

POINTERS TO THE PRESENT AND FUTURE OF CATHOLIC EDUCATION

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“It is time to look to the future with courage and hope”¹ in the words of Pope Francis towards the end of his video message to launch the Global Education Pact. He went on to say, “May we be sustained by the conviction that education bears within itself a seed of hope: the hope of peace and justice; the hope of beauty and goodness; the hope of social harmony.”² In regard to courage, he stated, “We want to commit ourselves courageously to developing an educational plan within our respective countries, investing our best energies and introducing creative and

transformative processes in cooperation with civil society.”³

The experience of this Congress, organised by the Inter-American Confederation of Catholic Education, has given us the opportunity to reflect on the future of education, motivating us to “look ahead with courage and hope”.

I am grateful for the invitation to share my thoughts today. I would like to focus on a few points to be clear about our support for Catholic education, its present and future.

¹ Video Message of His Holiness Pope Francis on the occasion of the meeting organised by the Congregation for Catholic Education: “Global Compact on Education. Together to look beyond” (15 October 2020) | Francis (vatican.va)

² Ibid..

³ Ibid.

1. Sent out together on mission

How much could be achieved in the near future if this large group of participants leaves with the conviction in our hearts that it is worth our while to continue to invest all our energy and passion in a type of education that fosters a sense of steady transformation in the people of our continent and the whole world!

In America there are a significant number of Catholic schools, the mission and organisation of which are conducted mostly by religious congregations or dioceses. The number of lay men and women involved in this educational mission is growing considerably. We constitute an important group and have learned to take some steps together. How much more could we achieve by strengthening our unity through networking? We have the capacity to create synergies, convinced that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, and therefore, outcomes and effectiveness will be greater than if we act separately.

I believe that we could get more involved, both personally and as a group, if we were to look more deeply into ourselves and ask where this conviction about the mission of the Catholic school in our world comes from. The key point is that we are engaged in mission because we feel sent, as Jesus himself felt: “My food is to do the will of the One who sent me and to carry out God’s work” (Jn 4.34). To be aware that we are sent is to understand that we carry out a mission of service which is the mission of God. In the words of a prayer attributed to St. Oscar Romero: “The Kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, but is even beyond our vision (...) We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker. We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs. We are prophets of a future not our own.”⁴

Feeling sent leads us to live more easily in a spir-

it of communion and inclusion, embracing diversity, seeing it more as a richness and less as a threat. Otherwise, by forgetting that we are sent, we could easily fall into the temptation of feeling ourselves lords and masters. This can give rise to self-focussed attitudes that would lead us to treat each other in a competitive and win-lose manner (it is sad to see that in many places Catholic schools act more in competition with one another than united in a common mission). Such attitudes also lead us to exercise authority as power and not as a service, and to lose sight of the main objective of our educational mission as a Catholic school.

To relate well, we need to develop an attitude of mercy and reconciliation that enables us to overcome misunderstandings and heal hurts. We need to grow in unity recognising our common human fragility and vulnerability, becoming strong together, drawing on the One who has called us: “my strength is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor 12.9). As a church institution, too, we need to welcome with compassion the fragility we experience, including a lack of credibility in many places due to counter-witness or abuse.

As Catholic schools, we have great potential and can make a significant difference for our times. We can try to unite forces to confront the challenges of this new epoch. This could mean imagining the future through the lens of networking whereby we aim for more synergy between Catholic schools themselves and with other educational institutions with which we have so much in common: ideals, best practices, mutual support, human and financial resources... This is the invitation made to us in the launching of the Educational Pact: “Never before has there been such need 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

⁴ [Prophets of a Future Not Our Own](#) — often attributed to Oscar Romero - Ignatian Solidarity Network

relationships for the sake of a more fraternal humanity.”⁵

For this to become a reality and flourish, the initiative has to come from ourselves, principally from those of us in the service of leadership, like the yeast that leavens the whole mass (Cf. Lk 13.21). The invitation is for us to be ready to accept and value the contribution of others and to make our own contribution, open to the sacrifices that this might entail.

2. We are sowers of hope

Our context is a turbulent world. The weakness and vulnerability of our structures have been very much in evidence during the Covid 19 pandemic and through ongoing conflicts and wars. We are being invited today -I should say with a degree of urgency - to unite our forces more in the field of education in which we are all involved: “Now more than ever - in a context torn by social conflicts and lacking a common vision – there is an urgent need for a change of pace – through an integral and inclusive education, that is able to engage in patient listening and constructive dialogue – whereby unity can prevail over conflict.”⁶

In the present context, we are being invited “to humanize education, that is, to make it a process in which each person can develop his or her own deep-rooted attitudes and vocation, and thus contribute to his or her vocation within the community. ‘Humanizing education’ means putting the person at the centre of education, in a framework of relationships that make up a living community, which is interdependent and bound to a

common destiny. This is fraternal humanism.”⁷

A key question that we should probably ask ourselves is whether we really believe in the value and relevance of what we can offer the church and the world through Catholic education. This contribution could be likened to a “seed of hope”, able to bear fruit through its capacity to give its all and die. “The Catholic school lives in the flow of human history. It is therefore continually called upon to follow its unfolding in order to offer an educational service appropriate to the present times.”⁸ That is, a school that seeks to humanise and evangelise ... the two verbs refer to the same activity since the Gospel describes what it is to be fully human.

We are all aware that the times in which we are living are marked by multi-faceted crises and yet also by shoots of solidarity and hope (these latter receiving much less publicity than they deserve). Jose Laguna, referring to schools engaged in creating the future, wrote: “At a time when there is a crisis of meaning, society turns back to institutions to serve as its guiding lights. In this context, schools, and especially Catholic schools, have to make more of an effort than normal to educate students about accounts of the meaning of life and related topics from their storehouse and make these available as well to the wider society.”⁹ The same author, taking up the idea of “rapidification” that Pope Francis denounced as an evil of our times, given the continued acceleration of changes affecting humanity and the planet, coupled today with a more intensified pace of life and work,¹⁰ said that such ‘rapidification’ is causing a ‘digestive’ problem for schools... “In classrooms there is a disproportionate consumption of instrumental knowledge that results in a

⁵ Message of His Holiness Pope Francis for the Launch of the Global Compact on Education (12 September 2019) | Francis (vatican.va)

⁶ CONGREGATION FOR CATHOLIC EDUCATION, [instrumentum-laboris-en.pdf](#) (educationglobalcompact.org), 2019, 1

⁷ CONGREGATION FOR CATHOLIC EDUCATION, [Educating to fraternal humanism - Building a “civilization of love” 50 years after Populorum progressio](#) (vatican.va)/, n.8

⁸ CONGREGATION FOR CATHOLIC EDUCATION, [Instruction “The Identity of the Catholic School for a Culture of Dialogue \(25 January 2022\)](#) (vatican.va), n. 18

⁹ José LAGUNA, *Escuelas que “futurean”*. *La Escuela Católica y el Pacto Educativo Global del Papa Francisco*, Madrid, PPC, Editorial y Distribuidora, S.A., 2020, pp. 20-21.

¹⁰ Cf. Pope Francis, *Encyclical Letter Laudato Si’, on caring for our Common Home*, 24 May 2015, n. 18.

harmful bulimia in students incapable of meeting the expectations that society and market forces place on classrooms. At the same time, malnutrition of learning about human wisdom is worsening, dragging education towards an anorexia of meaning”.¹¹ Insightful images to describe the current reality of education.

Javier Cortés Soriano¹² maintains that any analysis of our context is not straightforward and that it is not just a matter of trying to understand what is happening and make consequent adjustments. Real life in which our students and their families are immersed is where Catholic education wants to be present as ‘incarnated’ good news, capable of having a transforming effect on ‘real life’ through the power of the Gospel. What this means is that faith and hope have to feature in any ‘reading’ of our times. “Ours is a time for attentive listening to the voice of the Spirit in contemporary life.”¹³ A contextual analysis, then, aimed at not merely describing what might be happening but trying to formulate bold educational strategies as well that flow directly from such an analysis and that are the fruit of faith reflection.

The future of Catholic schools will depend on their capacity to adapt to the new times in which we are living, fostering innovation, connecting better with the new generations and presenting Gospel values in appealing and up-to-date ways. We motivate students to focus not just on what they are capable of doing and where they can earn more but on what they are called to be and how they can serve in society. Catholic schools have plenty of biographical and historical stories to provide such motivation.¹⁴

We know that we have not always been faithful to our aims as Catholic schools. We are being constantly invited to refocus our choices and actions for our educational works to be truly worthy of the name of ‘Catholic’. Let us continue to make Catholic schools seeds of hope!

3. With young people we make participation a feature of Catholic Schools

Among the points of commitment to which the Global Education Pact invites us and which point directly to our relationship with the new generations, are: to put the human person at the centre of every educational process, to listen to the voice of children, adolescents and young people, to encourage the participation of girls and young women, and to be open to the most vulnerable and marginalised.¹⁵

In October 2018, I had the privilege of participating in the Synod on “Young people, Faith and Vocational Discernment”. About forty young people from five continents took part in the Synod Assembly. The active presence of this group offered very enriching elements of reflection throughout the synod process. I was able to note, in myself and in many other participants, a change of attitude and outlook regarding young people.

Contact, dialogue and personal warmth foster a climate of listening and mutual understanding. Some of the ideas that came up in the Synod process still resonate deeply within me: we

¹¹ José LAGUNA, *Escuelas que “futurean”. La Escuela Católica y el Pacto Educativo Global del Papa Francisco*, Madrid, PPC, Editorial y Distribuidora, S.A., 2020, p. 25.

¹² Cf. Javier CORTÉS SORIANO *La Escuela Católica. De la autocomprensión a la significatividad*, Madrid, PPC, Editorial y Distribuidora, S.A., 2015, p. 22.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

¹⁴ Cf. José LAGUNA, *Escuelas que “futurean”. La Escuela Católica y el Pacto Educativo Global del Papa Francisco*, Madrid, PPC, Editorial y Distribuidora, S.A., 2020, p. 156.

¹⁵ Cf. [Video Message of His Holiness Pope Francis on the occasion of the meeting organised by the Congregation for Catholic Education: “Global Compact on Education. Together to look beyond” \(15 October 2020\) | Francis \(vatican.va\)](#)

should not speak of “the Church and the young” as if they were separate worlds since they form an important and essential part of the Church; youth have real leadership potential and hence we should not speak of ministry for youth but ministry with youth; the importance of having a positive attitude towards the new generations, accepting and understanding their challenges and limits; trying to be an empathic church, with a listening ear; looking for ways to be involved pastorally with all youth, particularly those who have suffered any type of abuse; the need to have youth ministers who are well-prepared and up-to-date ...

These and many other ideas were developed in the final document of the Synod. This formed the basis for the Apostolic Exhortation, *Christus Vivit*, which has a number of creative sections addressed to youth themselves. Throughout the Synod, there were many moments for conversations in language groups in which people could share openly and formulate suggestions. Within the Assembly itself, each participant, including the youth, had the chance to express him or herself.

In my intervention in the Assembly, I mentioned that, in our days, we need to position ourselves humbly more as disciples than as masters, seeking to co-create the dream of God, hand in hand with youth. Do we believe that young people understand the words that we use? Words like vocation or discernment ...? Isn't it true that the Gospel is speaking to youth and challenging them but our 'religious' structures less so? We need to connect with and be on the same wavelength as the new generations and what they find life-giving, with a positive outlook, finding the right words and appreciating their particular context. We have to let each young person take the lead in being the main artisan of his or her own vocation.

The younger generations of today are bearers of novelty and creativity, just as ours were in their time. How can we listen better to them? How

can we relate better to them, employing words that touch their hearts and really communicate? “Young people themselves make good youth ministers, with accompaniment and guidance certainly, but free to identify new pathways that are bold and creative.” Connecting better with current generations means journeying with them, empowering them, fostering the development of their potential and creativity. A point of special relevance regarding connecting with current generations is communication via social media in which we are all becoming more and more immersed.

Last October, a Synod Process was launched within the Church, with the hope of involving all who make up the People of God. Catholic schools form part of this process, with the possibility of involving young people. Indeed, Catholic schools are already an example of 'synodality' in as much as they are an excellent platform for dialogue, listening to one another, and making creative suggestions as school communities on how to integrate faith and life. Catholic schools have the possibility of offering discussion forums to students, teachers as well as parents.

The Synod process offers us an occasion to review our organisation structures for them to offer ever greater space for the active participation of all sectors of the school community, thereby giving a say to the young people and a more active role to women. Women make a tremendous contribution to the Church, and hence Catholic education, through their active and dedicated presence, through their personal care for children and young people, through their vision and leadership. The active participation of many represents an important field to continue to explore and appreciate. I believe that it is in the nature of Catholic schools to keep moving ahead and developing, including in regard to their internal structures when needed.

Half-way through the Synod Process undertaken by the Church in our days, it is good for schools to seize the moment to be renewed centres of

evangelisation, developing their own processes of 'synodality' as faith communities, with an emphasis on communion, participation and mission.

4. Schools where students learn and we learn to accept the most vulnerable and marginalized

One of the key points of the Education Pact, linked to the theme of saving and caring for our Common Home, is to be committed "to educate and to learn to accept and be open to the most vulnerable and marginalized".¹⁶ "Ecology and social justice are intrinsically united (cf. *LS* 137). With integral ecology a new paradigm of justice emerges, since "*a true ecological approach always becomes a social approach*; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear *both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor*" (*LS* 49). Integral ecology thus connects the exercise of care for nature with the exercise of justice for the most impoverished and disadvantaged on earth, who are God's preferred choice in revealed history."¹⁷ Within Catholic schools we can promote the vision of integral ecology, beginning with concrete actions and conducting a debriefing after direct contact experiences.

In relation to situations of poverty and marginalisation, in line with the Global Education Pact, Br Robert Schieler, SG of the De La Salle Brothers, comments, "If we consider that today more than 260 million children and young people are still out of school, and that more than 600 million do not have even the minimum skills in reading or mathematics, we realise that we really do not have too many options or enough time to address and solve the problem. We cannot afford to ignore the education crisis by pretending

it does not concern us or by trying to address it with inadequately targeted programmes."¹⁸ We are aware that, especially in Latin America, there are many countries with extensive poverty zones where many children have no access to school.

Many of us perhaps had the experience of being educated in a Catholic school. We have also had the experience of being on a school staff. Thanks to our contact with marginalised settings, we have been better placed to understand such realities and to take some initiative or other on behalf of the most vulnerable. I remember my experience as a student in a Marist school, in which we were invited to take part in a volunteer experience. We used to visit one of the most marginalised areas of the city of Guadalajara each week, expressing our solidarity by building a primary school and giving catechetical support. I believe that experience left its mark on me and a group of my school friends. For me personally, it was a key aspect in sorting out my vocation in life. In recent months, I have met colleagues from that time who have engaged in very significant solidarity activity as professional people.

The work that is being done in so many educational ministries in very poor and marginalised areas is truly admirable. I have had the opportunity to visit such ministries in indigenous areas and also in very poor countries. I have met teachers (lay people, religious men and women, priests, young volunteers) who live among the people they serve so as to share life with those who suffer marginalisation and with whom they try to take steps leading to liberation and growth. In Catholic schools we seek to go beyond just encouraging charitable actions, important as they are. Rather, we try to encourage a change of mindset and social transformation which tries to get to the root of the origins of poverty and to bring about structural change.

¹⁶ Cf. [Video Message of His Holiness Pope Francis on the occasion of the meeting organised by the Congregation for Catholic Education: "Global Compact on Education. Together to look beyond" \(15 October 2020\) | Francis \(vatican.va\)](#)

¹⁷ [Synod on the Amazon Final Document of the Synod of Bishops \(26 October 2019\) \(vatican.va\)](#), n.66

¹⁸ Juan Antonio OJEDA ORTIZ, Manuel Jesús CEBALLOS GARCÍA and Beatriz RAMÍREZ RAMOS (coords.), *Luces par el camino. Pacto Educativo Global. Una Educación de, con y para todos. Hacia una sociedad más fraterna, solidaria y sostenible*, Madrid, OIEC 2020, p. 230.

A recent document from the Congregation for Catholic Education referring to the identity of the Catholic School states, “A distinctive feature of its ecclesial nature is that it is a *school for all*, especially the weakest. This is testified to by the ‘establishment of the majority of Catholic educational institutions [in response] to the needs of the socially and economically disadvantaged.’”¹⁹

Most of us have the experience of a Founder or Foundress in our past who knew how to hear the voice of the Spirit in their reading of the signs of the times and sought to respond as best they could to the most needy, using education as an important pathway to social transformation. Perhaps the present moment, with its appalling situations of poverty, of young people living on the social or existential peripheries, is the occasion to reread our origins and respond in new ways. Today the same inspiration impels us as it did our Founders and Foundresses and we are being invited to respond like them with daring and hope.

The key question to ask ourselves is: in what way are we as a Catholic School contributing to social transformation? Is solidarity our priority? Are we focussing our energies and attention on the most needy and vulnerable? It is not easy to give a quick and decisive answer. There are a number of factors that frame Catholic education, some that favour a clear objective of attention to the peripheries and others that rather impede it. How do we combine striving for educational excellence and responding to a certain competitiveness with being true to the values of critical reflection of reality that includes and is sensitive to the world of the most marginalised?

Among our students, we certainly have young people who live on the existential peripheries, who suffer from loneliness and marginalisation,

who are burdened with very difficult family situations... This is where Catholic schools excel, where students feel they can find an oasis of hope.

We are also being invited to collaborate in reflecting on our mission of solidarity with the most disadvantaged. The concrete experiences of solidarity of so many educational institutions can generate ideas and energy for others that are encountering considerable difficulties in this area.

Conclusion: Looking beyond... to educate others to look beyond

I conclude by sharing with you something about the Institute to which I belong. Saint Marcellin Champagnat, a priest of the Society of Mary, founded the Brothers in 1817, when he was 27 years old, following through on a profound intuition dictated to him by the Spirit to care for the most needy children and young people through education and evangelisation. He was someone who knew how to “look beyond”, in a post-French Revolution context, where the ignorance and abandonment of youth was clearly evident.

I would like to share a recent experience of a meeting of the participants of our General Conference (Provincials, District Leaders and General Council) with Pope Francis. I quote some of the words he expressed to us in relation to our life and mission: “St Marcellin Champagnat knew how to “look beyond”, and to teach young people to “look beyond”, to open themselves to God, to the horizons of Gospel love. He was guided by the example of the Virgin Mary, our “Good Mother”, as he used to say: Mary was an insignificant woman from a remote village, but her heart looked beyond;

¹⁹ Congregation for Catholic Education, [Instruction “The Identity of the Catholic School for a Culture of Dialogue \(25 January 2022\) \(vatican.va\)](#), n.22. It makes to the document of the Congregation for Catholic Education, *The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium*, 28 December 1997, n. 15 [“The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium” by Congregation for Catholic Education \(lmu.edu\)](#)

she looked forward to the Kingdom of God, she was open.”²⁰

I believe that the sharing and reflection of this Congress is moving us towards a prospective of “looking beyond”. What challenges does “looking beyond” pose for education in America today? It is about looking beyond the particular context in which we are living, beyond our geographical and cultural borders, beyond our own organisations and beyond the Catholic Church itself, to make its dimension of universality a reality.

I believe that especially those of us who are in the service of leadership, along with our organisational and education teams, are being invited to “look beyond”. We have the history and experience of so many educators before us who,

because they had this capacity to look beyond, achieved goals and results from which we have benefited. It is up to all of us today to try to look beyond, with courage and hope, in order to keep the mission of God alive, collaborating as Catholic schools in the present and in the future. Let us do it together, for our ‘looking’ to be more expansive!

We stand for Catholic education today and in the future. Sent together on mission, we are sowers of hope. With young people we make participation a feature of Catholic Schools, where students learn and we learn to welcome the most vulnerable and marginalised. We look beyond to educate others to look beyond.

Many thanks.

Brother Ernesto Sánchez Barba, Superior General of the Marist Brothers

Mexico City, May 29, 2022

A handwritten signature in dark ink that reads "Ernesto". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the left and then curves back under the name.

²⁰ Pope Francis. Address to participants in the General Conference of the Marist Brothers, 24 March 2022. [UdienzaSantoPadre_Maristas_EN.pdf\(champagnat.org\)](#)