

SECOND PLENARY ASSEMBLY: WORKSHOP DISCUSSION GUIDE**EDUCATION FOR PRAYER IN
THE CATHOLIC SCHOOLS OF ASIA**

The attention of the Church in Asia has been going out to young people and education, and today the need to "grow together" with young people has been felt even more deeply. All people are growing in the faith and in their relationship with God. All people are searching for God, and they are expecting from the Church true help in this searching. The Church has again stressed the necessity of her activity in the line of a catechesis through word, memory and witness (Bishops' Synod of 1977, no.7). In this, the Catholic school has a great role to play.

The fact of "becoming" is most important in an adolescent's life; they are becoming honest men, adults, Christians. This becoming is assisted by a number of adults who come into their lives. Next to family education, school education is given high importance in Asian society. Through its many schools the Church has been promoting the spirit of the Gospel, helping young people to prepare for a life according to the Beatitudes.

1. Objectives of the Catholic School

By way of introduction it may be good to emphasize a few of the points made clear in the document "The Catholic School," issued on March 19, 1977 by the Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education.

This discussion guide has been prepared for the workshop sessions of the Second Plenary Assembly of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC), held at the Morning Star Regional Seminary, in Barrackpore, India, near Calcutta, 19th-25th November 1978. The theme of the Plenary Assembly was: "Prayer—the Life of the Church of Asia."

The Catholic School wants:

- (1) to convey a profound value system, based on justice and love;
- (2) to guide the young to an openness towards the poor and needy in society;
- (3) to form honest citizens, sound leaders and good Christians;
- (4) to evangelize directly or indirectly through a Christian environment and through catechetical or pre-catechetical curricula.

In this rapidly changing society the role of the Catholic schools has become even more important. The urgent need for well-balanced leaders is felt more and more; and a profound value system is needed more than ever. One may think of Christian education as the main "counterbalance" in a materialistic and pluralistic society, helping the young to build their lives on good foundations. The function of any educational institution is the total promotion of the person, but Catholic education adds to this a confrontation with absolute values (The Catholic School, no. 29). This gives the Catholic school its specific character: "The Beatitudes are the life norm, and evangelical principles become norm, interior motivation and final goal for education" (no.34).

The specificity of the Catholic school exists in the fact that it teaches the young to dialogue with God in the different situations of their personal life. Furthermore, she stimulates them to overcome all individualism and to discover, in the light of the faith, that they are called to live, in a responsible way, a specific vocation in solidarity with other people. (no.45)

This makes of the Catholic school a "meeting place for those who wish to express Christian values in education." (no.53).

Catholic Schools in Asia

When speaking of Catholic schools it is hard to generalize, since we are dealing with a variety of cultural contexts, social environments, and elementary, secondary and higher levels of education. On the one hand, we may have schools open to everybody. On the other, the selective norms may differ according to different areas or particular purposes of each institution, (e.g., a school put up for orphans will be different from a school in which student selection is done by the government).

The Catholic school is a part of the Church in Asia, but at the same

time it is a part of the educational effort of the nation. Most countries in Asia keep strict structural, financial and ideological controls on the schools, and often financial dependence puts limitations on what we can do. Often the official estimation is different from the popular esteem; many countries just permit Catholic schools. The schools usually find themselves in a non-Christian society, and very often in an environment in which people breathe a non-Christian religion (Hindu, Islam, Confucianism, Buddhism). Also, inside the so-called Catholic school a lot of other ideologies and religions are gathered together, since only an average of about 5% of the pupils are Catholic, and even those Catholics do not all live in a Catholic environment at home. Teachers and educators in Catholic institutions confess different religions; this makes it often difficult to show the Catholic specificity of the school. Since most Catholic schools in Asia are run by religious congregations, the responsibility for the religious education falls mainly on the religious, while the other teachers have charge of the general education. This may create an impression that it is the religious who are putting a "Catholic tag" onto the education offered by their school.

Plurality of ideas and religions within our institutions determine the methods and techniques for catechesis and prayer. Often this pluralism results in a kind of prudence or even fear of overstressing religious values.

In most countries mass assemblies for all the students of the school are customary at regular times. This offers possibilities for prayer, reflection, or celebration. Some schools have no other possibility to express their Catholicism than through these assemblies, and through the simple presence of a religious congregation or a chaplain.

Education is almost completely focused on scientific progress and memory (banking system). In many countries religious education as part of the curriculum is restricted, or not desired, or prohibited by the authorities. Education emphasizes national ideologies, economic growth, and cultural elements more than personal growth, social awareness, and concern for others. Exactly from this angle Christian teaching is needed, and by widening the horizon for the students Christianity can provide a counterbalance.

A Christian spirit is based on love of the neighbor as an individual, and on community building. Here the Asian concept of "person" sometimes creates a conflict with the Christian concept. Because

culturally the young are used to the understanding of a person as a member of a collectivity, always related to a group, this causes sometimes difficulties in accepting fully the Christian way of life.

Doctrine is more than teaching; it is a "way of life." Not only must this be taught in the catechetical activity of the school, but also conveyed and emphasized in the whole environment and mentality-building. The service-character of a true way of life has to be stressed, especially in countries where tradition teaches a structural distance between teachers and students.

A serious threat from communist power is part of our reality. Youth loses their balance between tradition and progress. Traditional religions do not appeal too much to them. Education should offer them a profound value system which prepares them to live in the society of tomorrow, whatever color flag this society will wave: communist, materialist, rightist dictatorial, or other. Our Christian education has to prepare them to stand firm on the foundation of faith in Jesus Christ.

When young people in Asia pray, to what kind of God do they turn themselves? The philosophy of life for many is a type of relativism which makes also their image of God relative. A biblical sense of God, a true concept of the Christian teaching, will help them to come to a total dependence on God, rather than to look for a type of consolation or peace of mind in religion or in prayer. The relatively "young" faith in Asia explains why its roots are not very deep, and the concept of God not purified enough.

For the same reason the horizon of the young is not very wide; when they pray, immediate needs prevail. A need for the "memory" aspect of the faith has to be brought to the young through the development of a sense of history. Bible, church history, living revelation, and salvation in history need to be brought home to form a spirit of prayer.

The most hope-giving element is their deep desire for religion and religious expression; their souls are thirsty and they want to meditate in different forms. The religious background of Asian cultures forms a good basis for the development of religious values.

Reflections: Prayer in the School

Education extends beyond the walls of the school. Different extra-curricular activities will have to complement the missing parts. Club activities, retreats, formation weekends, leadership formation, teacher training, camps, prayer groups, celebrations, etc., have a great value for education, and offer many chances for the educator to build relationships on a friendly basis with the *educandi*. These activities can become a real school-for-relationships with their friends, their teachers, and the Supreme Being.

Among many possibilities, we point out boarding sections as having great influence. Here life is shared together: educators, often religious, and students live together in a Christian community style; formation in a family spirit, relationship-building, brotherly love, and prayer are fostered here.

A basic question is: how create a Christian environment, for an atmosphere of recollection and prayer? The creators of this environment are the teachers and the whole staff. Therefore, selection of the teachers should be done according to their ability to cooperate in the creation of a Christian community, and not only according to their scientific skill. If we want our youth to pray, we need educators who pray for them, with them, and reflect together with the young on their way of life. The teachers' love for their students needs to be expressed also through prayer.

As a practical point, every Catholic school needs a meditation room or chapel, if possible centrally located, where people can always go in and relax, pray, and let their hearts come to rest for a while.

A "reflective way of teaching" results from this environment. Each subject allows reflection on a deeper level. Didactically speaking, each class period needs a climax; this climax is the leaven of our education. This reflection is a thinking more deeply, a digging into the roots of our being, a connection to be made between the study subject and our being, with what happens around us, in order to come to a more serene and deeper observation of reality.

Each Catholic school in Asia seems to have found a certain way of expressing its religious character. Experience shows that a short reflection at the beginning of the day is very fruitful. Bigger celebrations

during the year seem to be well remembered by past pupils. The fact of praying the "Our Father" daily, if possible, unites the pupils in prayer. The nature of this prayer makes it also very easily accepted by students of different ideologies.

Catechetical classes for students who desire it, and an introduction to religion in general, demand an appropriate place in the curriculum.

Education in prayer and the sacraments of Confession and the Eucharist needs to be given to the Catholic students and Catholic teachers. Special pastoral care has to be given, of course, to the Catholic students and staff.

The person of Jesus remains central. Often an overconcern for the non-Christians causes "flat" teaching. Young people like clarity and sincerity more than a watering down of one's opinion. Jesus has to be made present in their lives as a model and teacher; therefore, a biblical approach will be very helpful. Reading of the Bible leads to a right understanding and appreciation of God.

While preparing for baptism, or on introducing students to the faith, a close link has to be made with the parish in which the school is located, and perhaps, even more important, with the parish to which the catechumen belongs, in order to make the student feel at home in the community of believers. If not, there is a danger that the whole of religion remains connected only with the school environment in the student's mind. This would result in a taking off of the religious reality together with the taking off of the school uniform.

The presence of a crucifix in the classrooms, or some sign or picture, reminding them of the presence of God, has to be encouraged. (Exaggerations will often have the opposite effect.) Devotion to Mary, the mother of Jesus, presentation of appealing saints, of famous Christians of today, help the young find an ideal in life.

Education which brings an admiration of the created world and of art can contribute to a reflective and meditative presence in this world. Asian youth appreciate very much every kind of art. Beauty leads to appreciation of values and beauty of heart. Through personal contact and counseling positive values and virtues can be stressed continually, such as sacrifice, concern for others, sharing, joy.

Through all these different methods a way has to be found to create a desire to reflect and pray, so that also in their private lives the students will learn to thank and praise God, to review their lives in front of Him, to search for a deeper dimension in their daily life, and to build their life as a relation with God.

Questions

The search for ways to bring the living Christ to the people of Asia through the Catholic schools is of great importance for the future of the Church in Asia. Therefore, a few elements need to be examined:

(1) What should be the requirements in hiring teachers for our schools? What are the priorities as far as Christian life, moral life, and ideologies are concerned?

(2) How do we promote the specific character of the Catholic school, as a school in which people are trained to live the Beatitudes? How can we in Asia "liberate people from the conditions that impede them to live a fully human life" (no.29) through our schools?

(3) Do our people experience freedom of education? If not, is there anything the Church can do? Have substitutes to be found? How?

(4) Are we as national churches, or as an Asian federation, doing something for the training of teachers? What can be done: exchange programs, training sessions, our presence in teachers' colleges?

(5) It is our duty to encourage school directors and teachers to keep searching for new ways and experiments in providing ways of religious assistance to the youth in the school. How can we do this?

(6) How can school work be complementary to the parish, and vice versa? Is it necessary or desirable for the Church today to think of the apostolate and evangelization only in territorial terms of parish?

(7) Are we enough concerned about the formation of future youth directors among priests and religious? Is youth and student evangelization taken into consideration in the formation curriculum of our seminaries? What kind of difficulties do we encounter as far as personnel is concerned in youth evangelization?

Conclusions

Jesus entered into deeper contact with the Father through prayer. Prayer makes us say "Abba, Father," makes us realize our dependence, and aware of our own situation and relationship with others. Education towards a "prayerful life" corresponds with the deeper movement of the heart of young people in Asia.

Preparation for a life of love, of concern for people, and for justice in society grows with the question: what does God want from me? This question is asked by all young people in one way or another. We do not have the right to withhold the answer which Christ gave to this question. True love for Christ and for the young will make us creative in our ways of presenting Him to them as their Ideal, to lead youth to be still, to stand alongside Him, and then to walk together with Him.

In the structure of our schools we have to create an atmosphere of love and understanding, where the young realize that they are loved by their teachers, accepted and encouraged, even when they are in trouble. Closeness with the Lord gives the teacher the openness of mind to accept and love his students, and will attract the student to a similar way of life. He will look for a deeper dimension in life, search for a basic life style and attitude through the daily activities and studies.

The Asian soul is meditative and reflective. Therefore, our Catholic schools, building on this basic cultural element, have to help the students to reflect on themselves, their environment, the driving forces in society, to dig deeper and find their roots in the Supreme Being, Creator and Giver of all life. The God of the Bible will inspire them to reflect and meditate. Therefore, our education for prayer should lead through all kinds of systems and ways to a *meditative and reflecting way of existing*. In this way only, the Catholic school becomes a "meeting place for those who wish to express Christian values in education" (no.53).

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