



ANGELICVM

ROMA

PONTIFICIA UNIVERSITÀ S. TOMMASO D'AQUINO

Education: the only useful contribution of the Church to modern society?

7 Novembre 2023

16:30-19:00

Pontificia Università San Tommaso d'Aquino
Facoltà di Scienze Sociali
Largo Angelicum 1, Roma
Aula XI

- 16.30 Welcome and introduction
- 16.40 Lectio Magistralis of Friedrich Bechina, FSO
- 17.20 Respondents:
James Arthur (*Visiting Professor in the Faculty of Philosophy*)
Alejandro Crosthwaite, OP (*Professor in the Faculty of Social Sciences*)
Giuseppe Casale (*Professor in the Faculty of Social Sciences*)
- 17.50 Reply from Friedrich Bechina FSO
- 18.00 Discussion with the audience
- 18.30 Conclusions and aperitif



P. Friedrich BECHINA

Born in 1966 in Vienna (Austria). Doctor in Dogmatic Theology at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome. Ordained Priest in 1966, he has been involved in pastoral service and teaching in schools in Feldkirch (Austria) till 2001. From 2001 to 2022 he served at the Congregation for Catholic Education of the Holy See. From 2005 to 2015 he was in charge of the international relations of the Holy See in the field of Higher Education. He had been the Representative of the Holy See to the Bologna Process, the Council of Europe, the UNESCO Recognition Conventions and in various international organizations and initiatives regarding education and higher education. From 2013 to 2022 he was the Undersecretary of the Congregation for Catholic Education. Since 2022 he has served as a Personal Advisor to the Archbishop of Salzburg and to the Austrian Bishops Conference for International Higher Education and educational matters. He is a Research Associate of the Boston College Centre for Higher Education Studies, as well as a freelance international higher education expert and consultant in educational matters. He is a member of various Boards and Advisory Councils of Catholic Higher Education Institutions around the world.

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Abstract

The contribution of the Catholic Church and her institutions to education on a worldwide scale is quite impressive. With 220,000 Schools, 70,000,000 enrolled students and the most wide-ranging distribution of both, with some educational activity in nearly every country of the world, the Catholic Church is one of the most important, if not the only really global, players in Education.

But it is not only the statistics that indicate why Catholic schools are attractive all over the world. The usually high reputation of Catholic schools is linked to the special expectations of parents and students, which range from a safe place and a favourable learning environment for believers of the Catholic, and other, religions or those who adhere to certain sets of moral and cultural values, through to special needs or specific attention to groups for whom state schools do not seem to care sufficiently. In many countries, the latter groups are not only defined by special needs or by any kind of risk of discrimination, but could even be the sons and daughters of political and cultural elites who, because of their social advantages and typically excellent education, are likely to become themselves members of societal elites in the future. Throughout history, many Catholic schools have cared specifically about the formation of future leaders.

Times of crisis seem to make Catholic schools even more attractive, even to people who do not share the religious belief, practices and values of faith-based schools in general.

But this is only one side of the coin. In many countries, Catholic schools may find themselves under threat because of a lack of finances and resources within the Church and because of a decline in religious vocations, especially among congregations whose main charisma and apostolate has been, for centuries, to run schools and teach the youth. A not unimportant number of Bishops, Church leaders or the agencies they turn to for consultancy services to support the processes of Church reorganisation, consider education primarily as a cost and are tempted to consolidate budgets by reducing educational institutions and activities to save money. Others maintain that the sponsorship of schools is a too complex and risky endeavour in our time, a field where – because of the strong ties to state laws and regulations – an explicitly Catholic and catechetical identity may not be easily maintained. Conflicts between dioceses and religious orders or among Catholic groups from different political and ideological backgrounds may also create pressure to give up Catholic mainstream schools, sometimes in favour of new foundations, often quite weak and qualified by a rather narrow and specific view of what, and what exclusively, should be a “real” Catholic school.

Thus, Catholic schools and education at large are an incomparably important asset for the Church but reveal at the same moment a dilemma: between, on the one hand, investing in schools, which may adapt more and more to politically correct mainstream education and, on the other, tendencies within the Church to withdraw their educational activities into auto-referential echo-groups or ghettos without any significance in today’s societies. A pragmatic approach to this question could suggest to the Church to be happy both with a more popular area of activity, which may help to raise her reputation and to cultivate this reputation by providing what people are looking for, and, at the same time, to try to fulfil her “real mission” in other more inward focused areas, less popular and less visible.

But this problem is not just one of marketing or reputation management; it basically concerns the Church’s identity and mission in themselves. And the question of the right and fruitful relation to the world does not just concern education.

In its Pastoral Constitution, *Gaudium et spes* the Second Vatican Council tried to define the relationship between the Church and the world in a new way, according to the challenges of the present times. But maybe this new relationship has been accepted too easily, and in a rather simplistic way, sometimes probably also due to uncritically adapting to modern trends and common opinions. And a healthy and open discussion about differences and possible tensions as well as a constructive “apologetic” of the Church in the modern world has been missing in theological discussions.

From his early theological reflections, and especially in his best-seller, *Introduction to Christianity*, Joseph Ratzinger has presented a new approach to apologetics, which seems to relaunch the methodology of the early Church Fathers, engaging with the dominant philosophies and world-views as well as with the political discourse of their time. He continued to do this during his Pontificate as Pope Benedict XVI, especially in a number of speeches which he held in the big fora of the public arena like the UN Headquarters in New York, the Houses of Parliament in London, the Congress in Washington, the Deutsche Bundestag in Berlin or the Charles University in Prague. But also, his major encyclicals continue intensively the dialogue about the relationship between the modern World and the catholic Church. A condensed masterpiece of his argument may be found in a few articles of his social encyclical, *Caritas in veritate* (53-56). A more profound analysis of these passages may help to throw light not only on the general question about how the Church could interact with public authorities and civil society today – and vice versa. It may also help us reconsider the identity and mission of Catholic schools, not only as a useful marketing tool of the Church today, but also as an expression of her very essence and mission to a world which may need her more than it is immediately visible.
