

The Catholic school and the mission of the Church

Introduction

One of the most significant and far-reaching contributions that the Catholic Church has made in South Africa and in the world is in the field of education. Since the first Catholic school opened in Port Elizabeth in 1847, Catholic schools have served the children of South Africa. As we know, during the apartheid era Catholic schools were pioneers in pushing for multi-racial schools and often took great risks in doing so. There are now 335 Catholic schools in the country, with over 7,600 teachers and more than 170,000 students. These schools' communities represent diverse cultures and religions, with Catholics actually forming the minority. They continue to foster an ethos which stresses concern for the dignity of each person, the highest standards of integrity and competence, as well as a commitment of service to the community, particularly the poor and the marginalized.

Given the importance of its role and its value in our society, I wish to say something about the nature of the Catholic School as it has been articulated in some of the key documents of the Church regarding Catholic education. In particular I will speak about: a) the Church's right to establish schools; b) the mission of the Church towards the school; c) the mission of the Catholic School towards the world.

The Church's mission is essentially an "educational mission". After all, pastoral work - and it must be recognized as the fulfillment of the evangelizing mission of the Church in the specific conditions of place and time – has as its goal the assimilation of the message of Gospel by those with whom it engages.

The Church, by sharing values and norms and shaping attitudes, constantly educates. However, when Pius XI pointed out in the Encyclical *Divini Illius Magistri* that "the Church has a special mission to educate", he was speaking not only of our mission as educators but also the Church's right to run educational institutions.

a. The Church's right to establish schools

The Declaration of the Second Vatican Council *Gravissimum Educationis* on Christian Education states: "The influence of the Church in the field of education is shown in a special manner by the Catholic school". The Council proclaims anew what has already been taught in several documents of the magisterium,¹ namely: the right of the Church to freely establish and to

¹ Among many documents illustrating the importance of education confer above all: Apostolic Letter of Benedict XV, *Communes Litteras*, April 10, 1919: AAS 11 (1919) p. 172. Pius XI's Apostolic Encyclical *Divini Illius Magistri*, December 31 1929: AAS 22 (1930) pp. 49-86. Pius XII's Allocution to the youths of Italian Catholic Action, April 20 1946: Discourses and Radio Messages, vol. 8, pp. 53-57. Allocution to fathers of French families, Sept. 18, 1951: Discourses and Radio Messages, vol. 13, pp. 241-245. John XXIII's 30th anniversary message on the publication of the encyclical letter, *Divini Illius Magistri*, December 30, 1959: AAS 52 (1960) pp. 57-S9. Paul VI's Allocution to members of Federated Institutes Dependent on Ecclesiastic Authority, December 30, 1963: Encyclicals and Discourses of His Holiness Paul VI, Rome, 1964, pp. 601-603. Second Vatican Council, Declaration on Christian Education *Gravissimum Educationis*, 28 October 1965, AAS 58 (1966) 728-739. Congregation for Catholic Education, *The Catholic school*, 19 March 1977. Congregation for Catholic

conduct schools of every type and level” (n. 8). The document of the Congregation for Catholic Education *The Catholic school* does not speak much about the Church’s right to establish schools and to exercise ecclesiastical authority over them. Only the *Code of Canon Law* emphasizes this element in Catholic education: “The Church has the right to establish and direct schools of any discipline, type, and level. The Christian faithful are to foster Catholic schools, assisting in their establishment and maintenance according to their means” (can. 800). There is also an incentive in the *Code*, so that Catholic schools can also be founded by religious orders “whose proper mission is education” (can. 801). In addition, can. 802 states: “If schools which offer an education imbued with a Christian spirit are not available, it is for the diocesan bishop to take care that they are established” (can. 802). And finally: “A Catholic school is understood as one which a competent ecclesiastical authority or a public ecclesiastical juridic person directs or which ecclesiastical authority recognizes as such through a written document. [...] Even if it is in fact Catholic, no school is to bear the name Catholic school without the consent of the competent ecclesiastical authority” (can. 803). So according to the Code a school can be recognized as being Catholic in two ways:

- when it is directed by a Church institution,
- if it is conducted by a non-Church entity, but it is recognized as Catholic by the Church authority.

Education, *Lay Catholics in schools: witnesses to faith*, 15 October 1982. Code of Canon Law 1983, can. 747-833. John Paul II, Apostolic constitution *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, 15 August 1990: AAS 82 (1990) pp. 1475-1509. Francis, Apostolic Constitution on ecclesiastical universities and faculties *Veritatis Gaudium*, 8 December 2017.

b. The mission of the Church towards the school

The school is a place where the Church expresses its mission of service towards students and teachers: “The Catholic school forms part of the saving mission of the Church, especially for education in the faith” (*The Catholic school*, n. 9). “Christ is the foundation of the whole educational enterprise in a Catholic school” (n. 34). “The Catholic school loses its purpose without constant reference to the Gospel and a frequent encounter with Christ. It derives all the energy necessary for its educational work from Him and thus creates in the school community an atmosphere permeated with the Gospel spirit of freedom and love [...]. Faithful, therefore, to the claims of man and of God, the Catholic school makes its own contribution towards man's liberation, making him, in other words, what his destiny implies, one who talks consciously with God, one who is there for God to love” (n. 55).

The mission of the Church in the Catholic school is to give a specific, evangelical perspective to teaching and to upbringing. I will come back to this topic – the specificity of teaching and the specificity of education in a Catholic school –, but meanwhile, it is worth making a general remark. The document *The Catholic school* points out an essential goal of Catholic education when it states that: “Its task is fundamentally a synthesis of culture and faith, and a synthesis of faith and life: the first is reached by integrating all the different aspects of human knowledge through the subjects taught, in the light of the Gospel; the second is the growth of the virtues characteristic of the Christian” (n. 37). By

specifying this approach, it can be said that teaching in a Catholic school shows the synthesis of culture and faith, and education in this school is a synthesis of the life of faith. In this way, faith will be integrated into the basic functions and activities of the school.

c. The mission of the school towards the world

The school is one of the most important arenas where the Church operates. But at the same time, through the Catholic school, the Church is active in the world. In other words, a Catholic school is a place (institution) that carries out the Church's mission in the world. It does this in two ways:

- First, the Catholic school is a place that is specifically suited for the implementation of the pastoral action of the Church. The instruction on the pastoral ministry of bishops, *Ecclesiae Imago*, while enumerating the bishop's duties regarding the transmission of faith, underlines his responsibility for pastoral care through schools, especially Catholic ones.

- Second, the Catholic school prepares its students for the apostolate in the world, "for service in the spread of the Kingdom of God" (*Gravissimum educationis*, n. 8). The Catholic school should form the pupils so that "by leading an exemplary apostolic life they become a saving leaven in the human community" (*Ibid*). The instruction *Ecclesiae Imago* emphasizes the relationship between the Catholic school and the apostolate, and recommends that the Catholic school prepares students to undertake this apostolate in their

daily lives; the document also encourages the school apostolate to be harmonized with the general pastoral care of the diocese.

I. Catholic school - a community of students, teachers and parents

The Catholic school should be seen as a community of students, teachers and parents. This community primarily educates and teaches. We will therefore point out the most important educational tasks of the Catholic school. Church documents emphasize the communitarian and multi-segment character of the Catholic school as an educational community. They point out the obligation that parents, teachers and Church and civil authorities have to cooperate with each other. In the Catholic school the Congregation for Catholic Education in the document *Lay Catholics in schools: witnesses to faith* emphasizes that: “the educational community of a Catholic school should endeavor to become a Christian community: a genuine community of faith” (n. 41). For this to happen, the cooperation of parents, teachers and students is necessary.

a. Students

Relatively speaking, not much is said about students in the documents of the Magisterium of the Church, at least in the direct form, but it is worth recalling the Council’s declaration about the Catholic school: “its proper function is to create for the school community a special atmosphere animated by the Gospel spirit of freedom and charity, to help youth grow in accord with the new persons they were made through baptism” (n. 8). The Code of Canon Law,

defining the rights and duties of various participants in the educational community of the Catholic school, did not mention children and youth among them. And it is hard to deny that they are the most important component of the educational community. Therefore, when this Codex lack was noticed, the Congregation for Catholic Education was asked to prepare for publication a charter of the rights and duties of a Catholic disciple. So far, such a document has not been prepared. Communities directly organizing schools should not and cannot overlook students. For example, the document *The Principles of the Catholic Association of Educators* discussed the activities of students in a very ample way. The document states that the Catholic school should give the possibility to students to meet together in groups or associations which help them to grow in their Christian vocation to engage in social, charitable and cultural activities animated by the message of the Gospel. All those who manage Catholic schools are called upon to come up with a list of the rights and duties of students.

The recent Synod for young people is an example of how important it is to listen to our young people. Often our tendency is to impose our ideas of what and how to learn. This of course is extremely important, however it fails to take into consideration the rapidly changing generational differences. We need to listen to young people when formulating curricula and even pedagogy to ensure we are meeting their needs, desires, as well as truly equipping them to face the challenges present in our post-modern, info-saturated world.

b. Teachers

Church documents pay great attention to the didactic and educational competence of teachers in the Catholic schools. What, then, is the distinctive feature of the teacher of a Catholic institution? Expectations go in three directions:

- Firstly, teachers are to bear witness to their Christian faith: “Intimately linked in charity to one another and to their students and endowed with an apostolic spirit, may teachers by their life as much as by their instruction bear witness to Christ, the unique Teacher” (*Gravissimum educationis*, n. 8).

- Secondly, teachers in Catholic schools should receive particular pastoral care. The document *The Catholic school* states: “Teachers are of the first importance when it comes to imparting a distinctive character to Catholic schools. It is, therefore, indispensable to ensure their continuing formation through some form of suitable pastoral provision. This must aim to animate them as witnesses of Christ in the classroom and tackle the problems of their particular apostolate, especially regarding a Christian vision of the world and of education, problems also connected with the art of teaching in accordance with the principles of the Gospel. A huge field is thus opened up for national and international organisations which bring together Catholic teachers and educational institutions at all levels” (n 78).

- Thirdly, teachers of the Catholic school, if they are not only lay people, but also priests or consecrated persons, reveal the richness of the church community and allow the students to better understand the Church (*Lay Catholics in schools: witnesses to faith*, n. 43). Teachers must form a team which is truly of service to the children and youth entrusted to them. They need to build a climate of mutual trust, respect and love, and by their behavior at school and outside of school, they must give witness to their Catholic faith. Only on the basis of the compatibility of words with their own lives they can build their authority and expect the recognition of this authority by children and youths. Further, the school itself has the responsibility to help its own teachers and educators to develop their professional and didactic competencies. The school should also help teachers to deepen their spiritual formation and ties with the Church through participation in retreats, through activity in pastoral work, in apostolic movements, etc. (cf. *The Principles of the Catholic Association of Educators*, n. 17-19).

c. Parents

The conciliar declaration *Gravissimum Educationis* advised teachers and parents to cooperate in the education of their children. Canon 796 § 2 of the Codex expresses the same viewpoint: “Parents must cooperate closely with the teachers of the schools to which they entrust their children to be educated; moreover, teachers in fulfilling their duty are to collaborate very closely with parents, who are to be heard willingly and for whom associations or meetings

are to be established and highly esteemed". Church documents could not - understandably - go into details. This is due to the diversity of Catholic schools in different countries and the diversity of educational traditions. The document *The Principles of the Catholic Association of Educators* speaks of parents as those who must participate in school matters according to their professional skills and material resources. An expression of this cooperation, and at the same time a place of caring for the existence of a school, could be the School Council or the Parents Council, depending on the statutory provision. Parents should join the school's life not only through the above-mentioned structures, but also by helping in initiatives for children and young people through their financing or in their implementation (cf. n. 20-21). Next, the document speaks of the participation of parents in organizing extra-curricular lessons of interest to the whole school community and of parents' meetings with educationalists, psychologists or pediatricians (n. 22). And further: the Catholic school cannot forget the religious formation of parents, especially in connection with the religious formation of their children. This goal can be achieved, for example, through teacher meetings and talks with parents, joint pilgrimages (students, parents, teachers) etc. (n. 23).

d. Community and education

I am sure we are familiar with the African proverb: "it takes a village to raise a child". Besides being an expression of traditional wisdom, the proverb is also profoundly in harmony with the Christian vision of education. Whenever we speak of the psychological, intellectual, moral and spiritual formation of a

young person we do so in the context of a cultural milieu which is the expression not of one individual but of a community with its reservoir of shared ideas, values, beliefs and the binding force of actions which express an attitude of cooperation, solidarity, concern for the widows and the orphans, the sick and the elderly. In other words, Christianity is not just a spiritual discipline for sanctifying the individual (it is also that) but it is also a cultural phenomenon, and culture always has its roots in a community. I think it's important to recognize that the link between community and education is particularly present here in Africa, to the extent that countries in the Western world with their emphasis on the self-fulfilment of the individual (which at times can reach an extreme of a narcissistic "cult of the self") can learn from Africa. However, this link between education, community, culture and Christianity in Africa cannot be taken for granted. This is not only because in itself it is a challenge to build authentic Christian communities which serve to educate our children here in Africa, but we also have to take into account the many forces impinging on Africa both from within and from without which can be sources of fragmentation, cultural degeneration, social disorder, and political turmoil. But, I would say that it is precisely because of these forces that more than ever Christianity and in particular Catholic education has a role to play in safeguarding and developing what is truly authentic in the African tradition expressed in the well-known concept of "Ubuntu" – "I am because we are".

We have said earlier that students, teachers and parents should create a community that supports the educational process. This word "community" is

a key element in the whole enterprise of education. The human person flourishes within the context of different communities. The first is usually the family, then the school, the university, the local community, the religious community, the state. Every human being, especially a young person, needs a healthy community that makes him or her feel needed, with a task to fulfill that expresses participation in the life of the community.

The community gives a sense of security and helps in the development of the individual, correcting faults and setting goals for the future. A person feels more confident knowing that next to him or her is someone who thinks and feels in a similar way, who has similar goals and desires. By his very nature, man is a social being and he needs a community to develop. However, communities are not only a source of encouragement and support, but can also give rise to an experience of uncertainty or even delinquency. Just like every community: family, parish or the state, the school community can have its flaws and problems. Especially nowadays, what often destroys the community is egoism, pursuit of a career, struggle for success, the instrumental use of some, and the rejection of others if they are not useful. Such an attitude within individual members of the group will not create a healthy community, but a social environment that will dampen enthusiasm and generosity and will fail to provide young people with models of positive lifestyles and choices. To become a community, its members must focus on the common good, which is not restricted to private interest, but concerns the development of all its members. However, the community must not unduly limit the individual; on the contrary, it must support each person in his or her

efforts to flourish as a mature human being, while at the same time helping each one to avoid any form of behavior that is not conducive to their true good. A group of people forming a community, builds its own history and tradition, which will be an important element of the bond between successive generations. It is thanks to the community that people can grow and mature, thus fulfilling their vocation as authentic Christian men and women. That is why every person needs a genuine and healthy community to help them through the various stages of growth thus providing the foundation for their sense of identity and their understanding of their purpose in life.

Conclusion

Models of Catholic schools will be as many as the schools themselves, because they exist, especially on a global scale, in very different cultural, social and religious conditions. However, it cannot be forgotten that there are certain principles common to all such institutions that define the identity of the Catholic school. As I have already shared above, they are emphasized in the Declaration of the Second Vatican Council on Christian education, in the Code of Canon Law, in various documents of the Congregation for Catholic Education and in many statements of the Church's Magisterium.

The Catholic school is characterized above all by care for the integral education of the human person. It is not only about transferring knowledge or teaching certain skills, but about integral formation, also in a spiritual and moral

perspective. Knowledge can be used for both good and bad deeds. Looking at history, it is easy to notice that the achievements of knowledge and techniques have often been used for evil purposes, such as wars, terrorism, injustice, and manipulation. We must equip the young person not only with knowledge, but also with the resources for good, so that he serves the public in the best possible way in his life and at the same time fulfil himself. Therefore, in Catholic schools, it is necessary to give a lot of space to prayer, sacraments, and retreats, which leads the young person to a living contact with God.

Speaking of the Catholic school, or about Christian education in general, we mean above all four aspects of the educational process:

- First, the human aspect: the student should be helped to become a mature human being, righteous, honest, truthful, who can be relied upon and trusted, etc.
- The second is the spiritual aspect, which is somehow the crowning of the first and at the same time is a source of enrichment. The relationship with God is ennobled and strengthened by doing good.
- Another is the intellectual aspect, teaching independent thinking, critical assessment and evaluation.
- Only in the fourth place comes that aspect of education which prepares the young person for a specific profession. The more these three elements are in place, the better the student will in the future perform his profession, that is, creatively using his skills in the service of society.

What is the real goal of education in general, and Catholic education in particular. We want to teach our students not to repeat just what they have learned but, more importantly, we want to train them how to think, logically, critically. We want to teach them how to solve problems. For our Catholic students the task is even more daunting. We want to teach them how to think as authentically Christian women and men. We want them to be steeped not only in the profane sciences but in the rich cultural, spiritual and authentically human tradition of the Church. We want them to solve problems “mind, body and soul” always realizing that at the heart of every problem and solution is the human person made in the image and likeness of God. Our alumni must never see people as a means to an end but always as the end itself. They must always think with justice, goodness and charity. In fact the salvation of souls must be the inspiration behind all that they think and do. The salvation of souls must be behind all that we think and do.