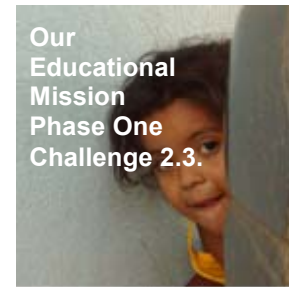


Discernment regarding the educational challenges for the Company of Mary

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Introduction

Recently, the Center for Educational Studies ACE, Mexican Institute for Educational Research, directed by the Society of Jesus, was asked to help discern the educational challenges faced by the Company of Mary at this present time, and what changes would it have to make to deal with them. It was specifically asked to write a six page reflection paper on the **2.3** challenge of the document entitled, *Challenges in the Educational Mission of the Company of Mary*. The direct quote is as follows: **“To discern, moved by our desire to seek an opportunity for greater service: the greater urgencies, the new educational needs, the consistency between the being and the doing of an organization.”** In the following paper, we present the results of our reflection after having interviewed a group of eleven persons, Religious and Lay.

I. Changes present in our world today

Each historical moment calls into question the process of education in a different manner, for this reason we should be attentive to the signs of the times in order to map out a horizon that will serve as a guide.

For the optimist, we are on the threshold of a better era, for the pessimists, we are moving towards dehumanization and chaos. But, if we carefully observe what happens in the world today, there is no doubt that we are living in an age of great change due to profound economic, political, social and cultural transformations that we are experiencing.

In economic terms, a quick glance shows us that the unfolding of contemporary capitalism has converted the planet into a micro system capable of producing and commercializing merchandise in any part of the world; today, neoliberalism is an omnipresent reality that has no boundaries. The phenomenon of globalization entails: specialized productivity, open commerce, the mushrooming of global information networks and the internationalization of the financial system. It has ambiguous results, given that in part it implies positive growth in the increase of productivity, but it also brings about multiple negative effects, such as unemployment, forced migration or getting involved in unstable and dubious systems of economy for those who cannot compete. This highlights, even more, traditional social inequalities. It must be noted that there are many who affirm that this economic, neoliberal, and globalized model and its overly praised benefits of productivity and consumerism contradicts the Christian vision of the world. Rather, it accentuates the enormous inequalities generated between individuals and countries.

On the other hand, in the political arena we witness a flourishing of citizenship and democracy as the fundamental drive for legitimacy and creating a consensus regarding public life. We also observe a weakness in the State (country) itself, caused in a good part by a sudden reversal of fortune in the international organisms in charge of preparing the way for a free

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market and trans-nationalization of capital. This kind of State (country) does not only have less and less influence in economic affairs, but it also begins to lose its influence in the social domain caused by the privatization of various services, such as social security and education. There is an trend of growing dissatisfaction among citizens with the world of politics due to the scandals arising from unfulfilled promises and corruption among representatives and public officials.

In the social sphere we see a number of positive political changes, such as a growing relevance of the roles of women and minorities. But, simultaneously, we see a troubling weakness in the social network, appearing in the phenomenon of terrorism, drug traffic, kidnappings, an increase of xenophobia regarding migrants, and that of domestic violence. In demographical changes we find an elevated birthrate in some countries and the gradual aging experienced by others.

In the cultural domain, thanks to technological advances, the world is actually a small village in which all of us can be in contact with others, reciprocally influencing one another other. This has brought about positive changes in a growing respect for human rights. It has also brought with it violent attacks on various civilizations, because pretentious, like-minded nations want to impose a single way of looking at life: the occidental and arrogant modern.

II. The great challenge brought about by these changes

Having seen the previous view of the situation, perhaps it can be assumed that the greatest challenge that exists in this age in the field of education, from a humanistic and Christian perspective, is finding alternatives for the tendency to merely be utilitarian and narrow in the planning of a global endeavor. Focused on the market, it has tried to impose this plan in order to meet its needs for expansion. From our point of view, education can in no way limit itself to the development of technical-scientific know-how, that is, the efficient management of new communication technologies and the promotion of productivity and individuality. In light of this, the creation of a counter-cultural change, an extensive plan for social development contrary to a neo-liberal globalization is necessary.

As was outlined in the previous section, the global process has brought confusion, not only in education, but also in all spheres of human activity; it has developed in the course of the last two decades according to a force that has unleashed the following steps or circumstances.

In its origin it is an economic phenomenon: the implantation of the supremacy of a speculative, transnational and anonymous capital.

To protect this supreme value, to guarantee its growth and propitiate its unlimited reproduction, political stability is insured by means of the reconfiguration of all institutions, both the secular and religious.

Thereupon, there is a desire to find ways to create changes consequent to that institutional reconfiguration in the social and interpersonal relationships of this type.

Lastly, this model hopes to achieve a definitive implantation, a “uniforming” of the culture; culture understood as the values that give meaning to the human existence.

From this lower level, which naturally has shown the greatest resistance to the global enterprise, an inverse process must be organized. In order to do this we must, first of all,

promote a major change in which a culture is created which does not operate on the level of norms alone, which is non-exclusive, one that is concerned about the integral growth and development of the person in this new historical endeavor. It is about motivating a change that comes not from the peak of power, but from the grassroots of society with all its human gifts: vital, intellectual, social, juridical, existential and religious. That is to say, a new species of “counter-reform” is need, like the one that Ignatius of Loyola and Jeanne de Lestonnac brought about in their time.

Secondly, we must take up the task of strengthening the social network, of creating communities, of learning to live together and of the cooperating with one another.

Given the social resources which have been developed, one can then move on to the third level, that of restoring the focus on the person: the creation and transformation of institutions as authentic organizations that guarantee permanent attention to the recurring needs of persons organized in groups, in collectivities, and in communities.

And finally, the reform of the State itself can be undertaken, making it an entity at the service of society and sustained by ethical norms.

In summary, the major change which the Company of Mary education offers and to which it must commit itself, consists in becoming part of this process of formation of the person, both as an individual and as part of a social group in opposition to the present day prevailing system of globalization.

III. Nine educational needs the Company of Mary should prioritize.

In order that the education offered by the Company move in the direction stated above, it is necessary to consider five basic present day needs experienced by young people of diverse ages and social levels.

1. They must be prepared to be productive, but guided by Ethics.

The development of those skills related to symbolic knowledge, (that is, research, analysis, synthesis, and having a critical view of the same,) as well as know-how of the new communication technologies give those who acquire this knowledge a substantial advantage over those whose work consists of physical labor. Not educating those who attend the Company of Mary schools in these skills, is to condemn them to unemployment or at least leave them vulnerable to a professional disadvantage in relation to those who have received this type of education in other institutions. At the same time, not to provide them with an ethical formation that would permit them to develop as persons and to overcome individualism, as well as, the ferocious competition that characterizes the work world today, is frankly irresponsible from a humanistic and Christian point of view.

2. They should be educated in sharing with others and in democratic participation

The world today demands that people know how to conduct themselves politically as citizens and not merely as subjects, that is, persons who understand the phenomenon of power and are able to participate in public life in democratic terms: law abiding, exercising their rights, respecting the rights of others and fulfilling their obligations, conducting themselves according to ethical principles not just for personal gain. We must educate persons who look

for the common good in their relationship with the leaders in society and with all other citizens. Particularly important is that the young people learn to formulate public policies and see to it that they are kept by making those responsible accountable for executing them. They must also learn to organize themselves to work together in the bringing about solutions to the common problems.

3. [They should be formed in creating an inclusive society and in reducing inequalities](#)

Over and above the fact that this type of formation is justified in and of itself because it helps re-create society, the option for the poor and the commitment to the most needy that the Company of Mary has had, challenges it to educate its young people as persons who are accepting of others, in a spirit of solidarity and justice. The education which can take place in this dimension alone is very extensive. It implies educating in the recognition and appreciation of ethnic minorities, educating in the renewal of the family, in respect for sexual diversities, for solidarity with immigrants, in accompanying those dependent on drugs in their process of education, in encouraging women to fulfill their role as agents of change, in working with marginalized young, etc.

4. [They must be empowered to grow in their own personal identity and in dialog with the other Cultures.](#)

This particular time in history requires that every person feel proud of the cultural tradition into which he/she was born and participate wholeheartedly in it. At the same time, it requires dialoging with other cultures, accepting what is of value in those cultures for their own life. Only an education such as this can help our societies eradicate the fundamentalist attitudes that have imposed so much physical destruction and pain in our world in recent years.

5. [They must be formed to seek the transcendent](#)

An growing number of persons declare that they experience “lack of meaning” in their lives today, a desolation that does not go away with the countless material and symbolic goods that the present age offers us. These persons have a “thirst for the transcendent”, one that can find a fruitful response in living the spirituality which has been part of the Company of Mary in its 400 year history. In this sense, over and above providing a traditional pastoral program of catechetics or sacramental preparation, those who are searching deeply must be accompanied on a personal level in experiences such as the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius.

IV. Organizational adaptations that the Company of Mary must make in order to face these challenges

If the Company of Mary believes that it is necessary to encourage the type of formation mentioned above, it will also have to learn to be more productive, participative, inclusive, plural-cultural and spiritual as well as an educational organization.

Regarding its organizational structure, the Company will have to direct its focus more decisively in assuring the sustainability of its various educational works, given that the number of works surpasses the number of sisters and as well as their economic resources. At the onset and in the early stages of planning, they must direct the greater part of their energies

to the participants, creating conditions that make it possible for each project to be self sufficient within a certain amount of time.

On their part, the provincial and general teams will have to direct their decisions in guaranteeing the operation of these works in terms of their infrastructure, teaching personnel, and financial resources. They must do everything possible to find ways to make all them sustainable, but they will give special attention to the development of those that care for the most needy.

For reasons of efficiency and in order to make a difference in society, the Company of Mary will have to seriously consider the possibility of opening itself up to other fields of education beyond schools, preparing themselves with adequate studies.

The Company will also have to be more decisive in its inclusion of the laity, even in positions of leadership. This is one of the means that will possibly revitalize the educational platforms, not only because of the reduced number of sisters now in existence, but because their main role is one of inspiration, not so much one of direct administration and the management of these works. Since the Second Vatican Council we have been invited to strengthen the Church, the People of God, in the complementarity of our charismas.

In the same manner, all the educational works that provide formation in authentic learning communities, where all the members, not only the students, but also the laity and the religious who function as educators, may broaden their human potential and their professional preparation.

The participation in the educational projects, laity as well as religious, must be undertaken in a truly collaborative manner, allowing space for true autonomy in the decisions made by different people and an equal distribution in the allocation of responsibilities. Likewise, a means for a permanent flow of information among all participants must be developed and maintained in the running and in the end results of these projects.

In like manner, there must be in an ongoing process of evaluation of the methods and study programs in order to constantly improve them in all respects.

On the other hand, the Company of Mary must understand that it is not alone in its educational endeavors. Consequently, it must decidedly open itself up to the collaboration with parents, encouraging their formation as educators through parenting programs.

Likewise, it must be convinced of how helpful it can be to establish communication and support networks with other schools and apostolic works, lay as well as religious, in order to enrich its educational practices.

Finally, recognizing itself as having inherited a relevant spiritual project, the Company of Mary must seek to attract new vocations and develop among its lay collaborators the spirituality that nurtures it in order to assure its continuity as a form of consecrated life dedicated to education.

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