



## BERGOGLIO

### The challenge of education

by ANTONIO SPADARO

For Pope Francis "to educate is one of the most exciting arts of existence, and it constantly requires that horizons be expanded".

On "La Civiltà Cattolica" Father Spadaro examines seven "columns" of the educational thought of the Pope matured before becoming a Pope.

The educational challenge is at the center of the current Pontiff's view. As he himself revealed in a 2016's interview, as a parish priest in San Miguel, he was involved in youth ministry and education. On a daily basis, he hosted the children in the very large spaces of the attached College: "I always used to say Mass for the children and on Saturdays, I would teach them Catechism". And he did so also by organising shows and games, which, in that interview, he describes in detail. This is the origin of his spontaneous ability to communicate with children. But already as a Jesuit student, Bergoglio had a scholastic experience that marked him. He was sent by his superiors to teach Literature in two Jesuit high schools. However, he did not stop at lectures: on the contrary, he pushed his boys to creative composition - to involve the great Jorge Luis Borges in their activities - but also to theater and music.

The educational action was then linked to the artistic and creative experience, and this is how Bergoglio succeeded in bringing out the widest human and spiritual dimension. An unprecedented example to better understand: José Hernàn Cibils, now a musician in Germany, at that time Bergoglio was 28, still retains the comment of his teacher on his tutorial about *Hora undécima* by Maria Esther de Miguel. The pupil believed that the final message of the work was that the denial of self and mortification lead to God. Bergoglio commented praising the work done by the student, but proposed a change in the formulation of the final message that, to him, seemed too negative; he noted: "Dedication is the fruit of love", not mortification. He concluded in brackets with a personal message for José: "Clear that you are undergoing a period of negativity". Exposure to creative experience or its exercise generates a dynamic that involves the person both psychologically and spiritually. This experience as a Jesuit student and then as a priest, made Bergoglio the pastor and bishop of Buenos Aires. Taking into consideration the time he was a bishop and reading the complete collection of his pastoral interventions, recently gathered in one volume, we realize that a third of them - including homilies, letters and messages - is dedicated to educators (teachers, catechists, animators, etc.). The topic has not yet been adequately explored, and one should also search among the sources and inspirations that Bergoglio had in developing his approach. Below, we

intend to present - without wanting to be exhaustive - seven facets of this polyhedron that is the education for Francis, as they have matured in his episcopal ministry.

### **Educating is to integrate**

It is important, first of all, to understand that Archbishop Bergoglio always frames education within a broad vision of society, as a vital context for meeting and making common commitments for the construction of the civil community.

Educating, therefore, means building a nation: "Our educational task - he wrote - must awaken the feeling of the world and of society as a home. To educate in order "to live". The nation and the world for Bergoglio are above all a "home", a place to live that implies a domestic dimension. Education is not an exclusively individual, but a popular fact. In a meeting with some of his former high school students, in 2006, he said, "I hope their lives make history beyond everyone's personal history; that they are remembered for what they accomplished together, and that they are an inspiration for other children on the path of creativity". Bergoglio has always considered school as an important means of social and national integration, one of the main pillars for building a sense of community, of living together. We find evidence of this in his reflection on the internal migrants of Argentina, which dates back to 2002: "The migrant of the interior that arrived in the city, and even the foreigner who landed on Argentinean soil, found the necessary elements in basic education to transcend the particularity of their origin to look for a place in the common construction of a project. Even today, in the enriching plurality of educational proposals, we must go back to betting everything on education".

The educational task is not only aimed at empowering oneself, but at helping people to build a future together, a shared history. He who migrates and arrives in a new land, through education, has the instrument and the fundamental context to transcend oneself and one's own history, to find their place in the new home. A central element of this social construction is therefore integration. "State must assume the task of integrating", wrote Bergoglio in 2001, on the occasion of the Archdiocesan Days of Social Pastoral Care, and repeated it many times. «Integrate», moreover, is one of the important keys to understand the pontificate of Pope Francis.

### **Welcoming and celebrating diversity**

Another central element of social construction is the acceptance of diversity. Addressing Catholic teachers, Bergoglio in 2012 stated: "As Christian teachers, I propose to open your mind and heart to diversity, which is an increasingly recurring feature of societies of this new century". What does this mean exactly? Bergoglio explains it to the educational communities of the diocese: "Dialogue and love imply that in the recognition of the other as the other there is the acceptance of diversity. Only in this way is it possible to establish the value of the community: not claiming that the other submits to my criteria and priorities, not "absorbing" the other, but recognizing that the other is valid, and celebrating the diversity that

enriches everyone. Otherwise, it is only a matter of narcissism, of mere imperialism, of foolishness". Differences must be considered as "challenges", but positive challenges, resources, not problems. And this has as its immediate consequence in fighting all forms of discrimination: "We fight against all forms of discrimination and prejudice from our schools. We learn and teach to give, despite the scarce resources of our institutions and our families. And this must manifest itself in every decision, in every word, in every project. So we will begin to put a very clear sign – even if it might either be controversial or it might generate a conflict - of the different society we want to create". Therefore, the educational task is linked to the construction of a society and a future together as a people. And this implies working for the integration and for the recognition of diversity as riches not to be homologated or flattened, but to be valued for the good of all.

### **Addressing anthropological change**

The great background on which the educational task is projected is the anthropological change. Bergoglio has always been aware that men and women today are interpreting themselves differently as compared to the past, with different categories even from those familiar to them. The anthropology to which the Church has traditionally referred to and the language used to express it is a solid base, also the fruit of wisdom and secular experience. However, it seems that the person to whom the Church addresses can no longer understand them as they once did. The Church is therefore called to confront the enormous anthropological challenge. Paul VI, so esteemed by Francis, had written that to evangelize means "bringing the Good News to all the strata of humanity that are transformed"; otherwise, he continued, evangelization risks to have a decorative value, a superficial painting. Francis confirmed this attitude in his conversation with the General Superiors of religious orders, later published in *La Civiltà Cattolica*. In that session of questions and answers, he said that the educator "must inquire about the proper manner to announce Jesus Christ to a changing generation". This is the point: "The educational task today is a key, key, key mission!" To be clearer, he has brought some examples, citing some of his experiences as bishop in Buenos Aires on the preparation required to welcome children and young people living in situations of unease in the family in educational contexts. In particular, he gave this example: "I remember the case of a very sad child who finally confided to the teacher the reason for her state of mind: "My mother's girlfriend does not love me". The percentage of children who study in schools and who have separated parents is very high". There are two different situations, but they clearly pose complex challenges: that of the children of divorced parents, and that of the children who live, having as domestic reference parents of the same sex. Francis knows perfectly well that the educational challenges are no longer those of the past. He knows that - these are his words - «the situations we are experiencing today present new challenges, which are sometimes even difficult to understand». We need to announce the Gospel to a generation subject to rapid changes, sometimes too complex and difficult to accept or understand. Here are his questions: "How to

announce Christ to these boys and girls? How to announce Christ to a changing generation? ». And finally his appeal: "We must be careful not to give them a vaccine against the faith".

Bergoglio affirms one fundamental thing: the educational challenge is linked to the anthropological challenge. You cannot take the attitude of the ostrich and behave "as if" the world was different. This realistic approach characterizes all of Bergoglio's pedagogical reflection, which always starts from the concrete data, from the person who has before him with his story.

### **Restlessness as an educational engine**

A fourth central aspect in the educational polyhedron of Bergoglio is undoubtedly the anxiety, intended as an engine of education. In a homily, he addresses his interlocutors, who are educators, with a set of pointed questions. It is appropriate to read them below: «Can the boy recognize the patrimony he received? [...] Or was the boy "tamed" by contingent situations and cannot recognize in this horizon what he received and lives as if he had nothing? On the other hand, what he received should not be kept in a box, preserved, but must be lived and transformed today! These young people, can they transform what they received today? Do they know how to welcome this heritage? [...] Do they make plans? Do they have dreams? "Here, there is a clear rejection of education understood as "domestication".

As it is also clear that inheritance passing through education is not a preserved treasure. It is not a passage of boxes. On the contrary. Bergoglio says that the only way to regain the legacy of the fathers is freedom. Ultimately, what I receive is mine only if it crosses my freedom. And there is no freedom if there is no restlessness. Nothing is mine if it does not cross my restlessness and touch my heart.

For Bergoglio, maturity does not coincide with adaptation. «Jesus himself - he states provocatively - for many people of his time could have been part of the paradigm of misfits and therefore perceived as an immature». In the same message, he argues: "If maturity was a pure and simple adaptation, the purpose of our educational task would be to" adapt youngsters, these "anarchist creatures", to the good norms of society, whatever the kind. At what cost? At the cost of censorship and subjection of subjectivity or, even worse, at the cost of deprivation of what is most proper and sacred to the person: his freedom". What I inherited belongs to me, because it approached my uneasiness and crossed it, becoming mine and directing me towards a future to be built. If the inheritance does not pass through restlessness, it petrifies; it becomes a museum of memories. Mahler said that faithfulness to what was conveyed to us means keeping the fire alive, and not worshipping the ashes. Keeping the fire *alive* means feeding it, rethinking and recovering the life force. Otherwise, we fall into moralism, formalism, and therefore into boredom. Bergoglio loves Augustine's existential position and repeatedly spoke about the "peace of restlessness". In particular, receiving in audience the Jesuits and collaborators of our magazine, he asked them: «Has your heart preserved the restlessness of the research? Only restlessness can give peace

to the heart of a Jesuit. Without restlessness we are sterile». The Augustinian and Ignatian disquiet makes us generative.

What we inherit from our fathers is above all this: *the wisdom of an anxiety* that leads us to seek, to come out of ourselves, to live transcendently. «Where there is life, there is movement; where there is movement, there are changes, research, uncertainties, there are hope, joy and even anguish or desolation». Bergoglio wrote again in a message to educators: “A *restless* child [...] is a person sensitive to the stimuli of the world and society, one that opens up to the crises to which life is subjected, one that rebels against the limits and, on the other hand, claims them and accepts them (not without pain) if they are right, a non-conformist child or youngster regarding the cultural clichés that society offers him; a child or a youngster who wishes to learn to discuss». Therefore, we need to "read" this restlessness and enhance it, because all the systems that try to "calm them down" are dangerous: they lead, in one way or another, to existential quietism.

### **A pedagogy of the application**

A specific form of anarchism and restlessness is what Bergoglio attributes to the child. This appears significant for the educator. The vitality of a child is firstly a challenge that measures the ability of those around him to come out of too rigid patterns. This gaze conveys to a youngster or an adolescent heart "the warmth that comes from a heart ripe for memory, for struggle, for defects, for grace, for sin". If this perspective is strong, then the youngster will be able to suffer in life, yes, but in times of crisis, he will not go crazy, losing the correct orientation. This approach provides them with the capacity to learn to "discover", "contemplate" and "intuit" the questions of the young, who sometimes fail to express their needs and their questions in a complete and clear manner. «We must never answer questions that no one poses», wrote the Pope in *Evangelii gaudium* (#155). This remains a fundamental criterion for education and pastoral care. In this sense, catechesis must never run the risk of turning into a tasteless indoctrination, into a frustrating transmission of moral norms.

This leads Bergoglio, in the homily of the Mass for education, April 18, 2007, to ask the questions to be raised in full, because they help to make an important verification, almost an "examination of conscience" of the educator: "Do we have hearts open enough to be surprised every day by the creativity of a child, by their hopes? Am I surprised by a child's thoughts? Am I surprised by their sincerity? I am also surprised by the many harmless pranks of a child who is to be found in our classrooms? Is my heart open or have I already closed it, sealed in a kind of museum of acquired knowledge, of established methods, in which everything is perfect? Do I have to put only them into practice? Am I to receive anything? Do I have a receptive and humble heart to see the freshness of a child? If I do not have it, I may be running a very serious risk: heart becomes anachronistic, grows old. And when the heart of a parent, of an educator, turns into this, children are left with the five loaves and the two fish without knowing who to give them to; their hopes remain frustrated, their solidarity is void».

Hence the appeal to educators to be "bold and creative". The appeal is to "create", to "lay the bricks of a new building in the middle of history", to express genius and soul. In fact, creativity is the "characteristic of an active hope", because it takes charge of what there is, the reality, and finds "the way to manifest something new starting from there".

This broad and open approach corresponds to an inclusive concept of "truth". In a very illuminating speech to educators, Bergoglio states: "We must move towards an idea of truth that is ever more inclusive, less restrictive; at least, if we are thinking of God's truth and not some human truth, however solid it may appear. God's truth is inexhaustible; it is an ocean of which we can hardly see the shore. It is something that now we begin to discover: not to make us slaves to an almost paranoid defense of "our truth" (if I "have it", the other does not "have it": if the other "can have it", then "I do not have it"). Truth is a gift that is great for us, and for this reason, it magnifies us, amplifies and elevates us. And he makes us servants of such a gift. And this does not involve relativism: the truth instead obliges us to a continuous process of deepening our understanding».

We find a concrete application of this pedagogy in a key passage of his speech to Catholic schools. They must be all except schools of "ideology". Bergoglio declares: "Our schools must not aspire to form a hegemonic army of Christians who will have all the answers, but must be the place where all questions are accepted; where, in the light of the Gospel, personal research is appropriately encouraged and not obstructed by verbal walls, walls that are rather weak and which fall down irremediably shortly thereafter. The challenge is greater: it requires depth, it requires attention to life, it requires healing and freeing ourselves from idols".

In this appeal, there is a full and mature synthesis of Bergoglio's vision. The path of research and of the question helps to form an adult personality, able to make choices with discernment and to adhere to the faith with full maturity. Do not mistreat the limits!

A sixth column of the educational edifice that Bergoglio built in his years as a bishop in Argentina is a clear awareness of the limits. The dimension of restlessness and of the tension towards beyond must be accompanied by this necessary awareness. Addressing educators in 2003, Bergoglio stated the need to "create from what exists", and therefore without idealism. "This entails - he wrote - that one is able to recognize the differences, the pre-existing know-how, the expectations and even the limits of the children and their families". More directly, a few years later, he underlined that "formation is to take place with patience, in hyponym, which accompanies trials without mistreating the limits".

This attitude of not mistreating or "caressing" the limits is another essential aspect of Bergoglio's pedagogy. In his apostolic exhortation *Amoris laetitia* (AL) which can and should also be read as a text of pedagogy - the Pope affirms that tenderness "is expressed in particular in turning with exquisite attention to the limits of the other, especially when they emerge clearly» (AL 323).

Going beyond the limits always implies a process of development, in which an innate trust coexists in the grace that grows by itself and a careful attention to small things. Rather than an attitude of optimism, here we are faced with an attitude of trust that focuses on the process that is possible in time rather than on the static nature of the condition. You cannot be educators unless you have a confident openness, capable of "taking care", to live a generative and familial fruitfulness.

This lively pedagogy, which is based on restlessness and questions, has an inclusive conception of truth and a widely-spread approach: it is based on the fact that education is not a technique, but a generative fruitfulness. This is a fundamental aspect of Bergoglio's educational vision. The generative and parental dimension innervates from the roots its conception of the educational task, which must be forged by a family like perspective. The current Pope spoke precisely of a look specific to a father or a mother, to a brother or a sister.

This statement is particularly striking: "To dialogue is to have the capacity to leave inheritance". Legacy is something that passes from a generation to another within a family. Bergoglio says: «Through dialogue we recover the memory of our fathers, the legacy... to make it grow within us... Through dialogue we take courage... check the courage to send forth this legacy committed to the present towards the utopias of the future and to fulfill our duty to increase the inheritance received through fruitful commitments of future utopias". From these words arise all the richness of the dialogue of experiences and attitudes towards life.

From Monsignor Bergoglio's writings it is further understood that he believes a lot in narratives. Only via the story is it possible to pass things from one generation to the next. In this sense, one of the fundamental themes dealt with is the family relationship between the young and the old, the two *limits* of our current societies. Young people are the future, the energy. The elderly are wisdom. The son looks like his father, but he is different. A child is not a clone.

Education is a *family fact* that involves the relationship between generations and the story of an experience. There is a bridge that must be established between generations. And it is this bridge that is the context of an education understood as the conveyance of a living heritage.

The legacy is always accompanied by a shiver, because it links the past and the future. The Pope recently said to a group of middle school children: "We must learn to look at life by looking at horizons, more and more, more and more, always ahead". And this gives the shiver. Here is the advice to educators: "Let's challenge them more than they challenge us. We should not let the "vertigo" be received from others, who only put their lives at risk: let us give it to them. But the right vertigo, which satisfies this desire to move, to move forward. "

We then understand that inheritance, which is transmitted from father to son, is a legacy of restlessness. To Bergoglio, the fathers and the elderly are those who "dream". As Bergoglio has meditated for a long time on the book of Joel, he says: "I shall pour out my spirit on all humanity [...]; Your old people shall dream dreams, and your young people see visions." (*Jl* 3: 1). The visions on the future that young people are able to elaborate are based on the dream of those who

preceded them. It is not the young who are dreamers, but the elderly! The young have "visions", they imagine the future, thus they build it in hope.

The lack of fathers "capable of narrating dreams does not allow young generations to "have visions" and they remain *locked*. It does not allow them to make plans, since future generates insecurity, distrust, fear". What helps to look up? Only the testimony of the fathers, "to see that it is possible to fight for something worthwhile".

This dynamic does not allow us to structure life as a "restoration shop", as traditionalists would like to put it, or even as a "laboratory of utopia", as those who try to stay on the crest of the wave would see the reality. The educational task is therefore a commitment to history. A people is a historical reality, it is constituted over many generations.

### **Three keywords**

We have quickly presented seven "columns" of Pope Francis' educational thought the way it was formed until the election to the papacy. Reflecting upon them can help to better understand the educational magisterium that the Pope developed in the five years since the day of his election to the throne of Peter. We have identified seven fundamental elements: education as a popular fact that helps build up the future of a nation; the need to welcome and integrate diversity as a resource; the precaution and the courage to face the new anthropological challenges, even those that we struggle to understand; the restlessness as an educational engine; demand and research as a method; awareness and acceptance of limits; the familiar and generative dimension of the educational relationship. If we verify the titles of the volumes in which the then Monsignor Bergoglio had collected some of his pedagogical reflections, we find three key words that characterize education: *choice*, *exigency* and *passion*.

But there is an extremely concise statement that Bergoglio wrote to educators and with which we can revive our action from this point on: "To educate is one of the most exciting arts of existence, and it constantly requires that horizons be expanded".

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