

On apostolic networks and other challenges faced in the educational mission of the Company of Mary



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I feel honored and grateful for the invitation I received from the Company of Mary to reflect on the challenges of its educational mission, renewed in light of the XV General Chapter (Rome 2003).

The Document addresses the challenges faced by the institution in the XXI century: interculturalization, integration, networking; those of a world affected by the growth of dynamic interpersonal relationships. These intensify and even multiply the unresolved problems of the XX century; those of inequality, poverty, violence. How can we face an ever growing changing and contradictory social condition, and move within the very structure itself with an “evangelizing passion”?

The first response of the General Chapter is not to evade the question, nor shut ourselves within our own truths, but to face it with realism and with optimism. “To see the condition of the world with the eyes of God”, is an invitation to go deeply into complexities of present day realities, into the real experiences of people, to enter the “nights”, the darkness of displacement, of exclusion, of poverty. It is an invitation to discover reasons for optimism, the “light” also produced by people: advances in science, solidarity, generosity, peace movements. This invitation to place ourselves in this global, changing world is not limited to space and time. It is a profoundly human act.

It is not a gratuitous call. It is part of the humanist tradition embraced by the foundress of the Company of Mary and Ignatius of Loyola both belonging to a world experiencing great transformation and little certitude. Nevertheless, to undertake, once again, the

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challenge of reflecting on the contradictions found in the world around us, to look at its positive side while being very much aware of its shadows, requires a renewed and conscious effort from each one of us. Technological advances in transmitting information and in the field of communication often convert the pain and suffering of others into a spectacle; a war, such as the one taking place in Iraq in a live and direct transmission becomes an image as real, or as fictitious, as a movie in our neighbor's cable TV. Horror becomes routine. It informs, but it also creates a certain distance by being a "spectator" for whom reality is not the war, but the television and the remote control with which one can 'opt'. To reflect deeply on world's condition, captured in everyday images, is more than ever a challenge for those who are called to act upon their beliefs and convictions.

This is, perhaps, the second point: the document invites us to action. Time and time again, the document states that this "vision" is not a contemplative one, but a vision committed to an action leading to change. This is very clear in the second challenge expressed by the General Chapter, "to bring to full potential an education that helps persons grow in all that they are and to commit themselves to the transformation of reality". The challenge is relevant in a world such as the present one. It has been described as "the end of history", where there is nothing else to wait for, only adaptations to the present moment with no change in sight. For the General Chapter of the Company of Mary, knowing that reality can be transformed is what gives life to its humanizing dimension; that persons can be transformed, that they can grow, and can change their surroundings. A look at the "nights" of our world produces dissatisfaction, evoking the need for change. Looking at the "lights" found in this same world, points out new ways and new visions.

Several contemporary, real and new challenges, products of globalization, are mentioned in the document; many of them are placed within the bigger challenge of "forming a universal body, entity, with other men and women". One of these challenges is noted as recognizing the richness of diversity in plurality, how only within that kind of recognition a common project is possible. The richness of diversity comes to us from an ever growing

interconnected world characterized by immense migratory movements, whether due to the terrible experience of the displaced caused by situations of armed conflict or because of the millions of men and women who from different places on the planet, Africa, Latin America, Asia, East Europe, are obliged to leave their country, their contacts, their roots. They must instead look for a different destiny in other parts of the world. I write from Peru, a country where 70% of the people have expressed that they would migrate if they had the opportunity and the resources to do so; several millions have already done so. If in reality there have been other times in history when such an enormous displacement of peoples and encounters between diverse cultures has taken place, the present situation we are living now, after much time, many wars and much intolerance, is beginning to place a value on diversity. This is one of the “lights” of our times. We are an intercultural world, not only multicultural (we’ve always been so), but one nourished by multiple relationships and interchanges. At one time, diverse ethnicity was actually a motive for destruction, from the domination and genocide of the indigenous peoples of our Americas, to the slavery of the African people, the annihilation of Jews, gypsies and other peoples during the II WW. Today this can become a source of new pacts, filled with mutual respect and a source of great enrichment for our societies. But this has its risks, it is still difficult to construct a common project among diverse persons and traditional powers, nuclear apathy, power based interests which undermine this new learning. To affirm diversity from the different educational platforms is to affirm openness, though not as yet the realization of certain possibilities for all of humanity, one that is enriched by multiple experiences.

Another challenge consists in learning to network, learning to act within diversity, without attempting to homogenize the other, but appreciating differences. “To seek new forms of solidarity in the Universal Body, establishing networks among apostolic endeavors, taking care of communication, promoting the interchange among people, goods, resources and experiences”, is an orientation for future action.

Manuel Castells, the theorist of the “Era of Information”, focuses on the need to create networks as the key point for contemporary transformations. In reality, network

structures empower multiplicity. When we network we move in highly flexible structures. This means that hierarchical, pyramidal structures are set aside, and in their place networking makes the sharing of information in a circular fashion is made possible among all. The new technologies of communication and information sustain these new flexible structures; interactions are no longer limited by space. Networking breaks barriers and isolation. It allows for the communication of ideas and above all of experiences. Learning from others, however distant, is one more “light” in our times, making possible the discovery and exploration of the richness of universality. Networking presupposes, at one and the same time, autonomy in central ideas and interaction. It has the enormous potential for integrating without eliminating the differences and to profit from them; organization and the communication of results are made possible.

The great potential of networking requires effort and for that reason it is a challenge. In the first place, it means we must abandon the apathy of hierarchical controls and this is not always easy. Many people prefer to have a pre-established place within a structure where others decide what is right or what is good. At the same time others are accustomed to patronizing people. Networking requires a horizontal concept of the world, a communication which is limited only by the parameters we ourselves set. It requires liberty and personal flexibility; liberty, a horizontal vision and flexibility have not been habitual practices. Furthermore, in order that the information which is shared be empowering, a collective effort in ways of proceeding is required. There is a great risk of individualization in networking. The individual in networks can lose his/her ties with real communities replacing them with virtual communities; these are less demanding, less interactive. The challenge is not so much to organize the networks; the challenge is to learn to be a community in the open world of networks; without losing the enormous possibility for the interchanges that they open to us, without losing real human contact and the definition of common objectives which allow them to be converted into instruments for greater aims.

In the first General Chapter of the XXI Century the Company of Mary had to face, without evading it, the reality of an enormously fast changing world, one with new values that as yet must be integrated and converted into new practices, even more so into new attitudes. These attitudes make further demands on professional renewal, especially for those who assume the responsibility for the formation of youth. Promoting attitudes that will affect young people who will see even further changes, evoking new feelings. The historical moment lived by Jeanne de Lestonnac, four centuries ago, was the first great moment of universalization. Perhaps, it is for this reason, different from other groups of men and women religious, that its tradition can still nourish fresh insights. In committing ourselves to education we place our trust in the future, in the generations who must as yet play their own match and who will oversee the changes to be seen. In this fluid space, between a present with such little certainty and a future difficult to foresee, the options taken by the General Chapter are challenges worthwhile confronting: not losing sight of the human dimension in a world as contradictory as ours, dissatisfaction with the present situation, continue nurturing and preparing a change, learning to build in diversity, being open to new flexible structures, and doing away with isolationism.