



Apporto delle Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice all'educazione (1872-2022)

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EDUCATION IN RESPONSE TO THE CHALLENGES OF HUMANITY TODAY IN THE ASIAN CONTEXT

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Introduction

First of all, special and warm greetings from Margaret Karram, president of the Focolare Movement, who has requested me to represent her to express our gratitude to FMA to be present at this conference and to reiterate our sincere openness to collaboration in the field of education.

A big thank you to Prof. Wodon for the presentation that further broadened our horizon to look at the serious global challenges that humanity is facing today, especially in these recent years of the Covid pandemic. In this urgent call, no one should remain indifferent. However, effective response to the cries of humanity calls for collective discernment and collaboration among organizations, peoples and nations.

Today I would like to present some reflections on education with a focus on religious freedom and human rights on the Asian continent. To comprehend better, I would like to share some characteristics of the Asian continent that could assist deeper reflections in its reality.

Asia is a complex, highly diverse and multifaceted reality

Asia consists of 49 countries and currently is the home to 4.7 billion people which constitutes 59.6% of the whole world population. It was the site of some cradles of the first civilizations such as Mesopotamia, Ancient China and Ancient India. It is a fertile land on which stands many ancient religions like Buddhism, Christianity, Confucianism, Hinduism, Islam, Jainism, Judaism, Shinto, Sikhism, Daoism and Zoroastrianism. Last but not least, over



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60% of the world's youth live in Asia-Pacific¹. This translates into more than 750 million young women and men between the ages of 15 to 24 years.

For this reason, Asia could never be considered as a single entity. The vast cultural, historical, racial, social, political, economic and religious differences among the five sub-regions of Asia can almost differentiate them as individual continents; for example, one immediately notices the huge contextual differences between East Asian countries such as China, Japan, Korea and Taiwan and South Asian countries such as Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. In addition to the countries already mentioned, there are the Southeast Asian countries, the Central Asian countries "The-Stans," and then again the West Asian countries encompassing the Arab world.

Some reflections on education with the focus on religious freedom and human rights in the Asia Continent

When we talk about education, it is more than appropriate to understand this reality through the perspective of cultures and religions. The majority of the Asian countries have their cultural roots intertwined with religious beliefs. For example, the Chinese culture is grounded on Confucianism Daoism, Buddhism and while the Indian culture is profoundly rooted in the Vedic civilization. Since culture is the short-hand version of the rules that guide the way of life of a particular people and it is a common code of conduct shared by the members of a society, education is to be considered as inherent within one's own culture. In Asia, the distribution of adherents to different religions is as follows: Islam (26.1 %), Hinduism (25.7 %), no religion (20 %), Buddhism (11.3 %), folk religions (8.6 %), Christianity (7.2 %) and 1.2 % others.² Catholics make up only 3.31% of the population, and about half of the continent's Catholics are in the Philippines.

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Religious Freedom

The Second Vatican Council, both in its document on revelation Dei Verbum and in its Declaration on religious freedom, Dignitatis Humanae, clarified that our notion of religious freedom involves not simply toleration of other religions but genuine recognition of the freedom of everyone to follow their conscience in the search for truth and adherence to that truth as they perceive it. The Declaration, Dignitatis Humanae, echoing the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, states that "the human person has a right to religious freedom".

However, the concept of religious freedom declared by the Catholic Church may not be perceived and practiced in the same way in Asia, as for instance, in the strongly Christian-rooted Europe or other continents. In fact, traditional religions such as Confucianism,

¹ Youth in Asia-Pacific | ESCAP (unescap.org)

² Religion in Asia - Wikipedia

Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam... have taken root in Asian lands for thousands of years, and comparatively, Christianity came much later and is still finding its way to inculturate. Most Asian cultures do not draw a clear line between religion, tradition, mentality and social structure. To examine how religious freedom is practiced in Asia, we need to consider well this particular context.

In Asia, a very important value is the family, the foundation on which one's identity is built. Right must always be exercised in a collectivity such as family, community, people and nation. Consequently, the right of an individual must sometimes be sacrificed at the cost of safeguarding the whole. Most leaders of Asian countries state that religious freedom is guaranteed to their citizens. However, the ways in which this right is interpreted vary extensively. Some countries that have established their own national religion or follow certain ideology are particularly careful about proselytizing and indoctrinating beliefs "foreign" to their regime or convictions. In general, in Asia, most believers of different religions, including Catholics, can enjoy a certain space of freedom, if not all the freedom to adhere to their beliefs offered by the state. The greater the tolerance granted by the state, the greater the space of freedom that believers can exercise. In some countries this space is much larger, while in others it is so small that believers may even experience hostility.

Religious Freedom and Education

Education is about the flourishing of each human person in his/her dignity. It is an indispensable means for the formation of a person and the "fulfilling" the design in each one. Religions at their root should lead to this. In actual practice, however, the education boards of many Asian States do not allow the teaching of distinct religious beliefs to be included in the curriculum. Christian education through Catholic and Christian schools usually operates in the form of private institutions at all levels on the Asian continent. They are present in most Asian countries with a few exceptions. Catholic schools are always open to all and inclusive in that they admit students on an equal basis without differentiating them according to their beliefs. Although their numbers are relatively low, the impact of education based on Christian values has facilitated gradual changes in the mentality and behavior of the people of different cultures over time, such as respect for individual freedom, equality between men and women, equal educational and employment opportunities, gradual demarcation of social classes, monogamy, option for "THE LEAST OF OUR BROTHERS", building up peace, tolerance and inclusiveness.

Catholic education actually reflects also the mission paths indicated by the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (the FABC): that is the threefold dialogue: dialogue with the poor, dialogue with religions and dialogue with culture. Today the bishops in Asia are adding other areas of dialogue, such as dialogue with youth, women, the environment and technology.

Education as a Human Right

Generally speaking, all of us would agree on “Education as a human right”, however, the biggest challenge is how can we protect this right.

One day a Filipina friend commented about education in the Philippines that really struck me: “In general, all children have access to schools, public schools are free, but when you do not have the resources or money, no right can be claimed.” In fact, the Department of Education (DepEd) data³ showed a drop of 24% of enrollment in basic education for the combined public and private schools for School Year 2020- 2021. The lack of funds for tuition and the loss of jobs of the parents of students during the Covid pandemic are reasons for the decrease in enrollments.

In addition to the many well-known serious social problems that are in the public eye as a result of the Covid pandemic, children's right to education is particularly undermined. The strict confinement of people in homes, especially for families living in poverty (more than 60 percent of the world's slum population lives in Asia), has left serious consequences on the psychological and mental health of people, especially children. In addition, domestic violence experienced by women and children, physical and sexual abuse, human trafficking, prostitution... are on the rise and the poor are the most vulnerable. Now that schools have resumed classes, many are reporting that children are suffering from emotional and psychological problems, and even parents seem to be more aggressive in their speech and behavior. In Japan⁴ , India⁵ , South Korea⁶ , Singapore⁷ , cases of youth suicide have increased significantly during this time of the pandemic.

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Perspectives for Catholic schools to explore to respond to the challenges to humanity by engaging in commitment to the Global Compact on Education

In the midst of all these tribulations of humanity, what could be the contribution of us Christians as educators to respond to these cries of humankind?

Alone or with the entire institution to which we belong, we can do our best, but our impact will still be too small. As Pope Francis has said, the lesson learned from the Pandemic is "the realization that we are a global community, all in the same boat, where the problems of one person are the problems of all." (cf. Brothers All, 32). Education is no longer a competence or responsibility of someone, of some institutions, but will be the effort of everyone. In his call for a global educational pact with humanity at the center, he

³ Official Statement on enrollment data | Department of Education (deped.gov.ph)

⁴ Number of suicides among Japanese children hit record high in 2020 | The Japan Times

⁵ 31 Children Died By Suicide Every Day In India In 2020 (ndtv.com)

⁶ South Korea's young suicides rise despite overall drop | Inquirer News

⁷ Youth suicide: Asian teens crack under growing family pressure - Nikkei Asia

called for an education that creates a new, universal "culture" at the service of the whole world.

Thus, Catholic educators, schools and institutes are called to open their doors, to create synergies, to build mutual trust and respect, to foster encounter and dialogue, to share spiritual and material resources with all schools, those of Christians, of other religions and those of no belief; to work together with the government, businesses and families for a more fraternal humanism and a more hopeful and sustainable "Common Home."

Education is a dynamic process of transmitting love, life, values and knowledge from one person to another. In this process, the good values of all religions play an important role. One of Asia's major richness and potential is religious beliefs. As part of a global project, perhaps the religions in Asia are called to dialogue more with each other precisely on the issue of education, and we Christians could be the leaven and the apostles of dialogue.

Thank you for your attention!