

Incontro pedagogico europeo – Cadine (TN - Italia) 9-10 ottobre 2010

BUILDERS OF RELATIONSHIPS

INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE EDU

1. A PERSON'S DIGNITY

In the reflections prepared for the previous “Education meetings” and for the International Congress, “The Community as Educator,”¹ we often returned to the *ontological primacy of relationships*: the human being does not exist only as an individual, but as a being in relationship. Therefore, relations as a dimension constitutive to education itself: a continuous communicating practice, a school of reciprocity between educator and student, between educators, between young people and between groups

As educators we should, therefore, be aware of how important it is to cultivate a clear vision of the world and of life, our own anthropology, not only in reference to the capacity of educators to get in touch with themselves, but to their own *being-in-relationship*, whose highest vocation is expressed in the capacity to love. In this way also the Socratic saying “know yourself,” if referred to educators, can be absolutely connected to the reality of love, in so far as their knowledge is true if they open themselves up to the other person, a horizon that while welcoming diversity also promotes relationships.² It is a complex instructive itinerary, certainly not easy and linear and as long as one's life span, but it is rooted in the precious years of child, adolescent and youth development.

In such a perspective, the person can be defined as a dynamic microcosm in continuous relational exchange,³ which is planned and transformed.⁴ Therefore, educators will be much more effectively educators the more they are able to tirelessly believe in the student's possibility of becoming, in turn, a *person-in-relationship*, with the ability to love.

Therefore, if the person is fulfilled as a being-in-relationship, it is not enough to establish an unequivocal communication aimed at the teaching of cognitive knowledge and competences, but we will need to promote also solid relational competences, of which *reciprocity* will represent the most mature goal.⁵ We are referring to that long process for the *full development of identity*, of personal and social autonomy, which asks to be sustained, accompanied and appreciated by the educators' passionate, always watchful and trusting “glance.” Therefore, education, as the full “promotion” of the students'

¹ For the texts see: www.eduforunity.org

² “There cannot be a true human promotion if we do not arrive to opening up towards other subjects ... Love represents the most complete expression of the will to promote the other. Love understands all the other values and is the soul of the various points of view He who truly loves wants the autonomous development of ‘you’ ...,” in (F. Pittau, *Il volere umano nel pensiero di Vladimir Jankélévitch*, Gregorian University Publisher, Rome 1972, pp. 206 – 217); cfr. also M. Nedenocelle, *Verso una filosofia dell'amore e della persona*, Paoline, Milan 1959.

³ Cfr. T. Sorgi, *Costruire il sociale, la persona e I suoi “piccoli mondi”*, Città Nuova Publishing House, Rome 1991.

⁴ Cfr. M. Freeman, R. Robinson, *The Development Within. An Alternative Approach to the Study of Lives*, in “New Ideas Psychol.”, 8, 1990, pp.53-72.

⁵ The autonomy being referred to here must not be confused with self-sufficiency or indifference, but must be understood as an assuming of responsibility towards oneself and towards the other person.

whole humanity, of their *whole persons* which is an entirety and not a part, as is underscored by Jacques Maritain.⁶

Continuing this reflection and connecting to what has been emphasized also in previous reflections – that every person’s DNA is love – we need to place ourselves in front of the mystery that every person carries within themselves, which is the mystery of our own nature. As Emmanuel Mounier wished, this demands not to reduce the people to mere individuals, centred on themselves, but on the contrary, to help them to *decentralize themselves* in order to fulfil the *training of the ‘you.’* In fact, without the encounter with the other person, without love, people do not attain this threshold because if we are distant from others, we are strangers also to ourselves. Therefore, as Mounier again underscored, if love on the one hand is *the community’s constitutive way of unity*, on the other it is the inalienable element *for the unity of people themselves.*⁷

It is an anthropological vision that religious thinking leads back to the concept of the human person as a creative being, made in the image of God,⁸ which can only be fulfilled as a *being-in-relationship of love.*⁹ Since “this new creature is truly a great being, he/she deserves all our respect.”¹⁰

From this point of view, Chiara Lubich, in her talk on the art of loving, even though she speaks on things linked to personalism, introduces us to an anthropological novelty: each person must be seen in their highest dignity and loved as Jesus was loved. Not only this: in each person we can see Jesus to be loved, but we have to do it by trying to be another Jesus ourselves, Jesus who loves himself in the others. Such a high vision of the human person was almost set aside also by the theological thinking until the Second Vatican Council,¹¹ and had not been carried out with its due consequences. It opens up stimulating ways of reflection also to education theory, which we will have to deepen.

We can affirm, then, that the *person* is the one who is able to deeply read one’s own experience¹² and reach self-awareness of one’s own actions, activating a dynamic process of knowledge and intentionality.¹³ The person is the one who knows how to overcome the limits of the one individuality, a land where every relationship has died; that is, where *the ego is everything*. Instead, the true affirmation of self, paradoxically comes about in the gift, in loving, as a value for oneself and for others: *I give myself as a gift, I love, therefore I am.*¹⁴

⁶ J. Maritain, *L’educazione al bivio*, La Scuola, Brescia 1983, p.2.

⁷ E. Mounier, *Rivoluzione personalista e comunitaria*, p. 105 in: E. Mounier, *Persona e umanesimo relazionale*, LAS, Rome 2005, pp 90-91.

⁸ J. Maritain, *op. cit.*, p.21.

⁹ Gregory of Nissa affirms: “Our Creator gave us love as an expression of our human physiognomy (identity)” (Gregory of Nissa, *De hominis opificio* 5, PG 44, 137 C.). E. Evdokimov, Russian philosopher and theologian, comments this phrase with a poetical expression which changes the “Cogito, ergo sum” of Descartes with “Amo, ergo sum” (Cfr. P. Evdokimov, *L’Ortodoxie*, Desclée, Paris 1979, p. 68.). Also in the thought of the Fathers of the Church, we find the expression: if you want to fulfil yourself, love. Augustine wrote: “Ask a person what they desire, they’ll respond that they are looking for happiness. But people don’t know the way nor where to find it, and they hesitate. Christ put us back on the right track, the one that leads to the Homeland. How can we go along this way? If you love, you will run. The stronger your love, the quicker you will run.” (Augustine, cit.in A.G.Hamman *Les racines de la foi*, 1983, p. 104).

¹⁰ G. Nosengo, *I figli sono un dono*, S. Paolo, Milan 1958, pp.40-42.

¹¹ Underscoring the council tests that not only the human person is in relationship with God, created “through Christ and for Christ” (Col 1:16), but even that “through the incarnation the Son of God, in a certain way, united himself to every person.” For this reason “Christians, then, made according to the Son’s image, who is the firstborn among many brothers and sisters, receive «the firstlings of the Spirit» (Rm 8:23), therefore they are able to fulfil the new law of love.” Jesus with his death “destroyed death, with his resurrection he gave us the gift of life, so that also we could become children with the Son, and we can pray exclaiming in the Spirit: Abba, Father!” (Gaudium et Spes, n.22).

¹² L. Guasti, *Curricolo e riforma della scuola*, La Scuola, Brescia, 1998.

¹³ M. De Beni, *I tesori di Giby e Doppiaw, Educarsi alla relazione*, Città Nuova Publishing House, Rome 2006.

¹⁴ G. Cicchese, *Persona*, in “Nuova Umanità”, XXVIII (2006/2), n. 164.

2. AN EDUCATION FOR EVERYONE

Love assumes different nuances in relationships among people: paternal, maternal, filial, fraternal love, which depend on precise roles and circumstances.

But what tonalities must *love have in the educative relationship?*

With the specification that true love loves everyone, the boundaries spread out on a planetary level, proposing a love which can embrace universal brotherhood. It is no longer a love which responds to the demands of particular relationships, regarding special people, but a love addressing every person, independently from the relationship that it has with us.

From the educative point of view, we underscore that only a love like this can be committed to *educating everyone*, independently from their personal, social and cultural condition and even from the response that they will give, guaranteeing that right to universally recognized education with the power of love.¹⁵ It's a love that cannot place limits and demands strength and inner steadiness: “love your neighbour with all your strength, without fearing the crisis that they may eventually introduce in our relationships.”¹⁶

This is a love with ample horizons, as it derived from the original and courageous intuitions of great educators and their methods: for example, the “preventive method of John Bosco,” originated from the love for children, especially the most needy ones of Turin; the “pedagogy of Maria Montessori” which started off from her passion to educate children, particularly the physically and mentally disabled; the “pedagogy of motivation” and the centre of interests of Ovide Decroly, who initially also took care of the physically and mentally disabled children; or Reuven Feurstein's studies on “cognitive modifiability,” which originated from his work as an educator for children who survived the Holocaust; similarly, “Fr.Milani's school,” which began with his attention for the poor, from which started an education which is still timely today, based on participation and active involvement; and also “Paulo Freire's pedagogy” on the teacher-student reciprocity which developed in Brazil, starting from his commitment to the most needy and the illiterate.

This is a love that must be free from the need of an answer and from the limits which we often pose ourselves. In fact, “charity is a law without barriers, it is universal” – highlighted Luigi Giussani – therefore “putting a limit in that law is not to limit it, but annuls it We must live for the universe, for the whole of humanity.”¹⁷ This is an attitude which demands *full respect for the other*: the student is different from me, is different from the plan that I could have for him/her, he/she does not have to respond to my vision of the world and life but he/she must fulfil him/herself in an autonomous way. Therefore, as Buber underscores, whoever knows how to fully respect the diversity of each one and knows how to appreciate it is a “true educator.”¹⁸

Such an attitude also reminds us that each person is unique: “With each person something new comes into the world that has never existed before, something which is *first and unique*.”¹⁹

¹⁵ As recognized in the Universally Recognized Rights and how we evict from different Declarations and pronouncements of the UN.

¹⁶ L. Secco, *La pedagogia dell'amore*, Città Nuova, Rome 2006, p.136.

¹⁷ L. Giussani, *Il rischio educativo*, Rizzoli, Milan 2005, pp. 102-103.

¹⁸ Cfr. G. Milan, *Educare all'incontro – la pedagogia di Martin Buber*, Città Nuova, Rome 1994, pp. 94-97.

¹⁹ M. Buber, *Il cammino dell'uomo secondo l'insegnamento chassidico*, Qiqajon, Magnano (VC), 1990, p.27.

3. BUILDERS OF HUMANITY

Human love is limited in itself because no person is able to summarise its infinite qualities (and accepting the limit is a responsible choice of every authentic educator). For this reason the possibility of an authentic educative love can be searched for only in the continuous effort of overcoming oneself, of annulling oneself in order to allow the *inner teacher* to act and to permit him/her to establish authentic relationships with “him/herself in the other.” This requires a continuous work of *self-transcending* which places us in dialogue with an ideal greater than ourselves. Whoever manifests a faith will fulfil it in their relationship with God; others will do it in the serene and profound dialogue with their own conscience and with those values which it highlights and that we find in every authentic educator.

It's only in one such type of relationship that there is the possibility to transmit values, whose passage depends on the atmosphere which emanates in the educative relationship, through which we can offer the students' answers to expressed or unexpressed questions: “We have to perceive them, clarify them and educate them, in the framework of a concrete educative relationship. The inner thirst of human beings, interwoven with anxieties, insecurities and the will to grow, must not be calmed and satisfied in a superficial way.” In fact, any inevitable problematic situation or crisis that the student lives through, “as a last resort tends to lead to the mystery itself of being human in front of the absolute, in a fragile, tormented life, but still yearns to look for it always further away.”²⁰

With power, *the educator's being* returns here and it cannot be restricted even in inalienable scientific and educative competences, but it must possess an art. It certainly doesn't want to diminish the importance of methods and instruments. The educative art of loving therefore leads us to the priority of the educator's person, who is able to incarnate such an art in all its nuances, and of the student's person, called to make this art his own.

An educative love like this will allow educators to share their own cultural patrimony in a way adapted to each one, “easily overcoming considerations of dislike or sympathy which often obstacle reciprocal acquaintance and the right individuation of positive and negative aspects of every educative situation.”²¹

Love in education never exclusively sends one back to oneself, but *knows how to look beyond*. Only in this way can it balance out nearness and distance from the young person, intimacy and detachment, accompaniment and promotion of autonomy. The way of maturation becomes, at a certain point, a guided journey and self-education. Educators, in fact, like the student, must be in a continuous thrust of research and self-knowledge; they must expose themselves to the risk of listening,²² avoiding preconceptions and impositions, facing the responsibility of an open dialogue. Here we find the concept of *gratuitousness* as a “fullness of being,” expressed by Maurice Blondel,²³ who underscores how the true educator must be able to act *without any immediate counterpart*, without being automatically influenced by likes or dislikes, by the students' responses or other.

Therefore, it will be love towards goodness and truth which will establish the educators' reasons for being and will motivate their actions towards students, whoever they may be: accepted or not, according to our expectations or not. Then, we can well affirm that education finds its original reason for being in a profound passion for life, which is a competent and courageous quest for the good in the young generations entrusted to it. In this sense, education is an authentic act of love for the whole of humanity.

²⁰ P. Roveda, *Amore pedagogico*, in: Nuovo dizionario di Pedagogia, Edizioni Paoline, Rome 1982, p.49.

²¹ A. Morisi, *Amore*, in: Enciclopedia Pedagogica, La Scuola, Brescia 1989, vol I, pp. 547-548.

²² “Competence is not enough to make advice good. Nowadays we know that to counsel is not, first of all, giving indications, but knowing how to listen.” (P. Chauchard, *Forza e saggezza del desiderio. Indagine sull'Eros*, Città Nuova, Rome 1973).

²³ Cfr. M. Blondel, *L'azione*, Vallecchi, Florence 1921.