**Education In tIMES OF crisIS**

 **Marius Taloș SJ, Bucarest**

Inspired by the title of a novel by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, “Love in times of the cholera”, this article intends to put the problem of an education which answers to the contemporary challenges according to the Gospel. At the outset it seems vital to consider, in the process of education, two types of crises which are too seldom conceived and dealt with together: the interreligious dialogue and the secularized modern world. The hypothesis we propose is that, in order to confront these two major challenges one ought to apply as a criterion to the Christian education of today the “principle of Chalcedon”: “not mixed” at the same time as “not separated”: On the contrary, the two axiological sides of the Christian pedagogical answer would have to find their bearings in a synthetic step, capable of proposing the Good News both to other religions and a more and more secularized world. For, when all is said and done, the interreligious dialogue of today is marked by a relentless form because of the age of secularism, as it was described in such a convincing way by Charles Taylor[[1]](#endnote-1). The article presents in its first part the critical context in which Christian education must make its way heard, while the middle part is dedicated to the typology of the teaching of religions in a secularized world marked as well by the emergence of the new religious pluralism. Finally, the third part takes up the proposals of Pope Francis for revitalising the Christian education in the troubled context described before.

**I – Crisis of the Christian education**

Without pretending to give a comprehensive description of the crisis which marks the present Christian education, we underline two constant concerns in the vision of Pope Francis: one of them dwells on what we could call the “sorrowful temptations”[[2]](#endnote-2) to which the Christian education of our times in subjected, while the other one is concentrated on the accompanying phenomenon of “uprooting”[[3]](#endnote-3) in its multiple existential and spiritual dimensions, which affects both the young people and education itself.

*The “sorrowful temptations” of education*

The first temptation to be confronted in the act of education is discouragement tending towards nausea: “Confronted with a by definition militant faith the enemy, disguised as an angel of light, is going to sow the germs of pessimism. Never can a person fight, if he/she doesn’t believe fully in victory from the outset. Who enters into combat without believing in that has already halfway lost the battle. Christian victory is always a cross, but a cross as a standard of victory.”

i Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, Harvard University Press 2007. The same author also writes about Multiculturalism and The Politics of Recognition, Princeton 1992.

ii Jorge Maria Bergoglio, Educatia, exigenta și pasiune, ARCB 2014, p. 36 ff.

iii Jorge Maria Bergoglio, Educatia, exigenta si pasiune, ARCB 2014, pp. 86-89.

Another temptation is “*the desire to separate the good grain from the weed too early.* The contemplation of the history of salvation allows us to prove the sense of duration, for no human growth can be obtained by force. It’s the same with life: The Good is only found in God, it subsists in human beings, too. And God is not a distant God who wouldn’t intervene in the world. The structures of this world are not only of sin. Such a way of thinking is Manichean. The good grain and the weed continue to grow together, and our huble mssion is first of all to protect the grain like good parents, leaving to the angels the care of harvesting the weed.”

Further on the temptation of privileging “*the values of intelligence rather than those of the heart”* is mentioned. “That’s an error. Only the heart unifies and realizes integration. Intelligence, if it is not joined to the sense of compassion, tends to separate. The heart unites the idea with reality, time with space, life with death and eterniy.”

A fourth temptation is *being ashamed of our faith*: “Faith, we must ask for it. God would like to deliver us from the fear of being beggars in front of Him and his saints! Saying that the prayer of begging would be inferior to the other kinds of prayers is the most refined form of pride. It’s not as beggars that we recognize ourselves as creatures. As long as we don’t kneel in front of the faith of the humble ones, we are impervious to teaching; and if we don’t know how to beg, and then succeed to say that what saves is pure faith – that is but an empty faith, cut off from any kind of religiosity, from any feeling of compassion.”

*Education or the risk of growing up in an uprooted world*

We must realize that the pressure of those sorrowful temptations is increasing in our days and contributes to making appear cleavages, marked by growing discontinuity between generations (diachronique discontinuity), but also within the same generation (synchronic discontinuity). The lack of continuity means loss or absence of links, in time or in the sociopolitical context which constitutes a people. That’s the first feature of the feeling of not-belonging, of the state of an orphan. But there are others. Together with discontinuity there increases uprooting. We can find it in three fields:

First: an uprooting of a *local* kind in a general sense. It’s no more so easy to build one’s identity by identifying oneself with a *place*. The town invades the *quarter* and makes it explode from within. Even more: The *global village*, represented by the chains of large supermarkets, the practice of nourishment, the omnipresence of the means of mass communication, the thinking expressed by the language and the brutal culture of enterprise, take the place of the *local town*. From the latter’s social reality there hardly subsist some fragments laughable for those outside, badly hiding the tragic reality – globalized as well! – of people sleeping in the street, of children exploited and victims of drugs, of violence and marginalisation. Personal identity, as well as collective identity, vitally feels that dislocation of places: the concept of a *people* is more and more emptied of content in the present dynamics of fragmentation and crumbling of groups of human beings. The city is gradually losing the capacity of giving persons or groups an identity, by establishing, as some years ago a French anthropologist remarked, non-places, empty spaces only submitted to instrumental kinds of thinking (functionality, *marketing*) and without symbols and tokens qualified to contribute to the forming of a communitarian identity.

And thus the *local* uprooting goes hand in hand with the two other kinds of uprooting: the existential and the spiritual one. The first among them, the existential one, shows as a symptom the absence of life projects and perhaps the feeling of *growing up in a world of the colour of ashes*. Having no more continuity, nor places laden with history and meaning (but only fragments of time and space, those elements which constitute the identity and lead to the formation of a personal project), there are weakened in us at the same time the feeling of belonging to a history and the link to a possible future, a future capable of calling on me and dynamising the present. That affects identity gravely, because basically *identifying oneself with means belonging*. And also economic insecurity is not strange to that state: How can you take roots in the existential soil of a personal project, if you are refused even the most elementary perspective of stability in the field of work?

Uprooting has another feature. Both the growing indistinctness of local references and the break of continuity between past, present and future gradually rob the lives of citizens of certain symbolic tokens, those *windows*, genuine horizons charged with meaning, which here and there open towards transcendence, in the city as well as in the actions of human beings. That opening towards the transcendent existed, in the traditional cultures, by the intermediary of a mostly static and hierarchical representation of reality, and that was expressed by a multitude of images and symbols present in the city (from its very plan to the places impregnated with history and even sacredness). On the contrary, in the way of acting of the modern world, that transcendence was integrated in an imperative of progress, which constituted the nerve of history as emancipation and was translated into the activity of the human being – a transforming activity in the modern sense of the word -, which was expressed symbolically in art, in the vivifying breathing certain festivities brought to him, in free and spontaneous actions, and in the picture of the *people/man in the street*. But now when the places which till recently functioned as trigger elements, as symbols of the transcendence, are more and more limited and void of meaning, uprooting takes on a spiritual dimension, too.

**II – Christian education and religious pluralism in a secular society**

The present context in which Christian education is proposed is marked by two characteristics which cannot be neglected: religious pluralism and secularism. Let’s first look at the way in which each of them influences the transmission of teaching the faith, after that we will insist on the importance of relating those two aspects to each other.

While some decades ago Christian education could keep up unbroken its spiritual aims at the same time as the proposal of moral and civic values, we realize how much at this beginning of the 21st century the western democracies are transformed into more and more fragmented and secularized societies. At the beginning the plurality in question was to a large degree due to the migration of large classes of society, which was inevitably accompanied by the introduction of their proper cultural and religious values. That’s what is still today called a “traditional” plurality. While in our days we realize the appearance of new type of plurality due to technology and the means of mass communication between diverse continents, a phenomenon that leads to exposing persons to competing cultural and religious ideas and values. That diversity, typical of the late modern or post-modern age, which affects religions and ideologies inclusively, is known by the name of “modern” plurality (Skeie 1995).

As one could expect that first Christian education tried to answer to “traditional” religious pluralism, more recently the new pedagogies have to confront the two characteristics of the pluralist reality presented above. Apart from realizing at the same time a reaction of refusal and isolation in front of that growing plurality, by a teaching of the Christian religion as a religion of a national culture, separating the children of one and the same form on the basis of their religious/denominational belonging, or, in public schools, fighting for withdrawing religion from the school curricula.

So the most defensive form of religious education suggests an illusory return to the well defined and somehow protected position which it enjoyed in the past, thus neglecting the impact of plurality on social and personal identities. That presupposes the association of morale, religion, and citizenship in cultivating a cultural and national identity, or in arguing that the Christian or one-denominational teaching of the faith is an approach which suffices in itself for the religious education in the public school of our days.

Another possible reaction, taking the reality of pluralism into account, dismisses religion and religious education into the private or semi-private sphere in the form of private or denominational schools. Thus for children frequenting that type of schools that regulation allows certain religious values to impregnate the whole of the education received. Here the educational aim is to let the child grow up in a certain religious vision of the world/*Weltanschauung*. Such a view is generally associated with the argument that religious education ought to be received exclusively in that type of schools, and constitutes an anachronism with regard to the ordinary public school.

A third approach is completely different: It accepts as a norm the post-modern pluralism and rejects the study of religions as imposing oppressive structures and only promoting “belief” and values starting from personal experience. In that case the distinction between religious education and other forms of education – spiritual education, emotional education or education to values – practically loses all relevance, as the educational aim is then reduced to the personal development by the acquisition of “beliefs” and values which only satisfy from a personal point of view.

There also exists a fourth approach to Christian education which recognizes plurality, but seeks to save the integrity of diverse religions in their forms of distinct systems of beliefs and spirituality, as well as of ideologies pretending to be universal in their truth. That type of education promotes any religious literature and has in view to help every child to identify and adopt motivations in favour of a given attitude, religious or non-religious. Evidently the educational process is here oriented towards familiarisation with a religious language and a capacity of well-informed judgement.

A fifth possible attitude to religious education recognizes plurality, but keeps any discussion in this respect open. Here the pupils are encouraged to participate in this type of discussions starting from their proper level, by a thoughtful study of didactic materials as well as by dialogue and interaction with their environment. The aim of that educational attitude is encouraging the young people to develop and to realize the suitable abilities for interpreting cultural and religious material, starting from their proper culture, tradition or religion.

Finally a sixth pedagogical answer vis-à-vis religious pluralism is practised, namely by totally eliminating religious education from the curricula of public schools, under the pretext that the society of today is profoundly secularized. One also meets the variant of rejecting religion as an autonomous school subject following the motive that the study of diverse religions is meaningless for the experience of the greatest number of the pupils.

**III – Christian education in times of crisis: some elements of response**

Confronted with that multiple reality quite often hostile to Christian education, what should one choose and what answer? Before entering into details it is vital that this answer should be positive, presenting itself as a proposal, and not defensive and polemic, as long as it is the bearer of the Good News. In the spirit of what was presented in the first part, a response by Christian education must pave a way between two symmetric reefs: on the one hand neglecting the Christian core of any Christian education, which is alone capable of granting it its identity and thus its authenticity and originality in the whole panorama, dealing up to confusion with topical educational suggestions; on the other hand it would also be fatal to ignore the signs of the times in which we make this educational proposal; among thoses signs it is certainly secularisation and religious pluralism that have the greatest impact.

In that context I formulate some suggestions as a conclusion, modest but charged with hope:

 *Renewing the educational pact*

At various instances Pope Francis has remarked that in our time there was broken what was formerly called the “educational pact”, which was the basis of silent collaboration between family, school and society. The “educational pact” was broken, that means that both society and family and the diverse institutions have delegated the care for education only to the “professionals of education”, to the “professors, who in general are badly paid, who carry that responsibilty on their shoulders, but if they do not reach the expected results, they endure the reproaches”. “Nobody, however, makes reproaches to the diverse institutions which have renounced the educational pact by abandoning their part of responsibility.” The Pope expressed his closeness with respect to the professors in their difficult mission, and appreciated the efforts to renew “the educational pact in a harmonious way”.

In the same sense an inflation of “experts” is deplored, to the detriment of the “teachers” and the parents, down to the most intimate aspects of education. Concerning emotional life, personality and its development, rights and duties, “experts” know everything: objectives, motivations, techniques; one must urgently once again form “genuine masters”, capable of transmitting together with scientific knowledge the search for deeper values. There is a need for “genuine masters” in the political and social sphere as well, capable of guaranteeing the dignity of the person and the protection of his/her rights. It is a question - Savagnone concludes – “of rediscovering a horizon of truth and values which can be shared in a pluralist society, too, in order to propose it to the young people at all levels, safeguarding the accentuations specific to every institution. Creating an alliance, a network of pedagogical solidarity, being able to link the traditional educational communities, causing new courage and new ideas to circulate between them.”

*Christian education between moral education and the rediscovery of transcendence*

“Educating in a Christian way is not reduced to giving catachesis. That is only one part. That also means no more proselytising: Never practice proselytism at school, never, never! Giving a Christian education means leading young people and children to the human values in their complete reality, and one of these values is transcendence. Today there exists a neopositivist tendency, consisting in educating to immanent reality, to the values of immanent reality, and that in countries of Christian tradition as well as in countries of a tradition different from Christianity. That way of dealing with things doesn’t succeed in introducing the young people and the children to complete reality: Transcendence is missing there. For me the gravest crisis of education in the Christian perspective is this shutting out with respect to transcendence. We shut out transcendence. It is necessary to prepare the hearts so that the Lord can manifest himself, but in the totality of values, that is to say the totality of humnaity, which comprises that transcendent dimention, too. Educating in a human way, but with open horizons. Any shutting out, of whatever kind, is damaging to education.”

*Education for all and integrating education*

In a lot of places the Christian and especially the Catholic schools are sought after for their excellence, but also for the elitist status which they enjoy: It is true that it’s not only the educational relationship that has been destroyed, but it is education itself that has become too selective and elitist. It seems as if only those people and persons had a right to education who have a certain level of life or a certain capacity, but it is obvious that the right to education is not granted to all children, all young people. That is a global reality which puts shame on us. That reality leads us to a selection of human beings and instead of bringing people nearer to each other it separates them, it separates the rich ones from the poor ones, it separates the cultures from one another.”

That’s why – as difficult as it appears to be – we are asked to renounce to all that is meant by personal comfort, to fight for eradicating this moral disorder, to give to the young people whom we form the proof that a soul who follows Christ will be happy and will not get to know illness, depression, sadness. Whether a Catholic school is situated in a large metropolis or in an obscure village, the Catholic educators are called to sow in the hearts of the pupils the germs of peace, justice and compassion, of forgiveness and hope: Leave the places where educators are numerous and go to the periphery. There begin to seek. Or at least leave the central area! And there seek the disadvantaged, the poor. They have something the young people of the rich quarters don’t have – not because it is their fault, but because it is sociologic reality: They have the experience of survival, but also of cruelty, hunger, injustice. They have a wounded humanity. But I am convinced that our salvation comes from the wounds of a crucified. From those wounds they derive a kind of wisdom. That’s why there should be a good professor to lead them on.” The Holy Father insists on the necessity to find our centre in Christ, to quit our individual shell, showing the courage of making our way to the periphery, to fight against marginalisation and exclusion, by exhorting us to to what Don Bosco did at an epoch when the children of the street were extremely numerous: “Urgent education. Multicoloured education.” The Catholic school must focus its attention on a new evangelisation, bearing the divine message with passion, devotion and openness. There is a search for an “education of urgency” knowing how to use new ways:

* informal education: The Holy Father stresses: “It is necessary to open ourselves to new horizons, to create new patterns […] there are three languages: the language of the head, the language of the heart, the language of the hands. Education must unfold in these three directions.”
* inclusive education: “Education makes itself inclusive if everybody finds his/her place in it; it is inclusive from the human point of view, too. [...] The genuine school must transmit concepts, habits and values.”
* risky education: “An educator who doesn’t know how to take risks is not qualified for educating. [...] The genuine educator must be a master of risks, but of reasonable risks.”

As a conclusion the present Pope insists that education should fall back with passion und devotion to three fundamental remedies: creativity, the memory of the educational community, and the solidarity of the Church. And also the wish addressed by Jorge Maria Bergoglio to the community of educators in Argentina remains emblematic: “With the power given to me from Above, with all my heart, I address these wishes to all the members of our pedagogical community: *“From now on, brothers and sisters, if anything is excellent and if anything is admirable, focus your thoughts on these things: all that is true, all that is holy, all that is just, all that is pure, all that is lovely, and all that is worthy of praise.!”* (Phil 4, 8).”

1. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Translated from French by Wolfgang Rank [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)