identity is an asset and not a handicap? Do these persons, with all their differences, have something in common we can use as a starting point?

> **Our Lasallian tradition** directs our attention to those with most handicaps; to those who have no name; to those who have lost their identity and their culture.

To those who have no work. We know the settling effect of having work: a person finds a place in the world, in society; his psychological equilibrium is strengthened; he experiences working with others and assimilates common values. Young people nowadays do not have this framework of collective solidarity. Are there other forms of social contact besides those of paid employment? Yes, the social framework of a school which prepares young people for future employment.

> **What gives me the right to interfere in a person's life?**

All the year round, we hear the same remarks, the same objections and the same refusals to become involved:

- "I have no mission involving him".
- "Me, a Minister? God's Ambassador?"
- "Me, a model in my words and actions?"
- "The young people entrusted to you"! (they're dumped on me!)
- "I pass on knowledge, even a tradition, but his private life

doesn't concern me". ("Get me a qualification and I'll see to the rest").

#### + The problem of differences

Discussions about religion and education are often encumbered by the vocabulary used: culture, intercultural, pluricultural, multid denominational, post-modern, post-ideological, post-Christian, etc

The following generally accepted definition may help us in our discussion: "Culture is a reflection of the way in which a social group lives its life, revealed in its understanding of life, in its social behaviour, in the way it organises and orders itself" (The Sèvres Centre).

The following points are worth thinking about:

- The origin and evolution of cultural concepts.
- The discovery of the "other" through one's own referential system.
- The phenomenon of cultural "cross-breeding" through appropriation and integration; the consequences of cultural mixing (through immigration, marriage, etc).
- Factors which encourage prejudice, stereotyping (forms of dispossession, conditioning, compromising, the exploitation of the ideology of progress).
- Dealing with sensitive issues. Why are Portuguese people, because they are Latins and Christian, accepted and integrated, whereas North Africans and Turks are not, because they are Muslims?

#### + Dealing with a diversity of cultures

One of the important aims of education is to enable different cultures to live together, to bring children together from all the different social classes, and give them a chance to experience by negotiation all the constraints inherent in society.

The following could help us achieve this aim:

- The school mission statement: Living in a pluralist world - what points in common does my life have with that of other people?
- Each one should examine his roots, identify and strengthen what makes him different.
- Enrich one another.

#### *This diversity makes a contribution:*

1. A heritage, a language, a vocabulary, a way of thinking.
2. The migration of words, ideas, people, inventions. To learn a language and ways of doing things is to have a learning relationship (by sharing with others in other lives, feelings, ideals).

#### *There are connections in this diversity*

For example:

The East finds its nourishment in a spirituality, prayer and community life that is spontaneous.

The West has created an ethical system for itself and stresses the personal nature of faith.

- Our acceptance of differences should be practical. Why is it that, in Lasallian schools, where almost 50% of the pupils are not baptised or belong to non-Christian denominations, only Catholics are provided with pastoral care, religious symbols and a place for prayer? What about all the others?

#### + Morality and conscience when Christianity encounters other cultures.

##### *The sources of morality*

- Christianity does not have the monopoly of moral values. Let us accept that they are the result of a process of osmosis between the Gospel message and the thinking that went on before. Sometimes, values such as freedom, were developed in opposition to the Church (the evolution of personal or international moral conscience, the rights of man, etc).
- Young people accept forms of progress in biology and technology. For them, these replace traditional points of reference, rules and behaviour patterns.
- As young people exercise their independence, questioning

everything around them and seeking to establish their own referential system, they identify less with the Church which formerly stood for religious aspiration and for the more humanistic positions and attitudes of the major faiths (Protestant, Orthodox, even Muslim). They feel that the Church is failing because it is too rationalistic, too bureaucratic and too concerned with moral teaching.

"A Christian is given so much guidance through advice, guidelines and even orders, that he can end up by no longer using the judgement of his own conscience" (Mgr Thomas, Versailles).

It is clear that the Church finds it somewhat difficult to adopt a new role, that is, to understand the priorities of people, of men and women who dare show by everything they do

- the questions they ask themselves,
- the principles that guide their choices

and who dare show that they have made a choice. (Cf. "*Dieu n'a pas visité son peuple*", Open Letter to Cardinal Lustiger).

#### *Sources of conscience*

"Where is the spring that will enable me to assuage the thirst I feel (for myself, those close to me, my nation) and to find the strength to build up my life?" (Cardinal Lustiger).

There is no greater value than conscience.

It has to be said, however, that while I have a responsibility towards my conscience, I am also "responsible for my conscience". The most important role of true education today is to form active, enlightened and rational consciences.

We praise conscience, but as the Father General of the Jesuits, Fr Kolvenbach, says: "Whenever conscience is praised, the Splendour of Truth becomes indispensable for its enlightenment".

When planning our life, we can model ourselves on St Paul.

**My own life...:** I am called to take responsibility for myself, to use the creative powers that I possess, and to give full rein to the talents I have within myself;

**in these human conditions:** I take into account the level of my maturity, of my ability to judge, and of my moral energy. I take into account the situation in which I live and work, and my solidarity with others;

**I live through faith in the Son of God:** I do not live my life and my faith on my own. I live my life in the light of what is spiritual and transcendental, taking my energy from the Risen Christ.

A Christian does not have the monopoly of hope. What distinguishes him, however, is that he always sees life as a promise, and never as fate.

When teachers and students discuss the world they live in - violence, the economy, evil, death, unemployment, procreation - the power of the Resurrection in them can take them beyond apparent death and fate.

At this point it would be good to turn to the report drawn up by Mgr Dagens at the meeting of bishops at Lourdes in 1994. It is entitled: "*Promoting Faith in the Present Situation*", and attempts to discern the pastoral strategy that should be followed to promote the Christian faith with **Truth** and taking into account the **Variety** of a person's human abilities. This should be a faith that builds up a person, a faith that is a response to the search for the spiritual in the heart of a person, a faith that is seen as a response based on human freedom. Such a strategy should lead to the growth of interior life and inspire the desire to surpass oneself and to give of oneself.

.../...

(1) Common sense is needed. Do not generalise and avoid absolute statements like "All Lasallian schools have explicit religious instruction from the primary school to higher education"; "No Lasallian schools provide explicit religious instruction, but attach great importance to atmosphere and relationships"; "The quality of the teacher is the most important criterion when recruiting staff"; "The ability to teach well is the most important factor".