



In dialogue with the Secretary of the Congregation for Catholic Education

Creating Space for a Cultural Reawakening

An Interview with Archbishop Vincenzo Zani

Sections 221-223 of 'Christus vivit' are dedicated to the pastoral care of educational institutions. We spoke with Archbishop Vincenzo Zani, Secretary of the Congregation for Catholic Education since 2013. This Vatican dicastery focuses on both Catholic institutions of higher learning, as well as primary schools and other educational institution directed toward the formation of young laity.

Archbishop Zani, in the post-synodal exhortation, 'Christus Vivit', Pope Francis emphasizes that the school is 'the privileged place of personal development' and should be given maximum priority in the Christian community. Can you comment on this?

On the one hand, the Pope's insistence that the importance of education as 'the privileged place of personal development' repeats what the Conciliar Declaration *Gravissimum educationis* states regarding the human person's inalienable right to education, regardless of ethnicity, economic status, or age. On the other, I would emphasize that the educational mission of schools is even more important because of their role in helping the Church respond to today's many cultural challenges. In sections 61-75 of the exhortation, *Evangelii gaudium*, these challenges are listed and include: attacks on religious freedom, throwaway culture and the culture of mere appearances, a materialistic, consumerist and individualistic society, denial of transcendence, moral relativism and so on. Faced with such problems, schools are those places where the human person is placed at the center, irrespective of his or her culture, religion, ethnicity, or social class. Through education, every person has the right to be helped to grow and develop in his or her own intellectual and relational capacities.

While saying Catholic schools continue to be 'essential places for the evangelization of the young' Pope Francis doesn't refrain from criticizing them when they 'seem to be structured only for the sake of self-preservation,' or turned into a 'bunker', with their pastoral activities sometimes focused on religious instruction alone and often not able to stimulate lasting experiences of faith. How can these very real risks be avoided?

Pope Francis' words are forceful and challenging. He confirms that Catholic education is part of the Church's mission and achieved through a close alliance between proclamation of the faith and the promotion of integral human development. So, by balancing temporal realities and legitimate autonomy, the Church carries out her own evangelizing mission directed not only at schools, but *by means of schooling*. Thus, the Pope asks of Catholic education the same as he asks of the Church: to be turned outwards in order to face the

needs and problems of youth today, as well as those of the adults she is called to teach.

Catholic schools cannot be satisfied with communicating knowledge and skills aimed at ensuring successful and economically secure students alone. Rather they must offer 'relational' teaching. They need to develop educational programs that help students open their eyes and understand concrete situations and the multiple crises around them—economic, financial, political, democratic, demographic and migratory crises. These crises provide us with a chance to grow. A Catholic school would not fully achieve its aim if it failed to prepare young people to enter and bring their own contribution to the epochal change taking place. So, the 'open' education of the Catholic school should lead to more creative and dynamic students who are protagonists, persons capable of resolving problems and assuming responsibility for the common good. Just as the conciliar declaration mentioned: we need to educate persons to build fraternity between peoples with a focus on true unity and peace across the globe.

From your unique vantage point, there seems to be no shortage of 'best practice' experiences in which a teacher's greatest joys are fulfilled -- as the Pope says -- in those moments that a pupil becomes 'a strong, well-integrated person, a leader, someone prepared to give'...

There are plenty of experiences and extraordinary examples taking place in Catholic schools across the globe. There are, in fact, 218,000 schools attended by approximately 60 million students, with many of these students being non-Catholic.

Reports reach the Congregation during the bishops' ad limina visits and from other sources. They speak to the varied profiles and characteristics of the schools. These schools often pursue their efforts in difficult and sometimes dangerous conditions, like in parts of Central America, Venezuela, India, and many African countries. In Rwanda, for example, the network of Catholic schools there has sought to rebuild the socio-cultural fabric of the country after the tragic events of 1994 between the Tutsi and the Hutu, events which also involved former students.

Thousands of Catholic schools are developing the 'I CAN' project as a response to the call of *Laudato Si'* to build a 'common home,' committing themselves to transform how they live, as well as the environment around them. This project has led to countless stories of change in Lebanon, Syria, Northern Iraq and South Sudan. There, Catholic schools are places of refuge for those who have lost everything. Through education, they rediscover confidence, hope, and the courage to start again.

Looking at these many experiences, we can say that Catholic school education does not give up in the face of varied challenges, but rather becomes the answer to those same challenges. As a result, they create a hope-filled education, an inclusive education focused on change and creativity. It is an education in continuous search for those values that assist in the spreading of a culture of dialogue.

The Pope, in §223, said we cannot separate spiritual and cultural formation. He notes that the Church should not shy away from developing 'ways of providing youth with the best education possible', and to which they are entitled. Faced with today's cultural challenges, how can we reignite a passion for study and—as Pope Francis said—'protect wisdom, that is, knowledge that is human and

humanizing'?

That is a key passage. Existing anthropological and educational models – each with their own competing ideologies – focus on training individuals to live within society. Instead, education must become a process by which every person develops their own profound convictions and calling, and in this way contributes to their community's vocation. Humanism isn't just a way of regulating society or a system of polite manners; nor is it only a legal or social structure where one dominant group is the template for all human existence. Rather, it is the moral heart of the West, and not only of the West. To transmit 'wisdom, that is 'human and humanizing knowledge,' we need to teach not only 'building' – that is, those human actions aimed principally on production and organization at an external level. Nor is it only teaching how to 'act', by learning to imitate socially acceptable norms and behaviors of a given community. Rather, it is prioritizing and appreciating formative processes. It's an exploration of the 'contemplative' dimension of human activity with its perennial values that serve to enrich humanity and lead to an authentic life.

Francis also calls us to 'resist the temptation of siren songs' distracting us from asking today's fundamental questions about reality and the meaning of life. Instead he invites us to imitate Orpheus (who resisted the sirens' songs by singing an even more beautiful melody) rather than Ulysses (who simply tied himself to the ship's mast and blocked the ears of his traveling companions)...

This passage again recalls *Evangelii gaudium* (§§231–233), where the Pope speaks of realities being more important than ideas. 'Realities simply are, whereas ideas are worked out.' We must begin an ongoing dialogue between the two, 'lest ideas become detached from realities.' Ideas (which can resemble siren voices) should always be oriented towards grasping, understanding and directing reality. If this doesn't happen, ideas risk being changed into useless reasoning that classifies and defines problems but doesn't resolve them. Shunning contact with reality leads to an escape from reality itself or the reducing of faith into rhetoric.

Today, we certainly need sound ideas and thinking, but true and proven ones. In the 2015 World Congress on Catholic Education (Education Today and Tomorrow: A Renewing Passion), Pope Francis said something very clear in this regard: To educate in a Christian way signifies introducing children and young people to the complete reality and to all the human values contained within it, including that of *transcendence*. This vertical dimension intersects with the horizontal and together lead to pathways of encounter, of dialogue, of building welcoming bridges towards all, bridges built on mutual respect and esteem.

Edited by Mauro Mantovani, S.D.B.