

Handing on then Faith to the New Generations:

10 Challenges for Education

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This article reflects on the social conditions that can facilitate the handing on of the faith to new generations. What nutrients are needed in the new soil of today's childhood and youth for them to embrace the faith of our ancestors? What dispositions will we need to cultivate in each growing person so that the incarnate Jesus will find a crib in which to be born? How can the way be gradually smoothed out so that the manifestation of Christ takes place in the lives of those who will succeed us in time

1. Lingering, enduring, pausing to perceive beyond things

It is clear that time is a necessary requisite for things to reveal their meaning, the aura they contain and their contact with our sensibility. This is particularly true today. Children and young people often suffer from factors that can lead to a sedentary life. They are absorbed by screens that incessantly transmit fleeting items of information. The static position of the motionless body contrasts with the disturbing amount of information, attractions, knowledge and entertainment that are projected. At the same time, from a very young age they are involved in an abundance of tasks, sports activities, and courses aimed at developing this or that skill, to relieve busy working parents from caregiving duties. This generates in them a hyperkinetic, but sedentary sensitivity. They become hypermental, but without control of their emotions, and hyperphysical, but disconnected from self-knowledge.

This unbalanced situation must be remedied. Children and the youth of our age need time to explore the outer and inner worlds. In order for things to attract them because of what they radiate and not only because they stimulate them uninterruptedly, children must be allowed to be bored, to indulge in creative idleness, to do things without aiming to be productive or profitable, and not for the sake of immediate learning. We need to develop pedagogies based on sensitive and lasting contact with the closest realities for an extended time. For example, focus on the human heartbeat, closely perceiving one's breathing, marveling at the data transmitted by the senses in contact with one single thing at a time.

By offering children from an early age a multiplicity of stimuli and tasks, we are resetting in them that continuous perception of that which resides in the space between the knowledge of a thing and the message it carries. To perceive this, it is essential to possess the ability to wait.

Above all, faith requires such an exercise, because it does not respond to provocations but to the ability to perceive what pulsates beyond any given object. The divine is grasped in this return to human realities that enables us to appreciate the existence of such a *plus* of being. It follows that we must help children and young people to explore the mystery of God in the world for themselves, on their own. This requires a process appropriate to each developmental stage.

Conveying data, information, notions about the faith, the Bible, the catechism and so on, in the same way as giving things, is not helpful; rather, all this information should be proposed as clues to something deeper, as symbols that go beyond the concrete and reveal their meaning to the human heart, which goes in search of meaning. For example, the mystery of the word of God in the written tradition should involve an approach that comes through an openness to the mystery of the book itself, its thickness, its volume, its sacred dimension, its function, its colors, and the multiplicity of messages it contains.

2. *Reiterate, repeat, retrace*

Understood as a typical capacity of human consciousness, reflection is a return to – a mulling over of – the things and situations that occur in our lives. We must patiently exhort ourselves to the repetition of acts, healthy habits, positive rituals, as one of the most necessary practices to obtain something good for life. Our existence is pervaded by constant stimuli, breaking news, devices that are constantly updating. We end up feeling that everything is ephemeral. Everything ages quickly; nothing has time to assume historical weight and prominence. New things appear and fade into the atmosphere of information disintegration, of data, of “things that happen.” Everything passes away without a trace. Therefore, those who want to know more about what God is doing in the history of human events must necessarily consider past history.

Those who go through childhood and youth in the digital age are not aware of remote eras, ancient realities, in essence, the past. For them, such realities lie beyond the threshold of what is worth investigating. Their perspective is short-range, and what is beyond is empty, not worth returning to. And yet in the Judeo-Christian tradition the divine is given beyond history, when *kairos* is woven with *chronos* in the tapestry of salvation history.

To restore meaning to things, to extract from them the multiple possibilities of offering new meanings in contact with the passage of time and historical circumstances, it is necessary to exercise “circularity.” If we do not help children and young people discover that in repetition there is always something new, we will continue to increase their disdain for the past and understood as obsolete, useless, insignificant, to be discarded. In contrast, repeating is not always a negative thing: it is not necessarily the consequence of failure, as when one fails a school exam. Repeating lessons many times is necessary to grow better, to learn at one’s own pace, to settle down and find a better balance. Repetition and insistence are values to be encouraged; after all, they belong to the civic, sporting and religious rituals that characterize us socially and give us an identity.

However, there is a dimension of the relationship with the past that we must not indulge in, a dimension that becomes disproportionate when it over-emphasizes the tendency to separate events from the history that gives them meaning. We are speaking of nostalgia as a deleterious deformation of memory. Its virus imprisons memory in the gilded cage of regret for “what was and is no more,” creating sad and bitter sentiments that idealize the past and render those involved incapable of discovering its meaning for the present. Nostalgia does not see history as a teacher of life: it relegates it to a gallery of museum objects, old and dusty, wanting to evoke emotions of a past gone forever, which no one can revive. We must fight nostalgia as a threat to faith.

3. *Sharing silences and unexplained gestures*

Silence is one of those human realities that succeeds in bringing people together because they act inwardly with a unifying thrust. Those who share moments of silence, inhabiting them, find a common harmony. Silence nourishes who we are without showing our differences. In fact, it conceals them, because it gathers them into itself and makes it unnecessary for them to be specified. Silence implies union and has its own semantics, unrelated to the spoken word. Often, when there is nothing particular to say, activities such as sleeping, playing, working, listening in silence and sharing the same physical space can generate communion.

The symbolic or ritual gestures we witness do not need to be explained: they are experienced, performed, and just done. An action such as getting down on one’s knees with eyes closed, in silence, says much more than any explanation about prayer and recollection. It speaks for itself without words; it invites one to experience it. Sometimes, the impulse to explain everything is equivalent to the temptation to control everything.

The pedagogy of silence and wordless gesture, in a context overloaded with noise and empty actions as the one we live in, opens a door to faith as a possibility to be cultivated. Faith is implanted in the soul as a word of eternal life if it is protected from the emotional cries to which we relentlessly expose children and young people. They are individuals who in their journey toward maturity need meaningful, structuring silences in which bonds are cemented, deep silences

and gestures that suggest questions about the mystery of the Word made flesh and make it perceptible.

4. Resting from information

We must learn to rest from being constantly informed. If the accumulation of data gives us the impression of being informed or connected, it actually makes us less informed and less able to communicate. We now speak of “infoxication,” information intoxication, as a disease; this should make us reflect on the need to develop attitudes that enable us to consume information to the extent that we actually need it.

In the case of children and young people, it is plausible that the hubbub of data and information only serves to cause to fade in them the criteria by which to evaluate them. Everything is on the same level: war, gossip, fake news, analysis, fashion, sports, and so on. We are teaching them that information is always in excess, therefore probably false and useless for practical living. Instead, we need to help them devise learning mechanisms geared toward critically seeking the necessary information about something meaningful to their existence. Our education programs also suffer from the same defect that we see in information that has been deprived of order. So many years spent in schooling with the method of data-driven pounding, piecemeal knowledge, fragmented mosaics, can only do damage to the quest of many young people anxious to understand for what purpose they came into the world.

Faith is good news for the lives of those who believe. How do we ensure it does not become just one piece of information among many? How should information about the articles of faith be shared, so that they do not fall into the same cauldron as the rest? Would not religious reality be better Good News if it were witnessed to, rather than made an item of information?

5. Treating things gently, sewing, mending, weaving

Ours is a violent and divided world. That is nothing new. We have become accustomed to tampering with things, with our inner selves, and to separating, classifying, building divisions, forming groups and factions. We mistreat nature, ravage it and manipulate it unceasingly. We have broken the thread that binds things to their origin, declared null and void the interrelatedness of the cosmos. For example, mass-produced foods are devoid of that sacredness, proper to time, that makes them different, unique, original and, yet, part of the whole. The mechanisms of mass production of consumer goods, erasing any singularity, make mass-produced products appear without limit and identical.

The same thing happens with people. In their relationships human beings turn each other into more or less fearsome objects, able to be manipulated, rarely into sacred beings. Thus we are prone to hurt each other, and to do so in the same way we are hurt. Bullying in schools often constitutes a silent and terrible war that can cost the lives of those who do not find refuge in their friends, family or institutions.

This rupture of the social bond must find a possibility of remedy in personal experience. What if everyone, within the week, took a few moments to mend something broken, to the point of making something new, or suture an open wound? There are many experiences aimed at breaking, dividing, attacking, and few aimed at restoring, repairing, recovering, synthesizing.

With regard to liturgical realities, some catechetical approaches, marked by a search for intimacy, probably in reaction to an excess of distance, have deprived them of their enchantment, taking away the mystery that envelops them. It has also happened that the very relationship of ministers to the sacred has become somehow worldly, or too artificial and punctilious. In this way they distort familiarity with the mystery of things, and generate a dissonant relationship, which is so alien to childhood which is open to marvels.

Education in the faith must always strive for mystagogy, which is the pedagogy of mystery, the quest to offer a path of initiation into divine realities.

6. Being a body with others, bonding

The pandemic forced the body to beat a retreat. It sequestered it and somehow hid it. By the term “body” we mean the presence of the person. by means of the body and its manifestations we relate to the world and to others.

The experience of confinement to which we were subjected during the pandemic provoked a new form of presence that could do without the body. Digital communication platforms made us present to each other, at best, from the standpoint of intentionality, but it is not possible to prolong that presence for long. Until we could meet each other again, we were left with only a digital presence with those we wanted to be with in reality. But to children and young people, screen-mediated participation did not appear as an “extension” of their physical presence in the digital world by means of intentionality.

Over time, we have become more and more “present” and have returned to a semblance of normalcy; but reluctance, shyness in the presence of others, difficulty in taking on the burden of what we say because we are not standing in front of the other person, understanding the other person more as a contact or a digital profile than as a personal being have robbed many of the ability to enter into relationships.

We have not yet developed the pedagogies necessary to strengthen the healthy bond that is established with those who are not us, but configure us, because they reflect us. This reflection, which every subjectivity needs, occurs only in the physical presence of the other.

For faith, the body is Christ Himself found in our brothers and sisters. What would become of a merely spiritualized faith? It would be nothing more than the pursuit of inner well-being like any item of consumer goods that can be obtained through a special experience. But Christianity finds personal salvation in the other. God loves to make use of mediations, to incarnate himself in order to reach the heart of the real person. The body of Christ is the community, the bond, the communion, the synergy of love, made possible in the experience of being with one another. The incarnation of God in Jesus is completed in his passion, death and resurrection, “Christifying” every reality.

7. Storytelling, learning to inherit a tradition

Christianity is a living narrative that is transmitted from generation to generation through the telling of what God is doing in us through his Spirit. We need to help children and young people to tell their story, to relate the events of their existence, to find the appropriate metaphors and analogies to tell their stories, because in this way they will be able to increase their ability to interpret life.

The minimalist pre-packaged messaging, translated into icons, emoticons and stickers, as well as the possibility of speeding up the listening of WhatsApp voice messages or deleting what has been said generate instability. They do not ensure the understanding of what has been communicated. Indeed, they subject it to the constraint of the supposed tone in which a certain thing was said, to an a-synchronicity, to the absence of the receptor’s body, which with its gestures and emotions better completes the communicative circuit.

Paradoxically, the minimization of the message collides with the amplification of messaging. From almost any platform one can send a direct message. We can multiply conversations at will. This makes us think we are communicating a lot, but in fact we may just be sorting through correspondence.

The Christian tradition is a living legacy, which will remain so by the power of the Holy Spirit, but the mission to find God in all things and all things in him takes place within the framework of a God-directed history of salvation. If we do not develop in children and youth the appropriate communication strategies to become active receptors of the message, we will end up talking only among ourselves.

8. Placing the ‘self’ in a ‘we’ – belonging

The need to recover relational dimensions and give them back the depth they had stems from the certainty that there is no essentially pure self, which then comes into contact with others. Our subjective identity is made up of relationship.

The exaltation of the ego, to which we are continually tempted, destroys the “we” and breaks social ties to the point of locking each of us into our own individual world, where subjective laws apply. Only a “we” can save us from this tragedy of an outsized ego. Therefore, we must develop what can generate community: shared bonds, encounters and common stories. Christian faith is communal, not solitary. One receives it from the community, and returns to it through the configuring action that the community itself imprints in persons, causing them to open up and inviting them to the gift of self.

We must carry out the mission of disempowering the self so that it can discover its relationships with the other. Only in this way can Christ occupy the vital center of our personal choices, which will never be individual, but made in the community that sustains each person in his or her singularity.

9. *Do not try to know everything, leave room for mystery*

Scientific encyclopedism, still alive in our desire to control reality through knowledge, has played havoc with the transmission of faith, especially in contemporary society. A singular aspect of this age is that one does not only seek to know, to understand in depth some realities, but one wants everything. Contemporary sensibilities do not accept limits, the boundary, the finite. Digitality, overcoming physical time and space, seems to usher in new forms of more fluid and elusive digital boundaries. This creates the sense that an almost infinite vastness of things opens up to personal desire.

An ability to recognize ourselves as limited shows the proper place to relate to the mystery of God. If this placing of ourselves in human smallness is lost, wonder before the immensity of the divine is also diluted. The pedagogy of wonder seeks to ensure that our limitedness does not become a frustrating obstacle, but rather is a springboard toward the ineffable, the mysterious, the unknown that sustains us.

10. *Cut, close, conclude*

This last element suggests that we need to learn to say goodbye, to turn over a new leaf, to respect the cycles of life that we have instead become accustomed to altering and manipulating, ever since, for example, electricity entered modern life. The point here is not to despise advances in science, but to weigh how much each can help us live life better.

Children and young people should be helped to experience the fragilities of each stage of their existence, to celebrate each of life’s significant events by knowing how to recognize their end, to bid farewell to people who die, to detach themselves healthily from what can no longer be. Otherwise the residue, the unfinished business remains as unfinished karma that demands space in moments of fragility and uncertainty, returning to question everything. And since fluidity is a tendency peculiar to these new generations, childlike omnipotence feels challenged and unwilling to let go of anything, and so remains, paradoxically, with nothing: the emptiness of a life without decisions.

Faith needs to develop, and it can only do so if we move through a stage, if we finish it, let it go and do not expect, looking backward, that what will never return will return, or that it can magically become fixed at a frozen, lifeless point. Life requires that we choose what we perceive as our own, what God invites us to live. But we will not be able to make a positive choice without cuts and breaks. Ultimately, if there is no death, there will be no resurrection.

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