

The Key to Christian Pedagogy

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This is the translated text of the cardinal's homily given to the participants of the Conference on the Pedagogy of God and Catechesis in the Basilica of Saint Peter, at the tomb of Saint John Chrysostom, on July 7, 2009.

With affection, great joy, and sincere admiration, greetings to each and every participant in this event. The Church thanks you for dedicating time and part of your lives to Christian education. You have clearly understood that Christian education is the best investment in the future that we can make today. It is without doubt the Holy Spirit who drives forward this fundamental work in the life of the Church and the world.

The need for Christian education is heightened in a situation like ours: with insufficiently evangelized adults and young Christians, who are frequently separated from the practice of their faith and on occasion abandon that faith; with important shortcomings in Christian initiation; and with children, in growing numbers, who have not reached religious awakening. Dedicate yourselves to it apostolically with evangelical zeal; respond with a type of education that makes the Gospel of Jesus Christ joyfully present, in whom is revealed the truth of God and man inseparable from each other since the Incarnation.

There is an urgent need today to promote education with a religious depth that leads to a real and effective meeting with, and experience of, the living God, following in His way of life and in His engagement with mankind. It is necessary to provide an unambiguous Christian teaching, fully integrating the essential elements of faith and Christian morality, clear in the presentation of the living substance of the Gospel and of Christian life or morality. Let us never succumb to the temptation

to reduce Christian education to a vague religious awareness or a mere anodyne introduction to a series of values or ideals that do not reach the depths of the heart of man, incapable of newly conforming him to the will of God. Never, amongst us, should education be reduced to a blurred announcement of Jesus Christ that represents something other than Jesus Himself in person (that which has been called “the cause of Jesus,” or an ideal together with some attractive values).

It is clear that only a Christian education that engenders and that leads the believer to a personal encounter with Christ, is able to give sense and hope to man. Like Apostle John, we unceasingly discover that it is only when “that which we have seen and heard about the word of life” (cf. 1 Jn. 1:1) is communicated—Jesus Christ in person and present in His Church—that children, youth, and adults enter into communion with us, into this living experience that unites us to the whole Church, which was founded on the faith of the apostles. For this reason the knowledge of and the encounter with the living Son of God made man is at the center and foundation of our Christian education. There is no other. This is the root of all its originality. We are not proposing yet another religion or an ethical model of life with a set of ideals, empty of sense and without strength, because it has been stripped of its personal encounter with Jesus Christ. We propose “that which happened to us on the road” (cf. Lk. 24:35) and that which has filled us with hope. We announce that “we have seen, we have found the Lord” (cf. Jn. 1:41), or that He has come out to meet us in our lives. Just as Andrew and John did for Simon, or Philip for Bartholomew, when others who have had experience of Him lead us to His side, they communicate the real and true experience: joyful and encouraging, illuminating and giving meaning and strength to our lives.

This demands of us that we reclaim a Christian education that engenders the knowledge and living experience of the Gospel of Jesus. Educators, of which I am one, cannot be anything other than participating witnesses and providers of truth in the testimony of the ecclesial community.

If just a doctrinal or a moral issue were in question, there would be no need for us to be witnesses, but as we are dealing with one Person, one single event, the Christian educative task necessarily demands of us on the one hand that we give testimony, and on the other an education that leads to this witness.

In this sense, the words of Saint John in his first letter, “we are declaring to you what we have seen and heard, so that you too may be in communion with us” (cf. 1 Jn. 1:3), are emblematic and entirely enlightening, demanding of Christian

education, and reminding us that the education we provide must be authentically Christian and eminently personal and personalizing.

All this, in turn, tells us that we need to live a real ecclesial integration and communion, because Christ is only found in the Church, and our witness is only possible in light of our communion with the experience that is in the Church. Christian education, beginning in the founding experience of the Church and leading back to her, must be an act and a fact of the Christian community itself. Only in the Church and in cordial communion, real, affective and effective with her, is it possible to have education able to form new men and women of truth: Christians, joyful to be so, who witness to a new life and who have learnt the art of living the new truth of a person who brings Jesus Christ to others, expressing this with freedom and joy.

Loving the Church as Christ loved it—invigorated by the sense and the pride of belonging to her—strengthening our communion with her, strongly experiencing the Church and feeling part of her, living the grateful joy of the gift of being part of the Church and having her as mother, are fundamental and essential for our Christian education to be true. These actions and experiences guarantee that our education will make it possible for a new humanity to arise, made up of men and women renewed by the new message of the Gospel.

Christian education leads us to enter into a new universe, into a history that precedes us, into a new people. It immerses us in the history, tradition, and life of this people, of this family with its convictions, with its customs, with its language, with all that constitutes this new humanity, this new work of God. Christian education is the apprenticeship of life; catechesis is the apprenticeship and initiation in every aspect of the life of this family. The less solid the social environment, as is often the case today, the more one needs a Christian education to help one identify with the memory of this family, which is none other than the Church. This is the key to Christian pedagogy, inseparable from that pedagogy which God brings about in humanity, and that we must learn. May God grant us this grace.

Translated by Bernard Farrell-Roberts
