

Congregation for Catholic Education

Circular Letter to Schools, Universities and Educational Institutions

The spread of Covid-19 has profoundly changed our existence and way of life: “We find ourselves afraid and lost. Like the disciples in the Gospel we were caught off guard by an unexpected, turbulent storm”¹. Adding to our health concerns, we are also faced with economic and social woes. Educational systems around the world have suffered from the pandemic at both the school and university levels. Everywhere efforts have been made to ensure a rapid response by means of digital platforms for distance learning, whose effectiveness, however, has been lessened by a marked disparity in educational and technological opportunities. According to recent data from international agencies, about ten million children will not have access to education in the coming years, thus widening the current educational gap.

Added to this, the very difficult situation of those Catholic schools and universities which, lacking economic support from the state, risk closure or radical downsizing. And yet, Catholic educational institutions (schools and universities) have been able, once again, to become the new frontier of educational concerns, placing themselves at the service of ecclesial and civil communities, and providing a public educational and cultural service for the benefit of the entire community.

Education and Relationship

In this context, which unfortunately is still out of control in many parts of the world, several challenges have emerged. First of all, *distance learning* - albeit necessary in this extremely critical moment - has shown how the educational environment is made up of people who meet and interact directly and “face-to-face”: this is not a mere secondary context to educational activity, but is the very essence of the relationship of exchange and dialogue (between teachers and learners) that is indispensable for the formation of the human person and for a critical understanding of reality. In classrooms, lecture halls and laboratories, we grow together and build a relational identity. In all ages of life - but all the more so in childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood - the process of psycho-pedagogical growth cannot take place without the encounter with others, and the presence of others gives rise to the necessary conditions for creativity and inclusion to flourish. In the field of scientific research, academic

¹ POPE FRANCIS, *Extraordinary moment of prayer on the parvis of St. Peter's Basilica*, 27 March 2020.

investigation and, in general, educational activity, interpersonal relationships are the “place” where transdisciplinarity and interdisciplinarity emerge as fundamental cultural criteria to curb the risks of fragmentation and disintegration of knowledge, as well as to open this same knowledge to the light of Revelation.

Forming Educators

The pandemic’s pervasive and protracted presence has also generated a widespread sense of uncertainty among teachers and educators. Their invaluable contribution - which has changed profoundly over the years, from both social and technical standpoints - needs to be supported through robust *continuing formation* programs that can meet the needs of our time, without losing the synthesis between faith, culture, and life, which is the keystone of the educational mission that is pursued in Catholic schools and universities. Teachers bear so many responsibilities and their commitment must be increasingly transformed into *real, creative, and inclusive action*. Thanks to their work, a spirit of fraternity and sharing is nourished not only with learners, but also between generations, religions, and cultures, as well as between humans and the environment.

Focus on the Human Person

For this to happen, the *relationship with and between real human persons* who are part of the *educational community* must be put at the center; this relationship cannot be suitably accommodated within interactions mediated by screens or in the impersonal connections of digital networks. *Real human persons* are the heart and soul of formal and informal educational processes, as well as an inexhaustible source of life by virtue of their essentially relational and communal nature, which always implies a twofold dimension: vertical (open to communion with God) and horizontal (communion among human beings). Catholic education - inspired by the Christian vision of reality in all its expressions - aims at the integral formation of human persons who are called to live a specific vocation responsibly in solidarity with other people.

In a world where “everything is closely interrelated”², we feel united in finding new educational paths - in line with Christian anthropology - that allow us to grow together using the relational tools that are offered by current technology, but above all by opening ourselves to listening to the *voice of others*: an irreplaceable and honest endeavor that requires us to dedicate time to common reflection and planning, drawing on personal stories, shared projects, the teachings of history and the wisdom of past generations. In this process of *formation in relationships and in the culture of encounter*, our “common home” with all creatures also has its place and value, because people, while they are formed to the logic of communion and solidarity, already work

² POPE FRANCIS, Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si'*, 24 May 2015, 137

“to recover a serene harmony with creation”³ and to configure the world as “a place of true brotherhood” (*Gaudium et Spes*, 37).

Aiming at Service

The current situation has strongly highlighted the need for *an increasingly communal and shared educational pact* that - drawing strength from the Gospel and the teachings of the Church - can contribute to the spread of an authentic *culture of encounter* through generous and open synergies. For this reason, Catholic schools and universities are called to form *people who are willing to put themselves at the service of the community*. When we serve, in fact, we can experience that there is more joy in giving than in receiving (cf. *Acts* 20:35) and that our time can no longer be characterized by indifference, selfishness, and division: “the whole world is suffering and needs to be united in facing the pandemic” because “the challenge we are facing is shared by all, without distinguishing between persons”⁴. Formation to service in society, through promoting the common good, calls on everyone to “unite our efforts in a broad *educational alliance*, to form mature individuals capable of overcoming division and antagonism, and to restore the fabric of relationships for the sake of a more fraternal humanity”⁵.

Networking

It is now evident that “the pandemic has highlighted how vulnerable and interconnected everyone is”⁶, and this requires both Catholic and non-Catholic educational institutions to contribute to the establishment of an *educational alliance* which, like in a *team effort*, is aimed at “finding the common step 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”⁷. This can be fostered by a more integrated cooperation network, that forms a starting point for defining and sharing essential objectives towards which coexistence models can creatively and realistically converge, as an alternative to the ones that currently characterize our individualistic and mass societies⁸. This is a wide-ranging responsibility that is open to all those who care about building a renewed long-term educational project, based on shared ethical principles and standards. A valuable contribution can come from school and university pastoral care, as well as from individual Christians present in the various educational institutions.

³ POPE FRANCIS, Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si'*, 24 May 2015, 225.

⁴ POPE FRANCIS, *Message Urbi et Orbi*, 12 April 2020.

⁵ POPE FRANCIS, *Message for the launch of the Global Compact on Education*, 12 September 2019.

⁶ POPE FRANCIS, *General Audience*, 12 August 2020.

⁷ POPE FRANCIS, *Address to the participants of the Plenary Assembly of the Congregation for Catholic Education*, 20 February 2020.

⁸ Cf. CONGREGATION FOR CATHOLIC EDUCATION, *Educating to Fraternal Humanism. Building a Civilization of Love 50 Years After Populorum Progressio*, 16 April 2017, VI.

Conclusions

The Congregation for Catholic Education - as already mentioned in its communiqué of 14 May, 2020⁹ - renews its closeness and expresses its profound appreciation to all educational communities in Catholic schools and universities which, despite the health emergency, have continued to provide their services to avoid breaking the *educational chain* which is the foundation of both our personal development and social life. In view of future school and academic planning, albeit amidst uncertainty and concerns, the people who hold responsibility for our society are called to give greater importance to education in all its formal and informal aspects, coordinating efforts to support and ensure the educational commitment of all in these difficult times.

It is time to look forward with courage and hope. Catholic educational institutions have their foundation in Christ - the way, the truth, and the life (cf. *Jn* 14:6) - and a perennial source of “living water” (cf. *Jn* 4:7-13) which reveals the new meaning of life and transforms it. Therefore, may we be supported by our belief that in education dwell the seeds of hope: hope for peace and justice.

Vatican City, 10 September 2020

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⁹ <http://www.cec.va/content/dam/cec/Documenti/COMUNICATO%20global%20compact%20IT%2014-05-2020.pdf>