

Youth poverty and social exclusion:

The difficult construction of the future

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1. Poverty: unprecedented protagonists in new scenarios

The undoubted progress recorded in the last ten years on poverty reduction, especially in developing countries, did not annul the consequences of the phenomenon. Instead, they brought out new aspects compared to the past. Rather than decreasing, poverty has increased in developed countries and affects young people and women dramatically; economic poverty is flanked by social poverty which is less detected and studied; inequalities increase, especially in developed countries, and polarization is heightened.

The latest statistical data¹ show that the goal of eradicating poverty by 2030, as foreseen by the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs No. 1) is still a long way off. As the president of the World Bank Jim Yong Kim said, we still have a long way to go if we want poverty in all its forms to be wiped out and everywhere in the world. To promote inclusive growth, we need to invest in human capital. This is a task that challenges everyone.

Speaking about this task which concerns everyone, allow me to mention my admiration for *Centesimus's* choice - which I share - to analyze in 2020 the three ways that allow you to participate fully in the project to develop an integral ecology. The three ways, as you know, are: education, *governance* and business models.

This conference decided to focus on the first of the three ways: education. It is a question of doing it in a mindful way - as the Italian Bishops wrote (n.5) in the document

¹ A positive fact is that in the last 25 years more than a billion people have risen from extreme poverty (this is the first poverty threshold, that is, having less than \$ 1.90 per day). However, a figure to reflect on is that at the end of 2015 (the last year for which reliable data are available, World Bank source), one in ten people in the world still lived in conditions of extreme poverty equal to about 736 million people, of whom 25 percent are children. Furthermore, the situation varies greatly from country to country. In the period 2013-2015, a large part of the reduction was in fact concentrated in China and India, while in the Middle East and North Africa, the absolute poor even increased due to the conflicts in Yemen and Syria. The most critical situation occurs in sub-Saharan Africa.

Looking at the situation of relative poverty (it consists of living on 3.20 dollars a day in developing countries and with \$5.50 in industrialised countries), what emerges is that about half of the world population (i.e. 3.4 billion out of a total of around 7.5 billion) have a lower income than these standard values and therefore struggle to secure basic products and services.

Educating in the good life of the Gospel, for the pastoral Guidelines for the years 2010-2020 - (aware of the) "difficulties that education is facing today. Among these, skepticism about its own possibility stands out. Educational projects are increasingly becoming short-term programs. On the other hand, a cold undercurrent is jolting the classic spaces of the family and school. We ourselves are troubled by it and we (the Bishops) feel the urgent need to reaffirm the value of education starting from these fundamental places ".

We know that education is not limited to transmitting cognitive knowledge. It also concerns socio-emotional and behavioral knowledge. Education aims to build human capital that responds to the needs of the new context, but also aims to rebuild social capital "... that is, the set of relationships of trust, dependability, respect for the rules that are indispensable for any civil coexistence (*Laudato Si'* ', 128; *Caritas in Veritate*, 32).

2. Education: when meaningful questions are followed by trivial answers

Education. What importance should be given this word?

Educating means first of all transmitting, communicating and testifying in a credible and effective manner the *reasons for living* in a meaningful way. For this reason, one of the most worrying aspects of the "educational emergency" confronting us, is the *distance* between the question of reasons for living and the answers that are provided by individual educators or by what someone calls "educational agencies". I would also add that between the request for reasons for living and the answers to this request, authentic short circuits can be triggered. G. Bernanos highlighted it well. Recalling the victims of the First World War, especially those who died in the trenches of the Parisian basin of the Marne river, the French writer attributes a bitter observation to the youngest among the dead: "*We asked our fathers for a reason to live and they sent us to die in the trenches.*"

The question of reasons for living, that is, the question of reasons not to die, addressed by those young people - who are basically those of all times - was not only not accepted by their fathers in its deepest meaning, but was hijacked, symbolically, on the Marne, that is, in a trench that saw the death of three hundred thousand young French and Germans over the course of a couple of days.

Faced with the worrying signs of the educational emergency, I would not like us to resign ourselves to the inevitability of the river Marne trench which, at this point, would become the symbol of the inability to answer real questions. Indeed, it would become a symbol of the betrayal of those questions.

Educational failures and the consequent acknowledged educational emergency represent the price to be paid every time; while continuing to proclaim the centrality of the person, their nature and values are simplified to the point of being underestimated.

Leaving to others analysis of the traits of the personal universe that must act as reference points for proper formative action, I am limiting myself to proposing a segment of the human story of Job, with the intent to understand, with you, one of the fundamental characteristics of contemporary man and therefore an essential starting point to exit from the educational emergency and take the path that can make us real educators.

In the midst of his dramatic human story, the biblical patriarch goes in search of *sensible answers* to the *real questions* he was mulling over. When three of his friends go to see him to console him, Job rebels and strongly refuses their explanations that are "religious" in form, but ideological in substance. At the same time, however, and in this terrible condition, the biblical patriarch does not stop asking God questions, that is, he does not stop looking for the *relationship* with him.

Like the biblical patriarch, each of us is a person increasingly capable of asking *sensible questions* - a person who has many ways to express their need for authentic *relationships*. When the pragmatism of the questions and the need for relationships are followed by little or no practical answers, then those mechanisms are triggered that lead everyone to speak of an "educational emergency". And, if the continuity between the story of Job and one of the fundamental characteristics of contemporary man is true, then I feel I can say that the first step in order to exit from the emergency is recovery of the *relationship* that, in our context, acquires the nature of an "educational relationship". If I could make a suggestion, while talking about the first way to achieve an integral ecology and looking at the contemporary anthropological framework, I would immediately identify it with the "educational relationship", rather than with the simple reference to education.

The educational relationship is not just one of the many components of human experience. It is the way in which human life grows and "humanizes", achieves and evolves towards its ultimate goal. Therefore, there can be no pastoral commitment by the Church which does not pay attention to the field of education rightly defined as of extreme importance (*gravissimum momentum*) as shown by the title of the Second Vatican Council's Declaration (*Gravissimum educationis*).

The educational formula of Pope Francis, if we want to be reductive, is quite simple and can be reconstructed starting from his daily work. In his speeches the call to the multiform

unity of the person, made up of thought, feeling and action (mind, heart and hands) often recurs; the importance of example and personal testimony is also evident, which has made him a communicator (and therefore an educator) who is ever more effective and followed. Everyone is able to appreciate in his speeches the use of simple and evocative images, typical of Jesuit pedagogy. And yet, one cannot ignore his open gaze on the whole of human reality and his invitation to keep open the horizon of an educational activity that neglects nothing that is authentically human. Obviously and finally, attention cannot be lacking for the least and the weakest, who because of their condition, should be the natural recipients of any educational process.

3. Young people, between exclusion and a future they are denied

A careful look at the least and the weakest, the natural recipients of the educational process, leads us to observe that, today more than ever, poverty is accompanied by the phenomenon of social exclusion. The situation of disadvantaged and abandoned people has taken on particular importance in both quantitative and qualitative terms.

Social exclusion is a new type of poverty, fueled by the development model and the dominant culture. Exclusion is discrimination, it is impossible to acquire citizenship or residence. All in all, it means to feel and be excluded from opportunities for growth and integral development. This is what is experienced in what the Pope himself calls "the peripheries". Place, or rather places categorized by the culture of rejection and exclusion.

In the face of precise analysis that accurately records the culture of rejection and the evidence of exclusion, our task is above all to be on guard. To ensure that these bitter realities (poverty, exclusion, peripheries, waste) are not reduced to words - a *passpartout* - to be brought out in political debates and electoral programs and mainly subject to intermittent attention and systematic exploitation.

This is certainly not the way indicated by Pope Francis, who instead, in *Laudato Si'* , warns against: "*Obstructionist attitudes, even on the part of believers, that can range from denial of the problem, to indifference, nonchalant resignation, or blind confidence in technical solutions*"(14).

Poverty and exclusion, especially the exclusion of young people, are particularly worrying aspects. In fact, economic poverty is compounded by the paralyzing fear of the future due to

lack of work², uncertainty about which profession to choose and precariousness. Conditions that postpone and sometimes prevent the creation of a family and often cause difficulties to the stability of feelings.

4. From knowledge to action

Knowing the causes for the persistence of poverty and social exclusion is not enough. Knowledge is not enough if as Pope Francis writes in *Laudato Si'* (109) "*We are all too slow to see, which are the deepest roots of our present failures, which have to do with the direction, goals, meaning and social implications of technological and economic growth* " (LS, 109).

The answer to this harsh observation by the Pope can and must come from those with *governance* responsibilities at different levels. Those with responsibility are called to plan and promote interventions to stem the damage resulting from an ungoverned globalization and scientific and technological development dominated by the technocratic paradigm. The areas that require greater attention with a view to the reduction of poverty and social exclusion, are those relating to the weakening of social cohesion, the result of weakened, fluid, almost non-existent relationships³ and those concerning the demographic issue and the environmental emergency.

The educational emergency, of which Pope Benedict XVI also spoke with such force⁴, also affects these areas. Allowing everyone access to a well-built education is a powerful engine for reducing poverty and exclusion. It is particularly so in the current context where the required knowledge has changed radically and continues to evolve and young people are required to

² If we want to create an economy with a human face, we cannot exclude young people. I recall that unemployed young people aged between 15 and 24 were 3.4 million in 2018 out of a total of 22.4 million individuals employed in various ways and at various levels of education on an average in the 28 countries that made up the European Union, (Eurostat data) with an incidence of 15.2%. In Italy the figure is more than double. Of particular note is the data regarding inactive young people, so-called NEET (*no education, no employment and no training*) at the end of 2018, always in the 28 EU countries, amounted to 15 million in the 20-34 age group, 16.5% of the population, (source Eurostat), in the same year in Italy it was 28.9 percent. The incidence of NEET women is worrying being equal to 20.9 percent in Europe compared to 12.2 percent of males and 34.2 percent in Italy compared to 23.8 percent of men. There is a very relevant parity problem. In Europe, 27.7 percent of young people in the 16-29 age group, equal to 21.8 million individuals, are at risk of poverty and exclusion; in the ten years from 2007-2017, the risk increased.

³ The lack of education and relationship is also the cause of depression and desperation that lead to suicide (Cf. USA study quoted by Prof. Leonardo Becchetti in his speech on 16/01/20 at the UCID conference, "Generating Social Value").

⁴ BENEDICT XVI, *Letter to the Diocese and to the city of Rome on the urgent task of education*, 21st January, 2008.

be flexible, innovative and responsible. Aware that cognitive poverty is destined, sooner or later, to turn into economic and social poverty.

Of course, access to a good education is expensive. For this reason, those who cultivate a particular sensitivity and have the cultural tools and resources to do so must actively work for the activation of public-private partnership initiatives, by increasing the availability of scholarships, for example and opening up credit to young people at low cost or at zero cost. While acknowledging that there are already experiences in progress in this sense, it cannot be said that these actions are exactly among the programmatic priorities of many governments. And what about the delays that, beyond circumstantial slogans, are recorded in terms of investments in projects that see women as the main protagonists?

In Africa it has been shown that the economic aid made available to women is mainly used for the health and education of children. Those given to men have mostly been used to meet men's needs. How many obstacles to access to credit do women who want to start an economic activity still find!

Of course, something is changing. For example, the growing number of those who recognize that the current economic system is an unstable and unbalanced system and that the paradigm must be changed. The number of companies that, even at the request of investors, are evaluating the impact of their business and want to adopt the SGE (Energy Management System) criteria. As the World Human Forum points out, these include instruction and therefore training and education. It is one of the seven factors that leads to happiness together with income, health, freedom of initiative, the absence of corruption, the quality of relationships and gratuitousness. These elements do not grow instinctively and require everyone's commitment in the direction indicated by Pope Francis in *Laudato Si'* ', when in point 220, he writes: "... by developing our individual God-given capacities, ecological conversion can inspire us to greater creativity and enthusiasm in resolving the world's problems. [... The believer] does not interpret his own superiority as a reason for personal glory or irresponsible dominion, but rather as a different ability which in turn entails a serious responsibility stemming from our faith".

✠ Nunzio Galantino

President

Administration of the Patrimony of the Apostolic See