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LA BELLEZZA EDUCHERÀ IL MONDO (BEAUTY WILL EDUCATE THE WORLD)

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by Julián Carrón

President of the Fraternity of Communion and Liberation

Education is the great challenge that we all have to face. It is not by chance that we speak of an “educational emergency.” Education has always been crucial in introducing younger generations to life. What is different today than in the past? Why do we speak today in such dramatic terms of educational emergency? It is only in answering these questions that we can understand the significance of pope Francis’ contribution on this issue from when he was still archbishop of Buenos Aires.

What is the challenge we are facing? In an article published in [the Italian national paper] *la Repubblica* a few years ago on today’s younger generation, entitled “The Eternal Adolescents,” Pietro Citati wrote: “There was a time when one became an adult very quickly. Today there is perpetual race towards immaturity. There was a time when a boy grew up at all costs and attaining maturity was a sacrifice. Today, young people do not know who they are. Perhaps they do not want to know. They always ask themselves what their “I” is; they love indecision! They never say yes or no: they are always standing on a threshold that perhaps will never open. They have no will; they have no desire to act. They prefer to remain passive and live enveloped in a mysterious torpor. They do not love time. To them, time is merely a series of moments, that are not linked in a chain or shaped into a story.”¹

Eugenio Scalfari wrote a response to this article, which was published in the same national paper, *la Repubblica*. He argued that the wound young people suffer from today is the loss of identity and memory: “The wound was the silence of the fathers, too caught up in the race for success and power. The wound was boredom, unassailable boredom, existential boredom that has killed time and history, passion and hope. I do not find in them the profound melancholy of the young renaissance faces painted by Titian. I see eyes that are bewildered, ecstatic, stunned, fleeing, greedy without desire, alone in the midst of the crowd that surrounds them. I see hopeless eyes. [...] Eternal children. [...] I see a desperate generation [...] approaching. They try to escape the plastic emptiness that surrounds and suffocates them. Their salvation lies only in their hearts. We can only look on them with love and trepidation.”²

An educator, with an extensive experience of relating to young people, Luigi Giussani, used an image to describe this “mysterious torpor”: “It is as though the young people of today

¹ P. Citati, «Gli eterni adolescenti» [“The Eternal Adolescents”], in *La Repubblica*, 2 August 1999, p. 1.

² E. Scalfari, «Quel vuoto di plastica che soffoca i giovani» [“That plastic emptiness that suffocates young people”], in *La Repubblica*, 5 August 1999, p. 1.

have been invested [...] by radiation from Chernobyl—structurally the body is the same as before, [one does not note any apparent change], but dynamically it is no longer the same [it is as though the body no longer had any energy, because of the radiation] [...] It is as though there were no real evidence if not trends, because trends are [an instrument] a project of power.”³

The consequence of the weakness described above is, as don Giussani always says, that “[what] one listens to and sees is not really assimilated. What one is surrounded by, the dominant mentality [...], power, creates [in us] a sense of estrangement from ourselves” – it is as though they had torn us away from our very self–. “On the one hand, one remains abstract in the relationship with oneself [not just with others, but also with ourselves—one only has to think of how much time one is able to spend in solitude, in a moment of silence; we have to flee immediately, distract ourselves immediately, it’s as though we were incapable of staying in our own company in the way we would if we felt at home], as though drained in terms of affection.”⁴ The detachment from ourselves becomes a detachment from everything: nothing can truly interest us, and therefore indifference prevails.

Faced with this situation one cannot think to respond with rules or ethical appeals, since these have already proven themselves to be ineffective. They are incapable of making the person who needs to be educated spring into action, they are incapable of awakening the desire of the “I.” Without the “I” in action there can be no education.

Where, then, does one start up again in this situation? Despite everything, that “hot point” of the soul, which Cesare Pavese spoke of, lingers on within man.⁵ It is precisely around this hot point that a proposal that truly corresponds to one’s humanity can gravitate. Pope Francis understood it very well when, clearly identifying what this hot point was, he said: “Man is not at peace within his own limits, rather he is a being ‘on a journey’ [...] and when he does not enter into this dynamic, his person disappears or he becomes corrupt. What moves man to begin this journey is an inner restlessness that pushes man to ‘step out of himself.’ [...] There is something, outside and within us, that calls us to undertake this journey.”⁶ That restlessness, of which Augustine spoke, lingers on in the depth of man’s being.

This restlessness is the origin of desire, the hot point of the heart.

At the same time, there is always an attempt to anesthetize desire: “Worldly systems seek to quell man, to anesthetize his desire to embark on this journey, with promises of possession and consumption [...]. In this way man is alienated from the possibility of recognising and listening to the most profound desire of his heart. Our attention is drawn to the numerous ‘alibi’ that manipulate our desire [...] and offer, in exchange, an apparent peace. [...] greed, lust, avarice, anger, envy, sadness, sloth, boastfulness, pride. [...] are certainly excuses, cop-outs that hide something else: fear of freedom [...]. They act as a

³ L. Giussani, *L’io rinasce in un incontro (1986-1987)* [*The “I” is Reborn in an Encounter: 1986-1987*], Bur, Milano 2010, pp. 181-182.

⁴ *Ivi.*

⁵ Cfr. C. Pavese, «A Rosa Calzecchi Onesti» [“To Rosa Calzecchi Onesti”], 14 June [1949], *Lettere 1926-1950* [*Letters 1926-1950*], Einaudi, Torino 1968, vol. 2, p. 655.

⁶ J.M. Bergoglio - Francis, *La bellezza educerà il mondo* [*Beauty will educate the World*], Emi, Bologna 2014, p. 8.

refuge. Fundamentalism is based on the rigidity of a uniform thought, within which the person seeks protection from destabilizing instances (and crises) in exchange for a sort of existential quietism.”⁷

In this context, then-archbishop Bergoglio advised educators to be careful not to use any educational instruments to reduce desire: “Discipline is a means, a necessary remedy at the service of the overall education (of the person), but it should not be transformed into a mutilation of desire. [...] Desire contrasts with necessity. The latter is satisfied as soon as the want is filled; desire, instead, is the presence of a positive good; it continuously increases, grows in structure and draws us towards something “greater.” The desire for truth proceeds from “one encounter to the next.”⁸

In this regard, the well-known psychoanalyst Massimo Recalcati observes that “desire cannot be quashed by a mere satisfaction of needs, rather it shows itself to be different from beastly cravings precisely because it is animated by a transcendence that opens it to the new, that which is not yet known, not yet thought, not yet seen.”⁹

Therefore, the great challenge for an educator is how to reawaken this desire. “How can we teach our students not to be afraid to seek the truth? How can we educate them to be free? [...] What do we have to do to ensure that our young people [...] become ‘restless’ in their search?”¹⁰

There is only one way—by introducing young people to the relationship with reality.

Yet young people do not appear to be interested in this relationship, because of that mysterious torpor that turns into an unassailable boredom.

Why is this interest absent on their part, why is it so difficult for young people to become interested in something in reality, why is it so difficult to find adults who at forty or fifty years have not become skeptical?

Fr Giussani wrote: “Not only did the abilities we possess not come into existence all by themselves, but neither do they take action by themselves. They are like a car that, in addition to being made by others, also needs another to start and run it. In a word, every human ability needs to be stirred up and encouraged in order to take action.”¹¹

What is the problem? A Spanish philosopher, María Zambrano, helps us understand the extent of the situation: “That which is in crisis is the mysterious nexus connecting our existence with reality, something that is so profound and fundamental that it is our most intimate sustenance.”¹² What is in crisis is the nexus with reality. We can see this from the fact that reality is not capable of interesting us, that often it is not able to enthrall our “I.” Therefore, if there is nothing that truly interests us, boredom prevails. Since it is this relationship with reality that sustains our “I,” our person, if nothing interests it, then all that remains is boredom.

⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 14-15.

⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 12-13.

⁹ M. Recalcati, *Il complesso di Telemaco [The Telemachus Complex]*, Feltrinelli, Milan 2013, p. 114.

¹⁰ J.M. Bergoglio - Francis, *La bellezza educerà il mondo [Beauty will educate the World]*, op. cit., p. 17.

¹¹ L. Giussani, *Il senso di Dio e l'uomo moderno [The Sense of God and Modern Man]*, Bur, Milan 2010, p. 19.

¹² Cfr. María Zambrano, *Hacia un saber del alma*, Alianza, Madrid 1993.

It seems paradoxical, since today no one would say that young people are not interested in anything. Rather, they appear to be interested in everything, never before have they had so many opportunities. Why, then, do they end up in a state of passivity and boredom? Because without meaning reality loses its attraction. This, then, is the goal of an education that addresses adequately the seriousness of the problem: to educate is to introduce the young person to reality in its totality.

This is what Pope Francis said last Saturday to all the schools across Italy: “I love school because it is synonymous with openness to reality. [...] Going to school means opening one’s mind and heart to reality, in all of its aspects and dimensions. We do not have the right to be afraid of reality!”¹³

As we can well understand, this is a problem that affects everyone: associations, schools, the Church, and political parties, because we are not dealing with a particular problem but with the problem of all problems: how to re-establish the nexus with reality—whether there is something capable of awakening the interest of our “I.” In order to awake this interest, we need an education that is an introduction to reality. Jungmann defined education as an “introduction to the totality of reality.”¹⁴ Because, without affirming its meaning, a person will not become interested in reality. For example: if we adults give a child a toy that he has never seen before, and we leave him alone with it, he will be in awe of it, but how can he be helped to understand what that toy is? Usually there is a user’s manual, which is like saying to the child: if you use it like this, you will learn how to use it properly and you will enjoy how it works. It would be inhuman to give a child a toy and not teach him how to use it. Without offering him an hypothesis on how to use it, we would abandon him to his reactions: tears and boredom.

The inability to introduce oneself to the totality of reality is not without consequences for one’s relationship with it. Einstein used to say: “Whosoever fails to recognize the unfathomable Mystery, cannot call himself a scientist.”¹⁵ Without perceiving its meaning, reality does not move us to the point of becoming interesting to us. This is the origin of nihilism, of that position that ends in boredom, because nothing arouses my interest. We thought that reality, reduced only to the transmission of knowledge and data, would continue to be attractive even without meaning, but this was not enough to continue to interest young people and adults alike. With reality reduced to nothing, without meaning, a new form of nihilism has appeared. The great philosopher Augusto Del Noce drew our attention to this years ago when he said: “Nihilism today is jovial, [in the sense that] it is without restlessness (perhaps one could [go so far as to] define it as the suppression of the Augustinian *inquietum*

¹³ Francis, *Address of Pope Francis to Students and Teachers from Schools across Italy*, 10 May 2014.

¹⁴ J.A. Jungmann, *Christus als Mittelpunkt religiöser Erziehung*, Herder & Co. G.M.B.H. Verlagsbuchhandlung, Freiburg im Breisgau 1939, p. 5.

¹⁵ A. Einstein in F. Severi, «Scoppiò cinquant’anni fa la “rivoluzione” di Einstein» [“Fifty years ago the ‘revolution’ of Einstein broke out”], in *Il Corriere della Sera*, 20 April 1955.

*cor meum [restless heart])).*¹⁶ Desire is not awakened, curiosity is not awakened. Now, only he who manages to arouse interest will be able to make a contribution to the dramatic situation in which we find ourselves.

From where can we start again, then? From reality. But reality cannot be reduced to appearance, because otherwise we grow tired of it, it makes us become arid, because it cannot capture us, interest us for an extended period of time.

Reality arouses an interest through the attraction of beauty. Jorge Mario Bergoglio recognized this: “How many abstract rationalisms and “extrinsicist” moralisms would be cured [...] if we began to think of reality first as beautiful, and only later as good and true!”¹⁷

Again, speaking to teachers and students of schools across Italy, Pope Francis said that “school educates us to the true, the good and the beautiful. All three go together. Education cannot be neutral. It is either positive or negative; it either enriches or impoverishes; it either makes a person grow or it oppresses him, it may even corrupt him. [...] A school’s mission is to develop the sense of the true, the good and the beautiful. And this happens through a rich journey.”¹⁸

Reality sparks questions. I still remember, after many years, how impressed I was when I brought my high school students to the planetarium in Madrid. After the visit we went back to school and I started to ask them questions about what, of all the things they had seen, struck them most—the stars, the galaxies etc.. But no one was struck by the stars or even asked how many galaxies there were. Instead, struck by what they had seen, they filled the board with questions such as: who made all of this? Are we the masters of this? What is the meaning of all of this? What is its purpose?

This is the problem: we have been given the gift of the most beautiful toy, that is life, all of the cosmos, but we have not come into this world with the user’s manual under our arm. This is why we ask ourselves how to live, how to learn to enjoy life, how to learn to face reality in an adequate way, so that life can truly be life, intensely lived and fascinating to live.

There must be a working hypothesis: to “educate to seek the truth, then, requires an effort to harmonize contents, routines and assessment methods. [...] It is not enough to provide explanations and information to attain this harmony. [...] It is necessary to provide, to show a living synthesis of them.”¹⁹

It is at this point that a witness is required. In fact, Pope Francis says: “This can only be done by a witness. In this way we enter into one of the most profound and beautiful aspects of being an educator: witnessing. This is what consecrates the educator as a “*master*” and makes him a companion on the path to seek the truth. By his example, the witness challenges us, breathes life into us, accompanies us, allows us to walk, to make mistakes, and even repeat our mistakes, so that we can grow. Educating [...] requires you, dear teachers, [...] to ‘know

¹⁶ A. Del Noce, *Lettera a Rodolfo Quadrelli*, [Letter to Rodolfo Quadrelli] unpublished, 1984.

¹⁷ J.M. Bergoglio - Francis, *La bellezza educherà il mondo* [Beauty will educate the World], op. cit., p. 23.

¹⁸ Francis, *Address of Pope Francis to Students and Teachers from Schools across Italy*, 10 May 2014.

¹⁹ J.M. Bergoglio - Francis, *La bellezza educherà il mondo* [Beauty will educate the World], op. cit., p. 24.

how to give reasons'; not just through conceptual explanations and isolated contents, but by your conduct and living judgements. [...] Everything becomes interesting, attractive, and at last the bells will ring to reawaken a healthy 'restlessness' in the hearts of young people. The paradigmatic example of the *master*-witness is Jesus himself."²⁰

Recalcati adds: "To become human, life requires the living presence of Another. [...] If this encounter does not occur, life is exposed to a disassociation from its meaning, it appears to be without meaning."²¹ Indeed, "how is this desire passed from one generation to the next? By a living testimony of how life can be lived with desire."²²

This is why witnessing is not possible unless, and above all, the educators take their own restlessness seriously: "To educate is of itself an act of hope. [...] Dear educators, [...] I pray that restlessness—the image of the desire that moves all of man's existence—opens your heart and points you in the direction of that hope that does not disappoint. That, as educators, you become authentic witnesses in close proximity to everyone."²³

Saturday in Rome the Pope said: "young people understand that, they have a 'nose' for it, and they are attracted by professors whose thoughts are open, 'unfinished', who are seeking something 'more', and thus they infect students with this attitude."²⁴

Our responsibility begins here.

In order to take on this responsibility, one must not succumb to the temptation to despair, as Pope Francis reminds us once again: "Temptation is an invitation to stop along the way, to despair. How can one not fall, when many, many utopias have already fallen? [...] This temptation is a serious one and the extent of its power is known by anyone who has courageously followed his heart. [...] He alone knows the difficulty and the depth of the problematic nature of his desire. [...] In this context [...] every educator is tempted by despair."²⁵

We adults have to recognize that we have not always lived up to that need.

"Let us look at young people. [...] Do we prepare them for sweeping horizons or for the future that is just around the corner? [...] We want to ask forgiveness from young people because we have not always taken them seriously. Because we do not always give them the instruments to ensure that their horizon does not end just around the corner; because often we are not able to excite enthusiasm in them by showing them those broader horizons that enable them to appreciate what they have received and must share with others. Because many times we did not know how to make them dream! [...] And when young people see evidence of shallowness in us, their leaders, then they do not have the courage to dream, they do not have the courage to grow. [...] If we will not be able to bear witness to the existence of such an outlook and work, our life will end in a corner of existence, crying bitter tears because of our failure as educators and as men and woman."²⁶

²⁰ *Ibidem*, pp. 24-25.

²¹ M. Recalcati, *Il complesso di Telemaco*, op. cit., p. 136.

²² *Ibidem*, p. 141.

²³ J.M. Bergoglio - Francis, *La bellezza educherà il mondo [Beauty will educate the World]*, op. cit., pp. 35-36.

²⁴ Francis, *Address of Pope Francis to Students and Teachers from Schools across Italy*, 10 May 2014.

²⁵ J.M. Bergoglio - Francis, *La bellezza educherà il mondo [Beauty will educate the World]*, op. cit., p. 10.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 46-48.

I will conclude with the words of pope Francis that sound as an urgent call to take responsibility: “That through our testimony—since one teaches more by example than with words—they [young people] can assimilate the fertile culture of life” [...] It is not just drugs that kill or generate a culture of death; the same happens as a consequence of the selfishness of the heart in us who have the responsibility to educate, of the narrowness of our minds, of the indifference we show to people who are stuck on the edge of existence, when we fail to stop and help them overcome their immobility and draw closer to life.”²⁷

²⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 52-53.