Children and Sustainable Development: A Challenge for Education

In April 2014 the Pontifical Academies jointly held an excellent Workshop on Sustainable Humanity, Sustainable Nature. A remarkable series of contributions produced a clear picture of the issues, and stressed the urgency to act. It also raised the need for spiritual and moral leadership. But the Workshop stopped short of elucidating the role of education in the changes to come, and making poposals for action in this direction. These essential questions form the basis of the present Workshop of November 2015, *Children and Sustainable Development: A Challenge for Education*.

The goal is to build, through education, an inclusive society in which all people can have the resources to develop a life project in harmony with their culture and beliefs, transcultural universal values and respect for the environment. Children must develop an approach open to the other as oneself so that the world, without losing the richness of diversity, can become ever more integrated. To prepare their active participation in the common good, promoting a cooperation between students in their relationships with civic awareness, valuing cooperation and solidarity above all forms of competitive selfishness are essential. Cognitive and health sciences provide today a better understanding of the way children grow, from birth onward, develop their cognitive abilities to read and write but also to reason, as well as their emotional senses and empathy.

In many countries one may already observe that “education for sustainable development” is becoming part of the agenda of education leaders and authorities. As science plays an essential part in the acceptance and understanding of the issues, it appears that science education of

children and youngsters (and their parents) is at the heart of the action, hence this new Workshop convened by the Pontifical Academy of Sciences. Progress in general education is slow and the UN Millennium Goals for the period 2000-2015 will not be achieved, although some progress has been noticeable in various parts of the world, including Africa and Asia. Progress in science education is much slower, despite the efforts of science academies, Unesco and some private institutions. The number of poorly educated children is increasing, affected by population migrations, urban uprooting and poverty, wars, refugees conditions and other changes of migrant work force. In many countries, especially developed ones, anti-science movements arise, questioning the ability of scientists to arrive at some truth about natural phenomena, showing a poor understanding of the nature of scientific reasoning and a lack of confidence in the scientific institutions which disseminate the results of research. in other countries, parents and maybe official agencies, basing themselves on religious principles, oppose scientific evidence to the detriment of children. In both cases the lack of understanding, by the general public, of the nature of science is evident: it has not been transmitted by a proper education pattern.

Today's children will be the adults of tomorrow, confronted to the consequences of today's actions or inactions. More important even, they will be the ones to act, and to act properly if properly prepared. Education has to convey to them hope, not despair or grim perspectives, giving them self-confidence in their intelligence. Hope and trust in human capabilities need to be first embedded in a solid knowledge, then deeply rooted in a message of spiritual nature, since so many factors could lead these children, students in today's schools, to despair. children are of special concern in the Gospel (Mat 19, 13-15) and education, not only religious, has always been treated as an essential gift to humanity by the church. The church itself having millions of students in catholic schools, these can therefore play a significant role.

Schools in today's world are confronted with massive urban migrations, the digital revolution, the lack of qualified teachers and their low income, the explosion of scientific knowledge, the deep changes in jobs requiring new skills. it is in this context that schools will have to absorb the UN Sustainable Development Goals, to be proclaimed in the fall of 2015, and to reconsider their science education in order to deal with interdisciplinary, complex issues which demand a new vision. There lies a formidable task in connecting education with the urgency of the issues of climate, development and sustainability, caring for poverty, inequalities and social conditions.

At the end of the Workshop, a global discussion will lead to the establishment of guidelines for action.

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