

Educational and training challenges: preparing young generations for the future

Archbishop Angelo Vincenzo Zani

In his speech at the audience granted to the Diplomatic Corps accredited to the Holy See on January 9th last, Pope Francis addressed the topic of this meeting, namely how to work out new development models to overcome the crises, divisions, inequalities and injustices that mark our era. As part of this picture, he remarked that young people are full of dreams and hopes and want to create a more humane world; therefore "adults must not abdicate their educational task", but "lead young people to spiritual, human and social maturity". To stimulate this commitment, the Pope, among other events, is promoting a worldwide event on 14th May on the theme: "*Reinventing the global pact on education.*".

Consequently, to have sustainable development in the long term, investment in education is an indispensable tool in the preparation of the younger generations. And the Pope's invitation reflects the concern that many feel when looking to the future, in particular the efforts being made by international bodies, which are attempting to indicate objectives and map out ways to facilitate a response to current challenges and lead towards change.

1. 21st century scenarios

The complex scenarios that typify the first decades of this 21st century are obvious to the eyes of the most attentive observers; young people who want to reconcile their existence with their ideals: when making important choices they certainly have to face fundamental options, but these are inevitably connected to very concrete and often problematic aspects concerning work, profession, income, family, affections, etc. The challenges associated with these areas make the young person indecisive and insecure in their choices and less inclined to take risks.

The OECD Report¹ through its program for 2030 called *Strategic Learning Framework*, has examined these issues closely, obviously from the standpoint of the economy and development, and therefore from the perspective of youth employment in the years to come². And to understand what professional skills will be required of 21st century young people, it indicates first of all that current education systems will

¹ The initials OECD stand for *Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development*.

² The international conference was held in Rome on 19 September 2017 on the theme: "*What skills for young people of the 21st century? What can the Italian school do?*".

have to be redefined by dealing with an unprecedented change in the frame of reference, exemplified by an explosion of needs and scientific knowledge and by very complex social problems.

On the one hand, the backdrop to the century that has just begun, will continue to be that of an endangered environment, of a continuously increasing population with decreasing resources, of climate change which calls upon everyone's responsibility and the needs of future generations. On the other hand, new challenges caused by the interaction between technology and globalization, will manifest themselves more intensely³. The OECD Report points out that to act effectively in the future world, young people must be *innovative, responsible and aware*: to this end, more open and dynamic conceptual models and a reference framework are needed, along with a system of knowledge that acts as a learning compass to help young people navigate their lives and their world.

In other words, education must prepare young people to commit themselves to operate in the world through a more active and dynamic approach. This is why in the first instance more training processes based on transformation are needed whereby imagination, intellectual curiosity, constant commitment, collaboration, resilience and self-discipline are consolidated.

Secondly, today's ever-increasing complex reality entails the need for education on *how to deal with tensions, dilemmas and trade-offs*. In this society, solutions to problems will result from the ability to seek a balance between equity and freedom, autonomy and solidarity, innovation and continuity, efficiency and respect for the democratic process. Competent people will be needed but they must have *empathy* (i.e. the ability to understand the point of view of others); *adaptability* (i.e. the ability to modify one's perceptions in the light of new experiences and new information); and *trust* in others and in the future (namely, the theme of hope).

Thirdly, training in *responsibility* will be needed. It is the transformative competence that leads individuals to "think for themselves and share their positions". Young people must be trained in the ability to consider the consequences of their actions, a sense of responsibility and moral and intellectual maturity to reflect on their actions and evaluate them on the basis of what is right and what is wrong. And this ability to judge is linked to *ethics*, namely, the ability to answer questions based on norms, values, meanings and limits.

Faced with this scenario, the indications provided by the UNESCO document on the 2030 objectives for education, seen as indispensable tools for achieving lasting

³ Cf. M. STEVENSON, *The OECD 2030 reference framework for learning*, report to the TREELLE conference mentioned above.

development⁴, are completely acceptable. It calls for a profound change in the training processes, aimed at the well-being of individuals and the prosperity of our societies. In essence, the training systems are asked to help achieve this: develop the skills that make individuals *capable of reflecting* on their own actions, taking into account the social, cultural and economic consequences and the present and future context; that *education be of quality and long-lasting*; that training systems focus on a *transforming pedagogy* and this requires a rethink of the contents and the results.

In other words, young people must acquire a series of skills and abilities, such as, for example, knowing how to understand and analyze relationships and complex systems; understand the evolution of possible future scenarios with a vision that knows how to anticipate risks and changes; understand and analyze the rules and values on which to base one's actions, knowing how to negotiate them in different and contradictory contexts; collectively conceive and implement innovative actions that increase the level of the common good; knowing how to learn from others, understanding and respecting the needs and points of view of others; knowing how to question the rules, practices and opinions, to reflect on one's values and perceptions and so be able to take a position.

Again, UNESCO summarizes the various learning objectives in three fundamental categories: *the cognitive sphere* (which includes knowledge and skills regarding reflection on existing problems); *the socio-emotional sphere* (which includes the social skills that allow you to collaborate, negotiate and communicate); *the behavioral sphere* (relating to the competences concerning concrete action).

2. The challenge of artificial intelligence

Within this context of epochal changes, the challenge of artificial intelligence also appears to be increasingly significant. Secret algorithms influence our readings, divert attention, reduce the general vision, lead thinking towards prefabricated concepts to which the individual submits unconsciously. The domination of *fake news* and the intrusiveness of “fictitious bubbles” in the so-called *post-truth* are a clear testimony to this. Due to the foregoing reasons, of no less importance is the protection of personal data, transparency of information and non-discrimination within the framework of the alarming growth in cyber-bullying and "hate speech" ⁵.

However, one must not simply demonize *tout court* the application of *artificial intelligence*. Their use, especially in the didactic field, could be of help to traditional

⁴ UNESCO, L'éducation en vue des objectifs de développement durable: Objectifs d'apprentissage, UNESCO, Paris 2017

⁵ COUNCIL OF EUROPE, *Unboxing Artificial Intelligence: 10 Steps to protect Human Rights*, CoE, Strasbourg 2019.

teaching methods by personalizing the pedagogical approach with ad hoc programs using engaging proposals which can also be given in a lighthearted way. In some western countries - as recent sector statistics show – this is an ideal platform especially for mathematical and scientific subjects where it is often difficult to find specialized teachers⁶.

3. Rebuilding the educational pact

An interesting perspective to be considered for the formation of future generations is shown by the rich patrimony of *the Church's social doctrine* by means of which the ecclesial magisterium confronts the great challenges of the changing world, providing principles and guidelines for life. It inspires the Holy See's multilateral diplomacy and international cooperation and complements its work with numerous educational and academic institutions throughout the world.

In his message of September 12th, 2019, and in his latest speech to the Diplomatic Corps, the Pope explains clearly the objectives for a new Educational Pact, as a response to the problems mentioned above. I would like to summarize them by highlighting that they are taken from the Church's social thinking of the last decades, from Vatican II to today, and, in particular, in the four papal encyclicals where one can perceive a strong convergence: Paul VI's *Populorum Progressio*, John Paul II's *Centesimus Annus* (as well as *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*), Benedict XVI's *Caritas in Veritate* and Pope Francis's *Laudato Si* '7 with other documents of his magisterium.

There are three main perspectives set out in Pope Montini's encyclical and picked up again by his successors. The first perspective is that building a new civilization comes from awareness that "***the world suffers from lack of thought***" (*Populorum Progressio* 85). This idea raises the issue of the truth of development and development in all its dimensions, to the point of underlining the current need to promote an orderly interdisciplinarity of knowledge and skills at the service of integral human development.

The second perspective is the idea that "***there is no true humanism if not open to the Absolute***" (*Populorum Progressio* 42) and the rich post-PP magisterium also moves towards the prospect of promoting integral humanism. Today, we are still faced with the urgent need to develop the whole of man and of all men.

⁶ *Artificial Intelligence Market in the US Education Sector 2018-2022*, Technavio, Toronto 2018.

⁷ For the sake of brevity, I am limiting myself to the similarity between these two encyclicals, without taking into consideration another important social encyclical, John Paul II's, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, published in 1987 on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of *Populorum Progressio*. (Development of Peoples)

The third perspective is the idea that a **lack of fraternity** is the origin of injustice (cf. PP. 66). Paul VI appealed to charity and truth when he invited people - especially those with political responsibilities - to work "*with [all] their heart and all [their] intelligence*" (*Populorum progressio* 82), to build a "civilization of "love".

I would like to dwell briefly on these three fundamental directions – **organizing thought, opening up to the Absolute and developing fraternity** that can stimulate the pedagogical sciences and academic channels to offer a satisfactory range of knowledge, capable of initiating processes that help young generations to deal with current challenges.

1. *Thinking Openly*

What does *bring order to your thoughts* mean? First of all, in a society like today's, with the epochal changes that are profoundly affecting the human adventure which has become planetary interdependent, we must ask ourselves *what is humanity becoming?* In fact, we can observe that what emerges from the joint engines of science / technology / economy is an "*augmented man*", an *amplified man* but one who is in no way a better man; he is a man who is introduced into a society governed by algorithms, tending to be guided by artificial intelligence, with the real risk of becoming a superficial and banal machine⁸. In this context, the younger generations must be educated courageously to "*know how to think*" in order to have the possibility to be free and creative when faced with the lethal information weapon (the computer) that can disintegrate society: the younger generations must be educated to think logically in order to be free within reality. In particular, there is a need for a set of transdisciplinary knowledge, capable of extracting, assimilating and integrating knowledge which, unfortunately, is still separate, compartmentalized, fragmented. A new approach is needed, a *complex and orderly way of thinking*, that is capable of connecting and formulating knowledge and not merely juxtaposing it⁹.

2. *Discovery of the Absolute*

The second viewpoint, as I mentioned above, consists in the idea that "*there is no true humanism if not open to the Absolute*" (PP. 42). The problem of the human quest, above all in the current convulsions of culture and society, raises a fundamental question: what is *human*? Unfortunately, the nature of our own identity is not taught

⁸ Cf. E. MORIN, *Preface* to the volume of M. CERUTI, *The time of complexity*, Raffaello Cortina Editore, Milan 2018, VII-X.

⁹ *Ibid.*

in our schools and universities, and therefore is not familiar and understood by our minds. All the elements useful for recognising it, are dispersed in countless sciences, including art and literature. In this perspective, it is crucial to *design a new planetary humanism* that can only come from the encounter between the different cultures of the planet, from the ability to think together about unity and multiplicity, from the courage to face challenges by immersing oneself fearlessly in reality and above all by being open to the Absolute.

Starting from the anthropological vision which was pondered during the Council, Pope Francis affirmed that "educating in a Christian manner is to accompany children and young people in the human values present in all reality, and one of these realities is *transcendence*". This vertical dimension of man intersects with the horizontal one and together they lead to the paths of encounter and the building of bridges towards everyone with respect, esteem and mutual acceptance. All this confirms what St. John Paul II already maintained in *Centesimus annus*, reiterating that "today's social doctrine is especially aimed at man, as he is part of the complex network of relationships of modern societies. The human sciences [...] help to interpret the centrality of man within society and to enable him to better understand himself as a "social being". Only faith however, fully reveals his true identity to him, and it is precisely from this that the social doctrine of the church commences, drawing on all the contributions made by the sciences and philosophy, helping man on the path of salvation "¹⁰.

3. *Solidarity and fraternity*

Therefore, what is essential for the human being is becoming fully themselves only in their openness to the "you" and the "us", since the human being is created for relationship, dialogue and synchronic and diachronic union. We are indebted to others for many things and we must look at others by overcoming the false idea of man's autonomy - he is not a complete "I" in himself - but becomes so through a fraternal and united relationship with otherness, with the "us". We must start from the basic idea that humanity is constitutionally incomplete and its individual and cultural manifestations are manifold. In this perspective, education is called to transform itself, and will in turn transform the world if it places the principle of "*universal brotherhood*", of "*solidarity*" at the heart of its plans.

Following this line, the principal mission of the *Agenda 2030 for Education* with its target to *leave no-one behind*, is acceptable. This principle is structured as an imperative of *ongoing education* so that - in addition to access for all - there are

¹⁰ JOHN PAUL II, *Centesimus annus*, 54

adequate interventions throughout the entire life span. For this reason, it is stated that "all age groups, including adults, should have the opportunity to learn and continue learning"¹¹. In this way, an open, inclusive, decent and fair education becomes the catalyst to achieve all the other *Sustainable Development Goals*¹² and consolidate an *educational society*¹³ that knows how to be truly open and inclusive. Obviously, such an educational task is not entrusted to the school or university alone, but - as is emphasized in the *Incheon Declaration* - to the different educational agencies.

I would like to conclude by reiterating again that in order to prepare young generations for the future, what is needed is an education based on transformation. Pope Francis denounces the breaking down of the *educational pact*¹⁴ in the name of a certain exclusive rigidity and a dehumanizing neo-positivism¹⁵. There is an urgent need to promote solid education, providing young people with spaces for discussion and personal intervention and, above all, offering them the means to develop the *culture of dialogue*.

Reconsideration of the educational sphere is needed and more generally "understanding" in terms of otherness and solidarity but also through the introduction of new models, going beyond a simple methodological organization of training processes to one based on a genuine "anthropological re-writing". A supportive and humanized education does not just provide a training service, albeit of a high level, but deals with its results within the overall framework of the personal, moral and social attitudes of the participants in the educational process¹⁶.

In his message for the launch of the Educational Pact, Pope Francis, without beating about the bush invites us, "to revive the commitment for and with the younger generations, renewing the passion for a more open and inclusive education, capable of patient listening, constructive dialogue and mutual understanding. Never before now, as the Holy Father emphasized, has there been a need to join efforts in a broad educational alliance to form mature people, capable of overcoming

¹¹ D. PAUL, *World Education Forum 2015 Adopts Incheon Declaration on Education for All by 2030*, International Institute for Sustainable Development, Winnipeg 2015
<http://sdg.iisd.org/news/world-education-forum-2015-adopts-incheon-declaration-on-education-for-all-by-2030/>

¹² See UNESCO, *Education 2030. Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action for the Implementation of SDG 4*, UNESCO Paris, 2017.

¹³ Cf. E. FAURE, *Apprendre à être*, UNESCO -Fayard, Paris 1972, 184 et seq.

¹⁴ "A rift has opened between family and society, between family and school, the educational pact is broken today; and so, the educational alliance of society with the family has entered into crisis." POPE FRANCIS, *Catechesis* (20th May 2015): *L'Osservatore Romano*, 21st May 2015, p. 8.

¹⁵ Cf. POPE FRANCIS, *Address to the participants at the World Congress promoted by the Congregation for Catholic Education*, 21st November, 2015

¹⁶ Cf. CONGREGATION FOR CATHOLIC EDUCATION, *Educating to fraternal humanism...*, op. cit., no. 10.

fragmentation and opposition and rebuilding the fabric of relationships for a more fraternal humanity. "¹⁷

The Church is combining all its efforts to make this invitation happen by starting a process of social and cultural transformation. In conclusion, I renew the invitation of Pope Francis to take an active part in the reconstruction of the educational pact.

¹⁷ POPE FRANCIS, *Message for the launch of the Educational Pact*, 12 September 2019.