

The Academic Life of a Benedictine School

1) Learning that unites Faith and Life

"The great drama of our time is the rupture between Gospel and culture" (Paul VI Evangelii Nuntiandi) or in other words, the rupture between faith and life, between knowing about faith and practising it. So, we are presented with a great challenge: to educate without separating the sacred and the profane, without separating the delivery of knowledge on the one hand, from the proclamation of Christ on the other.

As John Paul II preached at his inauguration: 'Do not fear, open wide the doors for Christ! Open the doors of states to his saving power, the doors of economic and political systems, the vast fields of culture, civilization and development'. We could add perhaps '...open wide the doors of academic programs and curriculum development!'

The experience our faith as educators cannot be held separate from our lives, or our duty, or from what we impart in our schools. All of this should be orientated towards Christ: 'If this is not so, our educational project may talk about Christ but it will not be Christian' (Santo Domingo, Conclusions to part 2). A gospel-based education cannot be limited to talking about 'values', to religion classes or to performing various pastoral activities 'as if the religious could be reduced to certain acts of cult and certain moral obligations' (Gaudium et Spes 43). Our entire school life needs to be geared towards discovering that Christ acts and is present in everything we do. In this way everything acquires a spiritual dimension, and Eternal Life invades daily life.

To be able to develop this aspect of community life, St Benedict orders things so that, in the School of the Lord's Service, work and prayer are two complementary aspects of the same search.

What St Benedict is telling us here is that we cannot be a community that manifests a presence of God only on the exterior and in certain isolated social and religious activities whilst leaving the academic side of things to be dictated to according to the ways of the world. The experience of faith in Christ has to enlighten and give meaning to all the knowledge and skills our pupils learn so that they strengthen their response to God's will, for the good of the community and the growth of charity.

It is vital to take on board that if the academic life of our schools is not central to the process which we could define as 'gospel-based' or 'evangelical education', our project will be seriously distorted. Without even noticing it, we would be in danger of falling into and contributing to the great crisis of



our times: the division between faith and life. How could we ask our pupils to have their whole life enlightened by faith if that same faith does not enlighten what we teach them in the classroom?

It is only by seeing everything done in our schools as a unity that we can form men and women whose lives are not separated from their faith, but who believe from their own personal experience, that God acts in their lives and that the Gospel offers them a Word that gives meaning to every situation in which they find themselves. In this way, our pupils will be able to contribute to the mission of the Church in the building of the Kingdom of God wherever He calls them.

We find in the Vatican document, 'The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium, (14): 'From the nature of the Catholic school also stems one of the most significant elements of its educational project: the synthesis between culture and faith. Indeed, knowledge set in the context of faith becomes wisdom and life vision. The endeavour to interweave reason and faith, which has become the heart of individual subjects, makes for unity, articulation and co-ordination, bringing forth within what is learnt in school a Christian vision of the world, of life, of culture and of history. In the Catholic school's educational project there is no separation between time for learning and time for formation, between acquiring notions and growing in wisdom. The various school subjects do not present only knowledge to be attained, but also values to be acquired and truths to be discovered. All of which demands an atmosphere characterised by the search for truth, in which competent, convinced and coherent educators, teachers of learning and of life, may be a reflection, albeit imperfect but still vivid, of the one Teacher. In this perspective, in the Christian educational project all subjects collaborate, each with its own specific content, to the formation of mature personalities'.

2) The Evangelical Vision of Education

At the heart of Christ's teaching is the person of each human being, with his or her spiritual needs. When the Catholic school, then, looks for its model of the human person to present, and to aim at as the ideal, it looks to Christ. It looks not only at his teaching but at Jesus himself as the first of many brothers. In this way every Benedictine community is a school of the Lord's service, in which we help one another 'to know the Lord', and to be formed in his likeness with regard to the world, to one another, and to the Father.

There is then, no necessity for tension between that formation which derives from revelation, and that which follows from the God-given thirst for discovering the truth about all things in a natural way, since all truth comes from God and leads to Him. Tension is likely, however, if the natural confusion that comes from our fallen nature is not first corrected by faith, and by faith lived in community in the Spirit.

St Paul, for instance, talks of the way in which natural creation and human understanding lead the person to God and to conversion (Romans 2). And for Augustine particularly, Truth is by no means neutral in human experience. All truth has a direction, which is God-wards. The search for truth is in fact the created heart's pilgrimage towards God, and each discovery of truth makes the soul thirstier for more seeking and finding until at last, fully satisfied, it finds its rest in God.

The perfect expression of the divine truth, its direction, and its end result is found in the person of Jesus. He says of himself: "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life." (John 14:6). In these words he brings together three parallel aspects of his mission to the world: the presentation to mankind of the Truth, the Way along which that Truth attracts each person towards God, and the result of going there, which is eternal Life. And all three are the person of Jesus himself.

And so we understand that to educate -with everything that it implies- is in Christian terms, a form of evangelization, since everything in our schools begins and ends in Christ. This cannot be about theory or even theology but has to be a real awareness, and a deepening friendship with the living person of Christ. Our students listen to Him in His Word, in the liturgy, in their neighbour and in each and every situation in their daily school life: and it is Him they seek and Him they serve with all their gifts and talents.

Evangelization in our schools then, has a special place. It is not simply one subject or topic among many, nor is it just the most important topic. It presents a vision of the full dignity of each person as made known in Christ and so defines the purpose of education. Also, it uniquely offers to us the primary model by which we understand the best reasons for listening and seeking, for learning and for sharing what we learn, and for acting on it with conviction. In vivid contrast to the unsatisfying utilitarianism and pragmatism of the secular view, it offers many good things.

Firstly, it fixes the values and the vision of a fully human world-view which cannot be diminished by sin, folly or misery. Instead it offers a way of confronting these enemies of human dignity. Last ICBE we were impressed when the Mexicans and Fillipinos shared with us their vision of teaching their students how to be people who knew how to change their societies for the better. Evangelization is the root of such an education.

Secondly, it establishes a unity of understanding amidst the fragments of a secular curriculum. Physics, literature, language, music and all the rest, are aspects of one beauty, one truth and one glory. It is the same beauty, truth and glory that came to be through the Son, and which Jesus presents afresh to every believer. Or as St Paul puts it: "He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation. Because in him were created all things, everything visible, everything invisible... because God wanted all things to be found in him and through him, to reconcile all things (that is to unify all things), everything in heaven and everything on earth." (Col:1-15-20)

And thirdly, it creates a shared motivation for teaching. Instead of telling a class that studying is necessary 'because it will be in the examination', teachers who have this understanding of education talk like people with a mission, a mandate. "Go, and teach all nations..." (Mt 28). When governments suggest that schools should teach more foreign languages, or more computer skills, they are arguing from the needs of the economy. Teachers who are evangelizers at heart, argue from the needs of the human person, physical, emotional, intellectual, moral and spiritual. And when they do so they speak out of solidarity with the student, since they as teachers share the same needs and dignity.

In fact, in this view of education, the teacher-pupil relationship has several layers, all of which ring true to our experience. There is the level of wisdom and tradition, in which the pupil learns from the

teacher as the guardian of the tradition: (Who hears you hears the one who sent you.... Listen my son to the words of a father who loves you....). At a second level, the teacher humbly realises that the pupil learns things the teacher never taught, (Blessed are you Father, for hiding these things from the wise and the learned and revealing them to mere children... God often reveals what is best to the youngest). At a third level, both teacher and student learn together from revelation (Do not let anyone call you teacher, since you have only one teacher, the Christ who is in heaven). This describes the fruitful complexity of a learning community in which the teachers also believe and learn.

In a Benedictine school then, the process of teaching and learning cannot be separated from the school's main objective, which is Christ-based: on the contrary, we must develop it in such a way that it becomes central to our schools' mission.

3) The Search for Truth

a. The desire for God and the desire for Truth

"I am the Way, the Truth and the Life" (Jn 14, 6).

In our schools we see learning as part of man's search for God, by which means our students draw closer to the truth of the created order, the truth about themselves, and so to the Truth that is God, source of all truth who enlightens man and frees him from ignorance, leading him along the path to wisdom and towards the Father, source and end of all knowledge.

For this to be so, it is necessary that our pupils discover that this Truth is not something they are born with; it is something which must be searched for, like hidden treasure, in different fields of activity, whether spiritual, physical, social, creative or academic. Through our learning, we are all looking for the image of the Creator Himself in the whole fullness of His Truth, discovered in the many different parts of His creation.

b. Good and bad reasons for developing talents

God created us with our talents and with these talents he is working out our personal story of salvation. For this reason we cannot be afraid of developing them. They are part of God's grace in each one of us manifested in 'our creation'. But we must watch over our purity of intention as a school. What are we looking to do in developing our students' talents?

Today's Society seems to encourage us in our desire to develop the talents of our students. We live in the age of efficiency at any cost, of global competition, of skills development, of training and huge concern for the education of the coming generations. As schools we feel compelled to respond to these demands; which are frequently an exact reflection of what our parents want for their children. And from within our own tradition we have the Gospel parable of the talents (cf. Mt 25, 14) in which we are called not to bury 'the good gifts which are in us' (RB Prol. 6). They are the instruments and gifts with which to obey him and we cannot bury them as if they were something dangerous.

All this can easily lead us to regard the development of talents as an end in itself. And that would turn it into an absolute good that cuts off many of our school activities, especially academic ones, from the so called "higher goals" of our schools. Indeed, the objectives of these activities might often clash (or appear to clash) with the higher goals themselves.

It is perfectly possible to teach plenty of things quite well and feel proud of the levels achieved but without making any contribution to the real search for truth. Over and over, it is partial or imperfect knowledge can lead us astray. In this sense we must examine ourselves when St Benedict says: "God may observe us falling at some time into evil and so made worthless..." (RB 7, 29). The worthlessness that St Benedict refers to does not mean our inability to be able to carry out certain jobs or studies but the worthlessness of falling into evil, in other words, doing our work or carrying out a particular activity with the wrong motives or according to false 'truths'.

One significant danger is that an overdeveloped or over-valued talent in one member of the community can lead to a subtle form of exclusion, as a result of that person feeling that while he or she is in some way of profit to the community, the community is of no profit to them and therefore they have no need of the community. "If there are artisans in the monastery, they are to practise their craft with all humility, but only with the abbot's permission. If one of them becomes puffed up by his skilfulness in his craft, and feels that he is conferring something on the monastery, he is to be removed from practising his craft and not allowed to resume it unless, after manifesting his humility, he is so ordered by the abbot" (RB 57, 1-3).

Moreover, the reverse can occur in the case of weakness, whereby a person comes to feel that they only receive and do not give to the community. This phenomenon comes about especially when the necessary balance between the various areas of a pupil's school life or between different aspects of his learning process is absent and therefore consciously or unconsciously we end up by valuing one particular aspect over and above others. On this point, it is fundamentally important to help the students live lives of real charity and spiritual friendship where they can grow in love for one another by means of fraternal correction and encouragement of virtues. Not only must the teachers and tutors know their students, but knowledge and trust need to grow among the students themselves, allowing them to look after one another as they progress in the different areas of their lives, according to the gifts that they have received from God. As St Paul says (1 Cor 12): "The parts are many but the body is one. The eye cannot say to the hand, I have no need of you,' nor can the head say to the feet, 'I have no need of you'."

In the same way there is also a danger on an institutional level of developing talents of an academic, pastoral, sporting, artistic or social nature with scant regard for what they really contribute to the real needs of the school community or to the real well-being and future happiness of the students, but with too much regard for institutional 'gains': prestige, image, marketing or even individual preferences. We must always be on our guard as we can easily mistake such things for more noble goals 'as if' - as St Jerome says - 'one's job were holy rather than one's life' (St Jerome).

It is clear then, that as educators, we cannot fail to nurture the talents of our students, but always according to God's plan, for his greater glory and not ours. In this sense we need to develop and create a school atmosphere that motivates, stimulates and values the development of the whole person, while being careful not to fall into the trap of vanity, pride and self-sufficiency. We should engender true humility in our students, enabling their successes and achievements to draw them closer to God, and their weaknesses to draw them closer to each other, so that the talents they develop and the knowledge they acquire do not become alternatives to dependence on God, a sort of idolatry - but should instead be good reasons for giving thanks to God and for uniting with each other in mutual respect and love.

In this way, the process of acquiring knowledge takes on a contemplative nature as we grow in true wisdom. (Quotation from *Gaudium et Spes*, 15): "The intellectual nature of the human person is perfected by wisdom and needs to be so, because wisdom gently attracts the mind of man to a quest and a love for what is true and good. Steeped in wisdom, man passes through visible realities to those which are unseen.". In this way the love of learning, and a thirst for prayer are similar.

c. Demanding the best ...for love

"Therefore we intend to establish a school for the Lord's service. In drawing up its regulations, we hope to set down nothing harsh, nothing burdensome. The good of all concerned, however, may prompt us to a little strictness in order to amend faults and to safeguard love. Do not be daunted immediately by fear and run away from the road that leads to salvation. It is bound to be narrow at the outset" (RB Prol. 45-48).

St Benedict establishes community life bearing in mind the weaknesses of every member of the community at the same time as the need for such 'strictness' as is necessary in order for the School to fulfil its objectives.

But rigour, or discipline, or high academic standards, can't be ends in themselves. They can't even be considered qualities or virtues, but are to be understood as a way of achieving a higher good: the correction of vices and/or the exercise of virtues, talents and skills that will be essential in the service of God and of others. The Document of Puebla on Catholic Education is unambiguous: "We cannot accept that the mere acquisition of knowledge be the prime aim of a Catholic School. That is not to say that we deny its importance: on the contrary, we expect it, but on its own it cannot be justified."

As we have seen, the demands of academic life challenge us to search for the truth, to discover our own potential and, importantly, our limitations. The process of learning is meant to generate intellectual inquiry, and a critical attitude towards the accepted vision of the world.

But to really know anything about truth it is necessary for our pupils to develop the ability to listen, the sign of true disciples: "attending with the ear of their heart" (RB Prol. 1). They will learn to be obedient in their approach to what it is they are doing or studying. We have a duty to help our pupils become disciples who are not above receiving guidance and instruction and who are able to recognise opportunities for learning and for growth wherever they are and whoever they are with.

This listening, far from being a passive submission, consists in a constant exercise that has to be taught and practised. In this way, the joy of learning can be developed, and the desire for truth that every person has can be awakened. And so we cannot limit ourselves to imparting subject knowledge but need to focus on the whole person, stimulating the appetite for truth, creating a hunger so that it can be satisfied.

Somehow we must develop the sense of effort and perseverance in the face of contradictions: our lives are not always simple and easy, but often require of us to die to our own personal desires and wishes in order to be able to find happiness and true fulfilment. We want our students to learn how to persevere in the face of difficulties and contradictions and therefore "joyfully take up their cross daily in the confidence that they can withstand all and bear everything in him whom has loved them". This perseverance is their own experience of what a monk or nun would call the demands of the vow of Stability.

None of this is possible without treading the narrow path. We will sometimes set work and tasks that the pupils will not always agree with, or see the point of. This means that, as it says in the chapter on humility in the Rule, they (the pupils) do not do what they want to do but rather what they are told to do. And so they discover the blessings of the vow of obedience too!

It is well to point out here, in all frankness, that the pursuit of academic excellence (like the pursuit of any community life) normally produces a certain tension between those involved, especially here between teachers and pupils. This makes it necessary for us to be on the lookout for such difficulties and to be sensitive to them, reacting to them promptly. But on the other hand, (as with any community life) it is no good getting used to a comfortable status quo that does not stimulate any process of growth or conversion. We should be encouraged by remembering what we are seeking for our pupils - true happiness, and not that temporary peace of mind or superficial cheerfulness which is all an apparently problem-free life can offer.

On countless occasions, when our pupils are studying they will be patiently getting on with work whose usefulness they do not comprehend, but we are confident that this makes them grow and strengthens them within. In this way, the demands we make on our pupils are a fruit of our love for them: and by their trust in us they respond to that love with love.

d. Not without love

Although Saint Benedict shows us the importance of teaching our pupils to search for the truth with faithful obedience, he also makes it clear that it is we who are held accountable for the quality of their response. "Let the abbot always remember that at the fearful judgement of God, not only his teaching but also his disciples' obedience will come under scrutiny" (RB 2, 6). As educators, then, we have no right to expect this obedience as due to us; nor can it be imposed as an obligation on the pupils, but must rather be viewed as an objective to strive for. And if we are to reach it, then we need to go about it the right way, which is through love.

In our schools we try to educate like a family. We receive our pupils knowing that they do not all have the same abilities. We will have in our schools, as in any family, those of greater abilities and those with more difficulties. We must educate both of them and demand the best from each of them. As a school community we should look for different ways in which everyone can grow according to God's plan following their different talents, intelligence and characteristics.

We must face this challenge in the light of the wise advice that St Benedict gives to the abbot in his Rule: "use argument, appeal and reproof" (RB 2, 23). In other words, the essential characteristic of our schools will be to know our pupils in all their different facets because only with this knowledge will we be able to know when to 'coax', when to 'reprove', when to 'encourage', when 'not to push them too hard', or 'if they desire more', or when 'not to crush the bruised reed' (cf. RB 2, 31; 64, 18; 64, 13).

In the chapter on the Kitchen Servers of the Week it says, "let those who are not strong have help so that they may serve without distress, and let everyone receive help..." (RB 35, 3-4). In our schools, things should be so structured that everyone receives help from tutors, parents, assistant teachers, special needs units, special programmes so that everyone progresses without excessive distress.

Above all, the concern for the individual should be reflected in the staff's capacity to 'listen', so that they do not content themselves with a theoretical knowledge of their area or of their pupils, but rather they get to know who the pupils are and to know their potential, take on board their differences and, like the abbot in the Rule, develop "great concern and act with all speed, discernment and diligence in order not to lose any of the sheep entrusted to him" (RB 27, 5).

This of course means that over and above their professional qualifications, teachers need to learn to be abbots for their students: to believe in friendship, to be capable of transmitting real Christian love in their involvement with their pupils. The teachers need to be taught to listen to their pupils not only at moments of crisis or achievement but to create situations of real, permanent and sincere dialogue so that they pluck their pupils from anonymity.

St Benedict recommends that the abbot is better loved than feared and in the chapter on humility he says that the disciple must walk from obedience in fear to obedience in love. So we can deduce that if indeed in the younger pupils there exists a certain acceptance of the truth out of fear, awe or respect, then when the age for reflection is reached, this acceptance must evolve into a more personal adhesion to the truth. Knowledge of the Truth cannot be imposed but must be worked out so that "by good habit and delight in virtue" (RB 7, 69) pupils tend towards a sincere search for the truth and decide to participate actively in the school's educational project.

To sum up, we could firstly declare that the pursuit of academic excellence should be governed by love; this love will frequently cause our pupils to develop their abilities by undergoing harsh or burdensome times (cf. RB Prol. 46): but through perseverance in the community they begin to perform and to fulfil everything without effort and dread but out of love for Christ, good habit and delight in virtue (cf. RB 7, 67-70).

e. Discovering weaknesses as well as talents

In his chapter on humility St Benedict teaches us how to discover the truth about ourselves; how to be creatures who recognise their dependence upon God their Creator. In this chapter he reveals to us a vision of what a Christian man or woman should be, where to seek support, how to grow and develop in the deepest sense of the words of the Gospel: 'If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself and take up his cross and follow me.' (Mt 16:24).

If we apply his path of humility to our schools, it should show us how to help our students reach a deep understanding of the truth about themselves and to recognise in their talents and weaknesses the boundless love of God their creator.

So, at the heart of the teaching and learning process of community life is the way in which it brings out the talents of all while at the same time pointing up those weaknesses which make us need each other's gifts. In coming to terms with their various limitations, students become aware that they are not self-sufficient. Individual effort needs to be combined with the assistance of others as well as with prayer: in this way, as St Benedict says, the Lord comes to our aid with his grace where our own abilities are not sufficient. (cf RB Prol. 41) What this essentially means is creating the awareness that everyone needs to progress together, the strong alongside the weak, and that the individual's achievement is the community's achievement, in the same way as an individual's needs are a community's duty.

f. Summary

The vision that St Benedict offers regarding the development of talents springs, as everything does in the Rule, from the primacy of the search for God over every other consideration. Every time we are faced with an institutional or personal step, St Benedict invites us to ask ourselves the same question that he asks those who wish to be received into the community, that is, whether we truly seek God (RB 58, 7).

Saint Benedict also tells us that we shall be called to account for our doctrine, so it is of great importance to ensure that our schools are clear about their 'doctrine': what it is we really want to teach as Christian and Benedictine educators. It should be rooted in our faith, reflecting our tradition, and our particular way of seeing education and man.

It is true that we can and should keep up to date with modern educational advances and new methodologies, respecting government requirements, but we cannot swallow these uncritically or confuse ourselves with techniques, programmes or philosophies that have their conceptual roots in visions completely different from ours. So we need to ask ourselves: Do we teach what we really want to teach in the way we would like to teach it? What implicit or explicit truths are we transmitting through our planning and programmes of study? Are we teaching according to what we believe the world really needs? Or are we still trying to give the world what it thinks it wants?

As 'Gaudium et Spes' (62) puts it: "May the faithful, therefore, live in very close union with the other men of their time and may they strive to understand perfectly their way of thinking and judging, as expressed in their culture. Let them blend new sciences and theories and the understanding of the most

recent discoveries with Christian morality and the teaching of Christian doctrine, so that their religious culture and morality may keep pace with scientific knowledge and with constantly progressing technology. Thus they will be able to interpret and evaluate all things in a truly Christian spirit."

4) The Benedictine School and personal vocation

Let us look finally at how a personal Benedictine spirituality marries with an objective dedication to learning to produce a well founded understanding of personal vocation for our students, and of their place in the Church's mission.

It is clear that everything in the Rule of St Benedict is organised in such a way as to make it possible for every member of the community to search for God and, with the help of the brethren, find Him. From the beginning of the Prologue, where we are invited to "return to him from whom you have strayed through the sloth of disobedience" (RB Prol. 2), until the end of chapter 72 where Christ is asked "...to bring us all together to everlasting life" the text reveals a clear and unavoidable objective: to search for God and to live focused on a personal encounter with Christ, learning how to die and so come into life.

Without this vision, the Rule would lose consistency, it would be reduced (and often is) to a handbook for communal organisation, full of values but with no clear aim or specific view of man. In other words, it would be cut off from what is fundamental to it: the Gospel.

Seen from this point of view, the ultimate aim of a Benedictine Educational Community must surely be that its members, and in particular its pupils, have the opportunity for encountering Christ and discovering their vocation; but not just any kind of vocation, but principally the call to them to be children of God in the world. All of God's children and so all members of the school community, have a universal vocation to holiness that they have received through their baptism. St Benedict in his Rule shows an inseparable relation between this vocation to holiness and the search for happiness: "Is there anyone here who yearns for life and desires to see good days?" (RB Prol. 15). This is what St Benedict asks of any one of us who has questions about life, and then he offers a path to follow. Seen in this way, vocation is the answer that the Lord gives to man's most profound needs: everyone, young and old, has such questions and needs in their hearts and he offers them a way to quench their internal thirst, a path that gives an answer all their anxieties, fears and dreams. This is the path to true happiness. St Augustine says 'Our hearts will not be still until they find rest in thee.'

But moving on from this inclusive invitation which is put to everyone, there also exists what can be called individual vocation, where everyone, from their position of being a unique and original being in God's eyes, with their own talents and weaknesses, must discover his or her own way to live out this universal call to holiness.

It is here that the School of the Lord's Service becomes a place for the discernment of vocations. It is in this School that one is taught to be faithful to the search for God and where one learns the tools and skills for discovering where and how to serve God, which comes about by teaching in a certain way, creating opportunities which allow children to learn how to serve God by serving in community.

This is why we feel instinctively that it is so important to cultivate in our children the capacity for self-knowledge, to allow them to explore their minds and hearts, to be aware of their talents and their limitations, their strengths and weaknesses, allowing them to perceive the truth about who they are rather than remaining attached to whatever image they have of themselves. Also, we must constantly be alert so that our schools are able to give the pupils the opportunities to carry out different curricular and extra-curricular activities and to face up to challenges, enabling them to come to know where their interests, enthusiasms and abilities lie. In this way, they are able to discover in the unfolding of their own personal story, signs and events that in some way go on marking the course of their life. If our pupils are given the chance of experiencing moments of personal fulfilment, interior peace and the joy of discovering truth, they will want to experience these things again and again. In this way they are able to respond to St Benedict's invitation: "Let peace be your quest and aim." (RB Prol 17) He knows that such a peace is not to be searched for in an empty and non-existent hereafter: it is something we experience in our life today and from this concrete experience we then seek to live this peace in the future.

So then this search for a personal vocation is bound to be firmly rooted in the world we live in. For this reason, we need to teach our pupils to look at what the Church calls 'the signs of our times', that is, to recognise the forces that shape our society and culture, and to identify in them ways to build a civilization of love. To this end, our schools must develop a critical spirit in their pupils where, with the eyes of faith, the pupils are able to know and love the historical period they belong to and for its sake, desire to be a light of the world for the sake of the Gospel.

So then, the teaching-learning process in our schools has to foster all of the elements already mentioned: self-knowledge, the opportunity to live different experiences and challenges, the development of talents, together with an understanding of the world such as will be a constant inspiration to search for the truth. Every single aspect of a pupil's school life ought to be part of this School of the Lord's Service. Academic life takes on a real meaning when it is embarked on not parallel to the Church's mission, but for the sake of it, and for the sake of each pupil's vocation. Study is not an activity separate from a believer's response to God, but rather is one which should favour the search for God, at the service of the divine vocation which calls us to build a civilization of love. Nevertheless, this requires true and committed guidance from teachers, in the light of the Word of God, to help students perceive His presence in all they do and learn.

Seen from this point of view, personal and professional development ceases to be a worldly reality but becomes something fundamental to the shaping presence of the Gospel in Society.

As St Paul says: 'The particular manifestation of the Spirit granted to each one is to be used for the general good. To one is given from the Spirit the gift of utterance expressing wisdom; to another the gift of utterance expressing knowledge, in accordance with the same Spirit; to another, faith, from the same Spirit; and to another, the gifts of healing, through this one Spirit; to another, the working of miracles; to another, prophecy; to another, the power of distinguishing spirits; to one, the gift of different tongues and to another, the interpretation of tongues. But at work in all of these is one and the same Spirit, distributing them at will to each individual' (1 Co 12, 7-11).

5) Vocation and Mission

Everything we teach our students, everything we enable them to do, acquires value in the degree to which each one of them is able to channel what he or she learns towards building the Kingdom and so live their lives with mission and purpose.

For this reason our proclamation of the Gospel cannot be a message removed from the temporal reality that our young people are living. On the contrary, it should be brought right into the concrete problems that they face. In this sense our students need to be familiar with the world that surrounds them, its past and present, so that they can develop a truly critical way of looking at the world. This is a matter of discovering the limitations and the possibilities of the world they live in, so that, with the transcendence and optimism that come with faith, they accept that these are the times that God has allotted to them and that here is where they build and carry out their mission and apostolate.

In order to do this it is important that, we establish in the everyday life of our schools specific opportunities for work and service. A school cannot simply be a place of preparation for a future mission, but must make it possible for this mission to begin today. It will only be possible to form men and women as future missionaries if they live out that need for mission here and now in our schools because "There is more happiness in giving than in receiving." (Acts 20,35)

In this way our students should, as they grow and reach "the age of understanding" (RB 63, 19) move on from being mere receivers to being active participants in school life, where each one can find how they can best contribute to the community. The students should discover that their contribution is personal and unique. Thus they become key players in our educational project.

For this reason it is important to develop in our schools a system of organisation and of teaching and learning that protects and nurtures the sense of community and belonging. The excessive individualism of achievements and failures, and the non-involvement of the community in everyday workings and procedures necessarily generates a community life only in name which bears no relation to the real needs of the people in it.

Our schooling, then, should look to ensure that our pupils receive as many tools as possible in order for them to carry out their mission in a fitting and effective way. This zeal for the search for truth, the ability to work in a team, communication skills, appreciation of learning, effort, self-denial and responsibility, should all be elements taken into account in the development of talents. We cannot make do with just handing our pupils the message of faith. We must, together with this, form them so that they can take up their role in the Church and so, taking the Gospel as guide, become agents of change in society.

Pope John Paul II said in the Conference of Puebla that Catholic schools should 'transform the educated man or woman not only into an agent of his or her own development, but into a person at the service of community development: education for service' (Puebla 1030).

The purpose of community life is to create the circumstances for each member of the community to come face to face with God; for each person to flourish according to God's plan and become the son or

daughter that God wants him or her to be. Since everyone in the community needs the "companionship of many others" (RB 1,4) we cannot categorise some as strong and others as weak; each member of the community has particular strengths and weaknesses which differ from person to person.

'It is true to say that the bonds and connections that exist among the members of the body are so great, that if one member does not contribute to the growth of the body according to his capabilities it must be said that he or she is of no use to the Church or themselves' (Apostolicam Actuositatem - II Vatican Council).

One aspect of Christian formation is that of being Missionary and Apostolic. By this we mean that we want our students to 'take part in the mission of the Church and its pastors and so undertake the evangelization of man and woman in society, ordering secular realities according to Christ'.

We wish to give our students not just the ideal of the Christian mission, but all the knowledge and tools they require in order to carry out their vocation within this mission effectively.

In this context it is very important to develop a teaching approach where faith and life, work and apostolate, personal life-option and vocation are united. The Benedictine man and woman we wish to form is not a person whose day to day existence is separate from his or her faith: We wish to form someone whose work, both today and in the future, is part of a mission to build the Kingdom.

In order to do this, as we have said, our curriculum must be seriously prophetic in the sense of teaching our pupils to look reality in the face - in all its dimensions - and to recognize not the truth that the world wants to show them, but the real truth. From that point they can look for real answers on which they can play their part in building the new city that God is calling them to build, even though they may never see it become a finished reality in this life. In an age of pragmatism, of worn out utopias, an age emptied of ideals, without anything to hang on to or to believe in, the mission of our schools is to form people who have a courageous thirst for the truth and an uncynical love of learning, people who can give the world convincing reasons for hope and reasons to live, clear ideas that can shape an alternative society, and the confidence to do it, with the Gospel as their guide and Christ as their friend and teacher.

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