

# LESSON FOR DEGREE HONORIS CAUSA IN PEDAGOGY

Por **Celia Bleckden**, tradução para o inglês do original LUBICH, Chiara. *Lezione per Laurea Honoris Causa in Pedagogia*, Washington, 2000

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Ladies and Gentlemen

Dear Friends,

I am deeply grateful to this renowned University for having chosen to honor me - and through me, the Focolare Movement - with this Doctorate in Education. I regard this as a recognition of the contribution we may have made to the formation of the human person and to society, in the area of education.

On the one hand, this honorary degree amazes me. But at the same time, I must admit that it does not surprise me completely.

This is because the motivation for everything we do is religious; and consequently, even in our efforts to educate, the focus is always on Christ, who linked the concept of educator directly to himself: "Do not be called 'Teacher; you have but one teacher, the Christ'" (Mt. 23:10).

Before discussing more specifically the aspect of education in the Focolare Movement, (also known as the "Work of Mary"), I think that for those who are not familiar with it, I should briefly outline the spirituality which animates it and has given rise to this new way of life.

As we turned our full attention toward him, it was as if a brilliant light suddenly filled our souls, enabling us to understand, or better, to understand anew, that God is Love. From that moment on we felt enveloped by his love.

Even before, we knew that God existed; but we thought of him as distant, inaccessible, out there beyond the stars.

Now everything had changed. It was as if our eyes were suddenly opened and we could see that because he is Love, God is close to us. He follows our every move. In all the circumstances of our life, whether happy or sad, he is present. He knows everything about us.

Thus believing that God is Love became the first foundation stone of our new spirituality.

But if God is Love, we asked, what should be our attitude toward him?

Jesus' life enlightened us. He had loved the Father by doing his will. We had to do the same.

To do God's will became the second key idea of our spirituality.

Bombs were falling night and day, forcing us to run to the shelters as often as eleven times a day. All we were able to take with us was a small book containing the Gospels.

We were certain that there we would find what Jesus wanted of us: his will.

We opened it and those words seemed filled with light. We understood them as if for the first time. And a force, which we now feel came from the Holy Spirit, impelled us to put them into practice.

We read: "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Mt. 19:19). "Your neighbor," it said. But who was our neighbor?

Our neighbors were all those who had been struck by the war. They were hungry, thirsty, wounded, in need of clothes and shelter. We immediately began to assist them.

The Gospel assured us: "Ask and it will be given to you" (Mt. 7:7; Lk. 11:9).

We would ask on behalf of the poor, and each time God showered us with all kinds of goods which we would take to those in need.

At this point I must leave the prepared text and recount a particular episode which was requested by one of the religious personalities present here. One day, during those early years, a poor man came up to me and said: "Chiara, please give me a pair of shoes, size 12." It was impossible to find shoes during the war; and then, size 12 – where could we go to find them? I remember that I entered a church and went up in front of the tabernacle.

The Work of Mary is an ecclesial Movement. It is present in approximately 200 nations and counts millions of members. These dimensions attest to the fact that it is a Work of God, which is how Pope John Paul II and the Church consider it.

The aim of the Movement is to contribute to the fulfillment of the testament of Jesus: “May they all be one” (Jn. 17:21). It achieves this goal precisely through its spirituality which is both personal and collective.

The guiding principles of this spirituality are rooted in a number of key statements and truths found in the Gospel which can best be understood if we look at how the Holy Spirit impressed them upon us during the first months of our new way of life.

We are in Italy; it is the early 1940’s. World War II is raging.

While performing a charitable act, I sense that God is calling me to give myself to him forever. I do so on December 7, 1943, a date which will later be considered the start of the Movement.

Through various circumstances, I become acquainted with other young people my age who decide to follow my example.

On May 13th, 1944, Trent, my hometown, undergoes a devastating bombardment. Thereafter, they are frequent.

One day, seeking shelter from the bombs, I find myself with my companions in a dark cellar, with a lighted candle and the Gospel in my hands. I open it to Jesus’ last prayer, the night before he died: “May they all be one” (Jn. 17:21). Those words instill in our hearts the conviction that we were born for that page of the Gospel.

The bombing raids continue, taking from us the people and things that have been the goals and ideals of our young hearts. One of us had hoped to marry, but her fiancé does not return from the front; another cannot continue her education; another loses her home; and so on.

The lesson God is offering us through these circumstances is clear: Everything is “vanity of vanities” (Qo. 1:2). Everything passes away.

I begin to ask myself: “Is there a goal, an ideal worth spending one’s life for, which no bomb can destroy?”

The answer is immediately clear: “Yes, there is. It is God.”

My companions and I decide to make God our reason for living.

But who *was* God?

Knowing that Jesus is present in the poor, I said: “Jesus, please give me a pair of shoes, size 12, for you in that poor man.”

As I was leaving the church, a young lady came up to me. She said: “Here’s a package for the people you are helping.” I opened it; there was a pair of shoes, size 12.

“Give and gifts will be given to you” (Lk. 6:38), we read. And so we gave. One day there was only one apple in the house. We gave it to a poor man who asked for something to eat. That same morning, a bag of apples arrived. We gave them away too, and before the day was over, someone brought us a suitcase of apples!

Jesus had made promises and now he was keeping them. So the Gospel was true!

This realization made us all the more eager to continue the new way of life we had undertaken. We were continually telling others about all that was happening. And for many, the encounter with us became an encounter with Jesus alive today.

Living the word of God became the third key point of our spirituality.

We were struck by everything Jesus said. Quite soon, however, the Holy Spirit began to focus our attention in a special way on those words that concerned love, the love the Gospel speaks of.

And loving became another key idea of our spirituality, the fourth.

However, since our lives were constantly in danger, one day we asked ourselves: “Is there something God particularly wants of us? If so, we would like to do that before we die.

In the Gospel we found a commandment which Jesus calls his own and “new”. It was exactly what we were looking for: “This is my commandment: love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (Jn. 15:12-13).

We decided to live accordingly. In fact we expressed it in a pact. We looked at one another and we said: “I am ready to die for you”; “And I for you”; “Every one of us for each of the others”.

From that moment on, our lives changed.

What had happened? With that pact, we had set mutual love in motion, and love had united us as Jesus had desired when he said: “Where two or three are gathered in my name (the Church Fathers say “in my love”), there am I in the midst of them” (Mt. 18:20). He had come into our midst. And we realized that all that was new, beautiful, and luminous in our hearts was the effect of his presence.

Mutual love and Jesus in our midst – other points of our spirituality.

Naturally, we were not always able to live this way. At times, faults and shortcomings, even small ones, cast shadows over the splendor of our unity.

But the Gospel taught us to face those moments, too.

We heard one day that Jesus' greatest suffering had been when, on the cross, he had felt forsaken even by the Father, and had cried out: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me"? (Mt. 27:46).

We were deeply struck by this fact and decided to follow Jesus in his abandonment for the rest of our lives.

From that moment on, we discovered his countenance everywhere and we loved him: in our personal sufferings; in those who are lonely, like him, abandoned, like him, in pain; and in the many divisions that exist in the world.

Jesus crucified and forsaken is another very important point of our spirituality.

But Jesus had said: "By this all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (Jn. 13:35). And: "May they all be one ... so that the world may believe" (Jn. 17:21).

And, in fact, people around us felt strengthened in their faith. Some believed anew; while others came to believe in Jesus for the first time.

Thus, through mutual love which gives rise to the presence of Jesus among us, we were able to experience that unity Jesus had prayed for: "May they all be one as you and I are one" (cf. Jn. 17:21).

Unity, another point of our spirituality.

This is a brief overview of our Movement from a spiritual viewpoint.

But our Movement can also be viewed from a theological, philosophical, cultural, social, economic or educative, artistic standpoint, as well as from an ecumenical or interreligious perspective.

I would like to share with you now some of the ways that the more significant points of this spirituality have had an impact in the area of education.

Actually, our Movement and the stages of its development can be viewed as one continuous, extraordinary educational event. All the necessary factors are present, including a well-defined educational theory and method which underlie our efforts in this field.

But first let us ask ourselves: what is education?

Education can be defined as the itinerary which a subject (either an individual or a community) pursues with the help of one or more educators, moving toward a goal considered worthwhile both for the individual person and for humanity.

What then are the characteristic elements of our educational method which follow from the main points of the spirituality we live?

Let us consider the first point: the “revelation” — if I may use this term — of **God as Love**. We see that from the beginning of our Movement there has been only one educator, *the Educator par excellence*: God who is Love, God who is our Father. It was he who took the initiative in our regard, who, with the sense of purpose characteristic of a true educator, has accompanied us, renewed us and given us new life along an intensely rich itinerary of formation, both personal and communal.

He has enabled us and countless others to rediscover the true meaning of the divine Paternity: a discovery of enormous importance, considering the various attempts in western culture to affirm — on theoretical and practical levels — that “God is dead”.

There has been an eclipse of God’s Fatherhood which has also contributed to an eclipse of the father figure, a loss of authority on the level of human and educational relationships. This has led to a moral relativism and an absence of rules in the life of the individual, as well as in interpersonal and social relationships. This often leads to grave consequences such as violence and the like; almost proving Dostoyevsky right when he affirmed that “killing God is the most horrific form of suicide”... and “If God does not exist, then everything is permitted”.

We have had the grace to come to know God. God is Love, and certainly not a distant judge, not a jealous enemy who uses his power to destroy us, or who doesn’t care about us. On the contrary, he is an educator who acknowledges each person’s unique and distinctive identity. He values every person. He loves us, and this is why he is also demanding. As an authentic educator he educates to, and demands responsibility and commitment. God is Love. For this reason he freed us from the greatest slavery of all, and re-opened the doors of his Home to us. And we know the price his son paid for our ransom. No educator has ever considered human beings as highly as God, who died for them. God who is Love has raised each and every human person to the highest possible dignity: the dignity of being his child and heir. Each and every person!

The realization that we are all children of the same Father was the inspiration underlying the key idea of Comenius,<sup>1</sup> that great forerunner of modern educational theory: we must “teach everything to everyone”.

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<sup>1</sup> . John Amos Comenius: born in Moravia in the present day Czech Republic, he lived from 1592 to 1670. He was the first to attempt an organic, systematic presentation of Pedagogy as a science.

Another pillar of our spirituality is the **Word of God**.

Comenius says “Teach everything to everyone”. But in order to do this, one must use — as he himself said — the educational norm: do things step by step. Thinking about it now, it seems that the Father suggested this method to us focolarini from the very first days of the Movement. He prompted us to live his word by choosing one sentence from the Gospel each month to put into practice in our daily lives. But this immediately gave us “everything”, because Jesus is wholly present in each word of the Gospel (and when we live his word, he lives in us). At the same time, we were like children being nourished by his word, and as it became increasingly a part of us, we grew into adults in faith and in this new life.

Through this very simple educational technique which combines teaching step by step and imparting knowledge fully, the light of this Ideal of life has spread and continues to spread far beyond the Movement. It is a powerful, ongoing spiritual and educational experience.

The word of God is unique because it is the *word of Life*, a word that becomes experience, in a world that is frequently characterized, even in education, by an abundance of empty words.

We have experienced that the educational power of this Word offers an alternative to this, because the Word of God is always alive and new. As it shaped our lives, it gradually gave us a personal inner unity, which is the enormous task proper to education. And this inner unity helped us overcome the sense of fragmentation people often experience in relation to themselves, to others, to society, and to God. At the same time it highlighted the originality of each individual, drawing out his or her unique characteristics.

It is because of this *existential unity* between Word and Life, between saying and doing, that so many people have found our experience credible and convincing. This experience causes profound interior changes in people, thereby setting in motion a true educational process.

The will of God is another point of our spirituality.

Faithfulness to the word of God also taught us to put aside our “selfish will”, all those desires that still tie us to the limited behavioral patterns of our self-centered ego, and to follow the will of God, which leads us to continually transcend ourselves, moving beyond self into a direct relationship with God that enriches us and makes us free.

As a rule, in the moral education of a person, one gradually moves from a necessary initial phase of dependency to the autonomous morality that should characterize a mature adult subject. In our experience, too, we observe a movement from an initial adherence to the will of Another and to his Law (manifested in many ways) – which we take hold of like



a child trusting completely in the guidance of an adult – to a powerful sense of freedom, the result of having made this Law our own. We then feel that it has become *our* law, that it has become so much a part of us that we feel adult precisely because we are able to say: “It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me” (Gal. 2:20).

And then we have Jesus who cries out: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me”? (Mt. 27:46; Mk. 15:34).

Jesus forsaken is our secret, our central idea, even in educating. He shows us that we should place no limits on our efforts as educators. He exemplifies to what extent and with what dedication we must educate.

But who is this Jesus forsaken whom we have decided to love in a preferential way? He is the figure of those who are ignorant — he asks “why”. His ignorance is the most tragic, his question the most dramatic. He is the figure of all who are needy, or maladjusted, or disabled; of those who are unloved, neglected, or excluded. He personifies all those human and social situations which more than any others — cry out for education in a special way. Jesus forsaken is the paradigm of those who, lacking everything, need someone to give them everything and do everything for them. Therefore, he is the perfect example, the ultimate measure of the learning subject, who manifests the educator’s responsibility. He indicates to us the boundless limits of the need for education; and at the same time, the boundless limits of our responsibility to help and to educate.

However, Jesus forsaken - who went beyond his own infinite suffering and prayed: “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit” (Lk. 23:46) - also teaches us to see difficulties, obstacles, trials, hard work, error, failure and suffering as something that must be faced, loved and overcome. Generally all of us, whatever our field of endeavor, seek to avoid such experiences in every way possible. In the field of education, as well, there is often a tendency to be over-protective with young people, shielding them from all that is difficult, teaching them to view the road of life as smooth and comfortable. In reality, this leaves them extremely unprepared to face the inevitable trials of life. In particular, it fosters passivity and a reluctance to accept the responsibility for oneself, one’s neighbor and society that every human being must assume.

For us, instead, precisely because of our choice of Jesus forsaken, every difficulty is faced up to and loved. And thus educating people to deal with difficulty – which involves commitment on the part of both the educator and the one being educated – is another key idea of our educational method.

There are two other points that I would like to consider: unity and Jesus in our midst.

But first, what is the aim of this educational process?



Its objective is the same as the one we could define as Jesus' goal in educating: "May they all be one": unity, therefore — a profound, heartfelt unity of all human beings with God and with one another.

Unity is a very timely aspiration. Despite the countless tensions present in our world today, the human race, almost paradoxically, is striving towards unity. Unity is a sign and a need of our times.

However, this innate drive toward unity — as the etymology of the word "education" (Latin *e-ducere*: "draw forth") indicates — must be drawn out in a positive way. This implies, on all levels of human endeavor, an educative process consistent with the demands of unity, so that our world will not become a Babel without a soul, but an experience of Emmaus, of God with us, capable of embracing the whole of humanity.

This might seem a utopia. But every authentic educational approach includes a utopian thrust; that is, a guiding principle which stimulates people to build together a world which is not yet a reality, but ought to be. In this perspective, education can be viewed as a means for drawing nearer to this utopian goal.

In our approach to education, in which the spiritual and the human penetrate one another and become one (through the Incarnation), this Utopia is not a dream, nor an illusion, nor an unattainable goal. It is already present here among us, and we see its fruits when we live out Jesus' words: "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (Mt. 18:20). Education's goal, its highest aim, becomes a reality.

In this we experience the fullness of God's life, which Jesus has given us, a trinitarian relationship, the most authentic form of social relationship, in which a wonderful synthesis is achieved between the two goals of education: to teach the individual and to build the community. We believe that our experience of this trinitarian, communitarian spirituality, brings to fulfillment many ideas held by outstanding men and women throughout the history of education, whose initial premises were often different from ours, but who insisted on the importance of education in building a society founded on truly democratic relationships. One example among many would be the great contribution offered by John Dewey to education throughout the world, beginning with the United States. We also find many similarities in the recent concept of "service-learning", which affirms that the formation of the person should also involve a formation in and for the community.

Of course, our experience of community life is based on Jesus' invitation: "Love one another as I have loved you..." "Be one." This motivation is religious in nature, but it has extraordinary effects in the field of education. The goal that has always been assigned to education (*to form the human person*, so as to render him or her independent)

is implemented, almost paradoxically, by *forming the person-in-relationship*, which for us means the *human person in the image of the Trinity*, one who is capable of continually transcending self in the context of the presence of Jesus in our midst.

It is through this spiritual and educational practice of *mutual love*, to the point of becoming completely one — a practice followed by all the members of the Movement, since all are called to live this communitarian experience in small groups — that we work towards the achievement of *the goal of all goals*, expressed in Jesus' prayer and testament: "May they all be one". As instruments under his guidance, we want to spend our lives for the realization of this goal which is at once a Utopia and a reality.

It is through this thorough educational process that we as individuals and as community become capable of meeting, entering into dialogue with, and working together with other persons, other Movements, and so on. And it is also through this in-depth educational process that — with God's grace — we can aspire to personal and communal sanctity.

Mary is an exceptional example of one who has put all the educational points I have mentioned into practice in her life.

Of course, Jesus is the one who fully lived out this pedagogical itinerary, in the dynamics of an experience that fully included both the life of the Trinity and the abandonment on the cross. In his earthly experience, he lived interpersonal relationships with exceptional intensity, expressing empathy, acceptance and hope; experiencing the struggle involved in educating, as well as a life of unity with the Father and with "his own." Clearly he is the most authentic and demanding witness of what it means to be an educator.

Religious and academic personalities, dear friends, I hope these points I have outlined have been sufficient to explain the educational experience that has emerged from the life of our Movement, and to help you appreciate how especially honored and delighted I am to receive this degree in education.

Thank you for your attention. May Jesus, the Teacher, form us all as true and effective educators.