



KKEKSH

KOMISIONI KOMBËTAR I EDUKIMIT KATOLIK SHQIPTAR

Building Networks for Education

In the Light of the Global Education Pact Reflections on the Capacity for Dialogue and Identity of Catholic Schools in Albania

Foreword

In such a diverse world, where points of reference are becoming scarce, various approaches to education proliferate, which sometimes in practice do not recognise for the individual, whether child or adult educator, a transcendence, which inhabits them and drives them to improve themselves and be a gift to the world. Even certain educational approaches would like the recipients to remain where they are, not only discouraging their attempts at growth and commitment, but intervening even beforehand by eliminating every type of obstacle that costs them effort, as if it were harmful or insignificant for the overall growth of the human person. In this type of approach, the proposal of absolute happiness, devoid of any commitment, far from any frustration of courageous choices, proves to be very unrealistic and deceiving.

Integral education

Moreover, in the global context, there is a strong ecological crisis, like a humanitarian crisis: environmental degradation and human social degradation go hand in hand, they are strongly interconnected. It is no coincidence that Pope Francis in *Laudato si* no. 215, speaks of an integral ecological education: *'There will be no new relationship with creation, without a new human being. And what is it that forms the human being, if not education? Education will not be effective, and its efforts will be sterile, if we do not deal with integral education.'*¹ In these words we find clear the universal and concrete impact of integral education. In other words, in education there is no sphere of the human that can remain outside, and there is no sphere of the social that does not benefit or suffer the consequences, when the whole human person is not taken into account in education. We find ample echo of this in the documents of the Magisterium of the Church that deal with schools: *'We can define the Catholic school as a "Centre of Life" in which the process of education includes both vertical and horizontal dimensions'*. or: *'A Catholic school is at the same time a place of evangelisation, of integral formation, of culture, of learning, carried out in a context of vital dialogue between pupils of various religions and cultures'*.²

¹ DR, 109 *La dimensione Religiosa della scuola Cattolica*, 7 aprile 1988

² ECAS, 11 *La scuola cattolica alle soglie del Terzo Millennio*

Reflection on identity

The above is important to remember in order to make it food for thought. The Covid-19 emergency has exposed the weaknesses of the physical person, but also of today's society. It has removed so many certainties, but at the same time has put us in a position not to take anything for granted, and at the same time to stop putting off reflections and decisions to be taken even in the educational sphere. The fact that so many schools, including Catholic schools, have had to face the risk of closure due to the Covid-19 crisis, which is still ongoing, must not be a reason for hasty, short-term, practical solutions, but an opportunity for reflection on identity and a reading of the signs of the times and meaning.

A reflection on the identity of the Catholic school is therefore important. This also entails a reconsideration in current and new words of what it actually is, and what it would like to become.

First and foremost, the Catholic school is a school, and therefore par excellence a place of learning where knowledge is cultivated. More than that, it is characterised by the Christian vision of man per se (child or adult teacher), by the Christocentric vision of the unfolding of history, by the Christian vision of Creation and God's plan for the world. These strong and clear contents (which always need to be deepened and focused on) are the basis of the way in which all kinds of activities are carried out in the school. They underpin the educational passion, the educational relationship and its quality, the seriousness of the commitment, the scientific and professional preparation and honesty of the teachers, the evaluation system, the desire to involve parents in their children's education.

Does such a school have to exist or is the state public educational offer sufficiently complete and satisfying the need for meaning? Could the Catholic school find ample freedom to express itself and be an accessible response to today's educational emergency?

Among the various educational proposals, especially among ministerial proposals, at least in Albania, much care is taken of: days to be celebrated, events to participate in, processes to be triggered. In some of these proposals, the Catholic school may be a little narrow and to some extent obliged not to be able to fully express its physiognomy and values. This narrowness is a remnant of the dictatorship that rightly recognised an educational role for the school, but made it the place of indoctrination where all Marxist ideology crumbled into a thousand concrete actions/proposals. Without going into detailed analysis, on the type of proposal, it is a fact that schools are assigned educational tasks that are not at all free of new ideologies even today. At best, when educational proposals are made with the best of intentions, referring to the most shared values, one could not expect the educational proposal reflected therein to be accepted, desired and shared by all parents. The latter, as the ones responsible for their children, have the right to be able to choose an education in keeping with their values, their vision of life and their faith. Now if schools are homologated nationally, if educational proposals and approaches are all flattened, parents would no longer be able to exercise their right/duty to choose their children's education.

The above would be reason enough not to desist from efforts to be there, and there would be others. Not fighting to continue to be there as an alternative of a quality educational proposal would increase the risk of leaving a vacuum that would be immediately filled by a uniformity very close to a dictatorial system.

Being and being there

It is therefore necessary to be and to remain, as Catholic schools, a different, proactive and meaningful voice. For this we need to be together, as a network, always open to dialogue with the various realities and institutions. I mean being there, not only surviving even in these challenging times.

Networking between schools

Being together is in itself a challenge and a goal. The network we are creating, here in Albania, is not a ready-made and well-packaged thing but is growing. More than 25 years ago, a National Commission of Catholic Schools was born. In the beginning it picked up and responded to emergencies. Later, when times matured, it took a quantum leap: it decided to go ahead of the urgencies, creating common paths and shared thinking. This decision consequently required the development of the Commission itself, which evolved into an ecclesiastical legal entity and gave itself technical tools. First and foremost, a secretariat office to guarantee the continuity of the path and the implementation of concrete steps. Today, the Catholic schools in Albania, though few in number, are able, thanks to this tool, to pursue their challenges, being represented at all levels by a National Coordinator; to implement training courses for the directors themselves, for teachers, economists, psychologists and other operators. Through this tool we are able to offer each school legal and economic advice as well as special training in human and economic resource management. In the last three years we have also undertaken transversal projects, again initiated by the schools. Thanks to the support of donors and with the help of experts from Italy and Austria, the national child protection policy for the entire network was drawn up. Included in this policy are clear procedures and tools for the handling and prevention of every case of abuse or neglect and danger. For two years now, in each school in the network, the director has assigned a teacher who is the contact person for the defence of minors. He is offered a training course organised with a group of experts and eventually also the certification exam to qualify him for this delicate task. This figure chosen precisely by the directors, according to a well-defined profile, is intended to guarantee the implementation of every all-round care for every child or young person. The Covid-19 emergency has made us more collaborative and supportive towards the weakest realities, always in the logic of remaining present in the territory. As a secretariat, we have collected the urgent needs of each individual school and written projects to support them in the new situation. The first project concerned hygiene material to be able to leave safely according to protocols, both for pupils and employees. This material was distributed to each reality. The second project concerned secure platforms for online teaching, providing PCs to school teachers, and continuing with the training of technicians in applying and adapting the platforms. In each school, a person was

identified who, once supported, could independently operate the platforms in accordance with online security and data protection. For this, we also drew up manuals and regulations for distance learning in cooperation with Fidae to avoid any kind of possible breach of privacy. Psychologists were trained in online stress management and teachers in distance learning.

In view of the new challenges worldwide, this year we started with an exchange between preadolescents and adolescents around the theme of peace. The global educational pact, to which we are all committed as schools, is already working, making children more supportive and open to sharing values and talents. Recently, there was the presentation of the documentary followed by a series of meetings and ideas to continue on a path to shed light on some historical truths that are still unfortunately deliberately left in the shadows. This is a journey under the banner of intergenerational dialogue and the search for truth.

Network in the school

More than offering meetings, we want to trigger processes that bring us together and enable us to share and reflect. It is often taken for granted that within the network schools themselves, we all agree on content and principles. On the contrary, there is a need to rethink what is important, to read the vision, mission and values together with the teachers in order to be re-motivated and also not to give in to the temptation to homologate or give in to the logic of surviving to keep a job.

This is why teacher involvement and training are important. This is not purely technical or scientific training, but accompaniment in the human and spiritual growth of each one. We must bear in mind that in Albania the vast majority of teachers are lay people and among them over 32% are non-Catholics.³ Having bet together on the educational pact is certainly a good starting point, but this is not enough.

For this reason, training cycles, sharing exchanges between schools, spiritual exercises, accompaniment for new recruits are being planned.

Network in the territory

Another challenge is opening up to the territory. Not only to make ourselves known as schools and activities, but to communicate the wealth of values and dialogue that distinguishes us. This requires openness to the territory, dialogue with the various educational agencies operating there, with institutions. etc.

Last but not least, openness to parents. Their involvement in their children's growth must be able to go beyond making them participants in the small and big decisions that affect them. It is about making them spokespeople in much bigger challenges, when their rights are at stake. Just by way of example: For four years now, families who have chosen Catholic or other private

³ *Study Of Catholic Pre-University Education Institutions In Albania: Impact, Importance and Added Values, pg.50, 2017*

schools have not been entitled to receive free books for primary school. Families have been helped to gradually realise that this is a right they are entitled to and that it cannot be undermined, merely for having chosen a school that is not state-run, while as active citizens, even though they pay every tax to the state, they are not offered any concessions or recognised any support from it. The state's saving for the services it does not offer these citizens is not insignificant. The parents themselves organised themselves by signing petitions that quickly added over 1,000 signatories. Through the coordinator, they were presented to the Ministry of Education. It can't be said to have achieved a decisive outcome, but that's not the most important thing, what counts is the support from the schools, the ability to take on board the concerns and to act as spokespersons. These are small, concrete and positive steps in an Albania, let us never forget, still under the shadow of the dictatorship of the past and always suspended by political and institutional uncertainty.

The parents' enthusiasm for the Global Education Pact and their commitment to the defence of minors was significant. Moreover, for the first time they proposed to organise a fundraiser for the children of Ukraine.

In my opinion, we must pursue the path of involvement, in concentric circles, to be there. Networking does not only mean including and focusing on common goals, but also focusing on positive relationships beyond institutions and despite obstacles. We must always bear in mind that there are many people of goodwill in the institutions who are open to good proposals and who care about education. On the basis of this we are maturing as part of a long-term journey: studies, research, meetings, seminars, cultural exchanges, remaining open to any possibility of exchange with institutions and organisations. We do not want to give up being leaven in the dough.

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