

**WHAT CONDITIONS MUST  
A CHRISTIAN SCHOOL FULFIL  
IN ORDER TO BE  
AN ECCLESIAL COMMUNITY?  
(2/3)**

**Brother Fadi Sfeir**

**II. The Christian school: An ecclesial community**

Having described the nature of the ecclesial community and its mission, we can now move on to consider the conditions that make the Christian school an ecclesial community both by its nature and its mission.

**(A) The identity of the Christian school**

**1. Etymology of the expression "Christian school"**

The word "school" comes from the Latin "Schola" or the Greek "skolè" meaning "leisure", "studious leisure" or a "place of study" (8). The adjective "Christian" denotes a person who has been baptised and professes faith in Jesus Christ (9). And so, a Christian school is a teaching establishment which includes a community of baptised persons professing faith in Jesus Christ. In what follows, the Christian school is understood as being a community. Let us see what part it has to play in God's plan of salvation.

**2. The nature of the Christian school**

Is the identity of the Christian school to be found in that of the Church? In part I, we showed the part played by the Church in the plan of salvation of God the Father, accomplished by his Son Jesus Christ, through the Holy Spirit. The Church is now playing its role in the final stages of God's plan. In it, it is a sacrament of salvation for all mankind and a sign of the kingdom to come. It has been sent by God and its mission is to evangelise, that is, to announce the Good News of salvation to everybody, to engender new creatures in Jesus Christ through baptism, and to educate them to live as sons of God (10).

To fulfil its mission, it uses all the means at hand. The Christian school is a place chosen by the Church where a particular view of the world, man and history is studied and taught. It is a special means of providing people with an integral education and preparing them to take their place in society as responsible individuals and in the Church as sons of God. In this way, the identity of the Christian school is to be found in God's plan of salvation of which the Church is the final stage. It is a sacrament of salvation which accomplishes the plan of salvation in and among people. It is a sign of the Kingdom of God. What precisely is its mission?

**(B) The mission of the Christian school:  
An ecclesial mission**

**1. The mission of the Christian school**

The Christian school aims to give a human and Christian education to young people. It trains young people to be responsible individuals capable of taking their place in society and in the Church, and helps to build them up according to Gospel values. The educational programme of the school is based on a mission statement. This document states the values on which the choices of the educational community are based. It describes how the school intends to ensure the systematic and progressive acquisition of human knowledge by the students as well as education in the faith. This twofold aim can be attained only if the education given is based on an evangelical view of mankind and of the world (11). The Christian school helps the young person to stay close to the person of Christ throughout the human and religious education he receives.

**2. Ecclesial mission**

The school serves as a "novitiate of Christianity" (12), in the sense that it introduces young people to Christian life by training them in the practice of the sacraments, by religious instruction and by teaching them Christian morality. By doing this, it cooperates with the mission of the Church: it announces the Kingdom of God and shares in the threefold vocation of priest, prophet and humaniser, which we are now going to consider.

**(a) The priestly mission**

The Christian school forms a community of baptised persons, and the priestly mission of this community is to strengthen unity with Christ by the practice of the sacraments and by prayer.

– **Prayer.** At an age when a child learns to read, he has to be trained to be aware of God. The teacher's short and striking morning reflection gives him an opportunity to witness to his faith and to help the children to understand the Christian significance of the event he is commenting on. This event could be something that happened in school, to young people or in the world around them. This reflection helps the child realise that God is present in everyday happenings, and encourages him to be aware of this presence throughout the day. All lessons start with a prayer to ask for the grace to study well, and end with another one to praise and thank God. This goes on throughout the day (13).

– **Practice of the sacraments.** The celebration of the various liturgical seasons during the year enables the school community to share in the mystery of Christ with the whole Church. Each week, pupils are given an opportunity to take an active and informed part in the celebration of the sacraments of the Eucharist and reconciliation (14). Preparation for first communion opens the hearts of the children to welcome Christ. All this is consolidated by an annual spiritual recollection. In this way, young people live in a sanctifying atmosphere which makes them constantly aware of the presence of God through Christ's influence in their lives. How does the Christian school fulfil its prophetic mission?

**(b) Prophetic mission**

The Christian school announces the Gospel to young people through catechesis and the witness given by teachers.

– **Catechesis.** The Christian school proclaims Jesus Christ explicitly to young people through catechesis. It teaches them the faith through a systematic catechetical programme

adapted to the age of the pupils. Pupils follow this programme throughout their school career. However, the Christian school believes, with the Church, that this knowledge of the faith remains static unless it challenges the life of the young person. Consequently, it uses all the means at its disposal to awaken the faith of the pupils: the Word of God, the liturgy, the witness of the educational community (teachers, students, management and parents), etc. In this way, catechesis becomes the Good News of salvation and power from God which can transform the thinking, affections and attitudes of the young person. Is the witness of teachers an integral part of the proclamation of the Gospel?

– **Witness.** The witness of the teachers, the concrete example they give, is what has most effect on young people. They believe much more what they see than what they hear. The person teaching young people to be Christians is a most important element in the process. The Christian teacher seeks enlightenment from the Holy Spirit (15). He is obliged to touch the hearts of children and this is possible only with the help of the Spirit of God. If his words and actions are inspired by God, they will be spirit and life for them and will lead them to Christ. And so, the young person experiences the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and allows Christ to enter his life.

This personal relationship between the young person and Christ should be one of the specific aims of the Christian school. The personal witness of the teacher reveals a spirit of faith which the educational community as a whole should share and seek to strengthen. The vitality of a school community does not depend on the number of pupils it has, but on its evangelical dynamism and its ability, by collaboration and shared responsibility, to live out its faith in Jesus in order to fulfil its mission.

– **Involvement/commitment.** The Christian school encourages and helps young people and teachers to become involved in school, parish and apostolic communities of faith. These communities show both what life according to the Gospel is like, and that it is possible. The aim of these communities is to help people to rediscover their own spiritual lives and to find out what is their specific Christian vocation. The identification of this vocation constitutes the basis of the pastoral ministry of vocations (16), and enables young people to find their place in the Church and in its various prayer, exchange and apostolic communities. How should Christian schools be involved with the poor?

The Christian school gives special encouragement to young people to form groups to help the poor. Concern for the outcasts and poor of society is an indication of true ecclesiality (17). Experience has shown that the involvement of young people in groups to help the poor (18) offers a good opportunity for the discernment of vocations. In this way, an ecclesial and catechetical atmosphere is created in a school context. To what extent is the involvement of the educational community ecclesial?

### (c) The mission to be a humanising influence

How does the Christian school fulfil its humanising (pastoral) mission? In the Christian school, the systematic and progressive acquisition of knowledge is an integral part of the human education of young people. The aim of this learning is to enable the young person to become independent and to take his place in society as a responsible adult, and in the Church, as a son of God. Every mission statement which is adapted to the needs of the time, aims to help young persons to grow as persons and as Christians. To achieve this aim, it seeks to promote three things in particular: education in values, seeing things on a world-wide scale, ability to live and work with others.

– **Education in values.** The Christian school seeks to proclaim the Gospel in the culture in which it operates. All moral education in values tries to promote Christian values based on faith not only on school premises, but also in the family and in society. Education in values is closely linked to all the other courses of study offered and to the approach adopted. If the Christian school promotes justice, respect for human rights and duties, truth, dialogue, solidarity, personal convictions, it will produce people who are capable of joining others to work for peace together in the world (19).

– **Seeing things on a world-wide scale.** Christian education has to help young people see things on a world-wide scale (20). This helps them also to understand catholicity. One consequence of the fact that the exchange of information now takes place on a world-wide scale, and that communications and travel have abolished frontiers, is that there is generally much more knowledge of different cultures, traditions, moral attitudes and beliefs. It is essential nowadays for young people to think in terms of the world as a whole. They need to acquire real knowledge of the world as a whole so that it can help them to look beyond their own limited horizons, and learn to understand and respect the differences of other cultures through which, nonetheless, the aspirations of a dispersed but caring humanity are expressed. The Christian school can contribute by teaching languages, history, geography, promoting the discussion of cultural questions and encouraging human solidarity.

– **Ability to live and work with others.** The Christian school believes that teaching people to live and work as part of a group is one of the primary aims of the education of young people (21). The participation of a young person in the life of a group introduces him to the demands inherent in collective life. It helps him also to know and accept himself better by learning how to know others better and accept them. This process of social education and self-awareness must begin at school. It will prepare the young person to take his place in the arena of adult society. To what extent does the Christian school always fulfil its ecclesial mission?

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(8) **Collectif, Quillet Flammarion.** *Dictionnaire Usuel*, Paris, 1973, p. 506.

(9) *Idem.* p. 325.

(10) *L'Ecole Catholique.* Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, Rome, 1977, p. 7.

(11) **Bureau Pédagogique.** *Le caractère des établissements de De La Salle.* May 3rd 1994, p. 4.

(12) **Sauvage, Michel and Campos, Miguel.** *Annoncer l'Évangile aux pauvres*, Beauchesne, Paris, 1977, p. 291.

(13) **Collectif.** *Les Frères des Ecoles Chrétiennes et leur rôle dans l'éducation populaire.* Montpellier, 1981, p. 27-28.

(14) **Khoury, F. Ildefonse.** *Congrès diocésain pastoral.* Amicale des prêtres, 1993, p. 104-108.

(15) **Sauvage, Michel and Campos, Miguel.** *op.cit.* p. 295.

(16) *Association La Salle, Frères et laïcs ensemble.* Fleurus, 1990, p. 63.

(17) **Rigal, Jean,** *op.cit.* p. 86.

(18) *42nd General Chapter, Circular 435,* Brothers of the Christian Schools, Rome, 1993, p. 63.

(19) *Idem,* p. 24.

(20) **Honoré, Jean,** *Aujourd'hui l'école catholique.* Le Centurion, p. 100.

(21) *Id.* p. 101.