

EDUCATE TO HUMANITY BETWEEN HUMANITY AND THE ENVIRONMENT (Laudato Si, n.209)

Vincent Dollmann – Archbishop of Cambrai
Ecclesial Assistant UMEC-WUCT

When reflecting on education in the context of safeguarding creation, I think I should be taking into consideration the current context of health and economic crisis.

Last June, during the quarantine, I sent a letter to the young people of my diocese inviting them to reflection in order to propose ideas and considerations for the future. About fifteen high school and university students from quite different backgrounds provided me with feedback. They testify to a true lucidity regarding society and the human heart, while at the same time expressing the desire for humanity to be more respectful of people and creation.

All of them have stressed the complexity of the human heart when facing the danger of death. Human selfishness can also be revealed in small instances of behaviour: arguing in shops over toilet paper, a case of water or a kilo of pasta. But the person, at the same time, can also feel the urge to be generous towards the poor or the lonely.

Since leaving the lockdown, young people have noticed the persistence of paradoxical attitudes: many are rediscovering the beauty of a less polluted world, but they are also eager to wear their masks in the frequented places.

Young people's replies also speak about their human and spiritual experiences in the period of quarantine.

-Young people were directly confronted with illness and death: the hospitalisation of a friend, the death of the elderly whom they were close with, be them grandparents or teachers. The obligation to keep families away from a loved one in hospital or to limit the number of participants at the funeral remain a traumatic experience and makes it difficult to deal with grief.

-Family life is mentioned in all letters. For some, the time of lockdown has rekindled the suffering of separation from parents; for others it has been made more difficult due to the small size of the house or the lack of a garden. But most of them talk about the simple joys, a meal together or mere exchanges. Families came back to pray more regularly, especially in the evenings and on Sundays.

Some young people living in the countryside remember the joy of attending the Rosary with their grandmothers every Friday evening at the church in the village.

-The quarantine was also the time of social networks. The young people emphasize the positivity of technology as a means to continue their studies in an interactive way and to get in touch with classmates or relatives. However, there are many responses that deal with the danger of video games that encourage people to withdraw into themselves.

-One last point that is underlined by young people refers to the relationship with the present as projects and the rhythm of activities was interrupted. A destabilizing experience at the beginning, but it allowed them to take "time to live and listen to themselves", as a student said. Another one writes: "Life has certainly changed, it has opened up to the interior, giving everyone the chance to ask themselves essential questions".

From these reflections, they indicate new paths to be followed in the near future. I note three of them that can challenge education and seek to take into account the safeguarding of creation: valuing interiority and prayer, caring for communion among Christians and among people, living an effective solidarity and joyful sobriety.

- The world of education has become accustomed to distinguishing between levels of knowledge: theoretical knowledge, practical knowledge, and essential knowledge (about being). The challenge of safeguarding creation implies special attention to the articulation of these three levels.

Education can no longer be limited to scientific information or awareness of climate change. As Pope Francis points out in his encyclical, it is a question of rethinking the pedagogical itineraries "of ethics of ecology, and helping people, through effective pedagogy, to grow in solidarity, responsibility and compassionate care" (Laudato si , 24 May 2015, n. 210).

In an era of increasingly specialised and compartmentalised education, there is a pressing invitation to find space for an evaluation and discernment in learning.

The Christian tradition offers various paths of meditation on the Word of God which have borne beautiful fruit. Reading the Holy Scriptures as a prayer makes it possible to articulate strictly faith and reason. The book of Deuteronomy uses the expression "a heart to know" (Dt 29:3), and therefore stresses that there is no true knowledge without a conversion of the heart.

If education, which considers the safeguarding of creation, needs on one hand the light of faith, on the other it must be able to be achieved through action. This requires that education integrate the purpose of an ecological commitment. Pope Francis does not hesitate to give concrete examples from daily life (Laudato si, n. 211).

In many countries initiatives have been launched to encourage Christian communities to develop more respectful behaviour towards creation: energy saving, combating waste, thermal insulation of buildings, but also attention to cultivating attitudes of gratitude and gratuitousness, as well as the prayer of thanksgiving and intercession for creation. Together with the parishes, schools can find true dynamism by integrating these paths of ecological conversion into their own educational project.

-In addition to the search for interiority and the thirst for prayer, young people point out the urgency of communion not only among Christians but among all people. The concern for the protection of creation passes through that of the common home where every person finds their place, the poor as well as the rich, the young as the firstborn.

This questions first of all the structures of education: the family as the first and main place of education (cf. Vatican II Declaration on Christian Education, n. 3), and more generally the different places of life (schools, communities and associations) fostering dialogue and collaboration. These links are essential to sustain an integral education that considers all dimensions of the person, but also an inclusive education that allows everyone to access knowledge and take their part in facing the challenges of humanity. If attention to family and the links between school and other places in life are the structural reference points for an education that encourages people to take care of the common home, I would like to stress the importance of intergenerational dialogue, so dear to Pope Francis. Based on the prophecy of Joel, "your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions", the Holy Father writes in his Exhortation to the Young People: "When young and old alike are open to the Holy Spirit, they make a wonderful combination. [...] The elderly have dreams built up of memories and images that bear the mark of their long experience. If young people sink roots in those dreams, they can peer into the future; they can have visions that broaden their horizons and show them new paths. But if the elderly do not dream, young people lose clear sight of the horizon." (*Christus vivit*, 25 March 2019, no. 192-193).

-The young people, who have shared with me their reflections during lockdown, aim at the heart of an education committed to safeguarding creation: ecological conversion, which Pope Francis describes as interior conversion, that opens up to an effective solidarity among people and a sobriety of life.

Education has an important role to play in determining the paradigm shift so necessary for ecological conversion, especially with regard to consumerism and individualism. The challenge is great! It questions educational parameters that remain in current practice: those of competition and performance, of individual success.

Moreover, education inspired by the points of reference of the Gospel has always sought to correct these parameters through person-centred accompaniment and the valorisation of talents, with openness to solidarity and the service of life.

In the current context of crisis, these realities seem to be of renewed relevance. But we know that this effort will not be made without a conversion of heart. Education, like all human activity, needs God's light and support. Only God can change hearts; only God can heal our intelligence and our will and direct them towards the goods of the Kingdom of peace and joy.

The current health crisis with its economic consequences could lower the focus on safeguarding creation. It is as if health emergency put everything on hold! While the crisis calls into question man's relationship with creation and the predominant ideology of progress! Already the holy Pope Paul VI did not hesitate to speak of the dramatic consequences for creation, of economic activity without human control (Apostolic Letter, Octogesima adveniens, 14 May 1971).

Education must be able to continue the process at the service of the Covenant between humanity and environment, as the Holy Father points out. Education must draw on the experiences of the integral and inclusive approach and thus develop the paradigms of fraternity among people and joyful sobriety. These paradigms are offered to us by the Gospel of Christ.

Trad. Adrian Podar