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PANDEMIC AND CHALLENGES FOR EDUCATION

Children and adolescents dealing with Covid19

A “parallel” pandemic

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the lives of children and adolescents requires a focus on what has been called a “parallel pandemic.” Even if its effects are not immediately evident, all over the world the psychosocial stress that children are subjected to as a result of the pandemic has resulted in distress and illnesses that have widely differing consequences based on age and social and environmental conditions.[1]

This parallel pandemic, which affects generations just when they are developing the energies that will fuel their imaginations and deal with the future, will have a profound impact on the psychology of the youth, especially adolescents. The disorientation following from pandemic cannot fail to attract the attention of adults. But even though the question has been raised many times, the effects of the pandemic have not yet become a central theme of youth development. And the principal directions the current debate do not show an adequate commitment to taking on the task. Children and young people, to the extent they can, are showing us that, in spite of everything, they are hoping and implicitly trusting us to deal with the current slowdown with the resilience and creativity that are necessary for the slowdown to be a learning experience. . Not all we do must be a return to “the way it was.” For good practices to return, we must “come to terms” with practices where we have not taken sufficient account of the common good and individual vulnerability.

With this Note, the Pontifical Academy for Life, in the exercise of its mission to protect and promote life, wants to take advantage of the experience of recent months and be aware of the positive resources that have been developed during the pandemic, identifying some particularly fragile and problematic areas in order to face the immediate future with that hope that the younger generations deserve.

1. The resources that children and adolescents have during Covid

Children and young people, in a situation that even adults are finding unprecedented, all-encompassing and traumatic are showing a mature ability to be sensitized to and involved in the understanding and interpretation of the pandemic and its effects. Among the youngest, just when greater understanding of reality is being acquired, their **sensitivity** to questions and answers concerning pain, illness and treatment increases. This sensitivity represents a first and important step in the development of a moral conscience. It is not true that children, including very young ones, lack a sense of empathy and the ability to understand the pain of others: they perceive pain as a morally relevant experience. Empathy is a human quality that always reveals itself and always surprises. No matter how lacking in experience and relevant applications, conscience is acting from the beginning. From the first years of life, we perceive in depth the influence of good and evil as an inescapable theme that gives meaning to life. It is mysterious – and often enigmatic as well – but , this sensitivity to the moral quality of life envelops us from infancy. When confronting death, children show a surprising understanding of the mysteriousness of this passage as well as of the uninterrupted closeness that it represents. The very concept of God brings to mind spontaneously a sense of complete, caring, and tender belonging An inborn awareness of Love, a trusting recognition of the Father that even babies are capable of. [2]

During these tragic months, the **resilience**[3] that characterizes younger generations has emerged. The youth have continued to launch themselves toward the future, despite destabilizing events, the difficult conditions, the sometimes even serious traumas. We have seen the implementation of resistance to gravely negative events thanks to the strength of inner resources and external support structures. Young people know how to resist. Children and young people are subject psychological distress and even though they are resilient; they should not be left to their own devices. Traumatic events must be put into a context that recognizes the meaning and significance of shared human experiences that have been rendered harmful because traumatic. The exercise of empathic dialogue and appropriate narrative recounting provide necessary attention and sharing in the form of intra-familial cooperation and collaboration between parents and local communities, as well in the dissemination and wider distribution of stories and encounters that give meaning, direction, and orientation to lived-out experiences.

Reconstructing events also provides an opportunity to develop in children a **trust for science**. Faced with diseases such as Covid-19, human intelligence is finding answers that respect the principles governing scientific research. The younger generations, raised in a highly technological and scientifically explainable world, can be helped to recognize that science is a process of success and failure that brings us closer to the truth. At the same time, when ideological denials of the value of scientific research are emerging, the pandemic presents a significant opportunity to reaffirm the value and nobility of the human being and of the gift of one's own intellectual abilities. The formulation of effective vaccines was, in addition, a result of the sharing of transnational scientific expertise and of public and private financial resources that allowed for distribution of vaccines without charge. These processes are characteristic of the globalized world, and we have a responsibility to point them out as positives and opportunities.

2. Four serious and urgent challenges

The continuing nature of the pandemic worldwide requires us to face the near future with a specific and shared acceptance of responsibility for the younger generations. Four areas to which it is necessary to pay particular attention are:

2.1 Re-Open schools as fully as possible

The decision to close schools, implemented in different ways and at different times around the world, was justified by the scientific community on the basis of a perceived need to avoid the spread of contagion. Experience with previous epidemics has shown the effectiveness of this measure in achieving infection control and a flattening of the contagion curve. On the other hand, one cannot fail to emphasize the seriousness of such a measure, which in the future will have to be considered as only the last resort, to be adopted in extreme cases and only after having tried other epidemic control measures, such as different arrangements of the classrooms, pupil transportation, scholastic life and classroom schedules.

Where, in fact, containment measures have forced children to the continued---and often unpredictable---practice of remote learning, the impoverishment of academic development, the loss of formative relationships intellectual learning and the deprivation of formative relationships have become well-known phenomena. This awareness does not prevent us from appreciating the technological means we have at our disposal to preserve teaching opportunities and pupil socialization. We must be grateful for the resources that the internet provides and hope that they will be strengthened in areas of the world where they are still weak. Yet it is clear that the internet is not in itself sufficient. Then too, we shouldn't rule out the possibility that such extreme electronic deprivation would perhaps have stimulated a more creative and ingenious response. In many countries, even now, the drastic lack of possibilities for schooling is overcome by the striking obstinacy of young pupils who walk miles to reach school and itinerant teachers who teach small groups of pupils in their own villages, getting there by the most diverse means.

However, what many are seeing---educators, clinicians, parents and social workers---is growing frustration and disorientation among, in particular, adolescents. This situation is aggravated by precedent poverty and social hardship. Education relationships as well as social relationships lack multidimensional interaction, and this has a negative impact on the perception of the quality of life, on the motivations of personal formation, and on the care for social responsibility. We must emphasize that daily school attendance is not just an educational tool. For everyone, but particularly adolescents, it is where "life" --- relationships, friendly ties and affective education---is learned. The closure of schools has severed many social relations or at least severely disrupted them.

With respect to re-opening the schools, another five points (which are negative) are to be considered:

- 1) In the countries of the Global South, the rate of **early school-leaving** has grown to a troubling extent as a result of school closures. It is estimated that at least 10 million children in the world today will not return to school. Many of them become victims of social conditions that force them into child labor and exploitation.[4]
- 2) The risk of a significant loss of acquired skills and knowledge has increased. Closings have limited access to education, accentuating the inequalities due to the "**digital divide**"[5] identified with remote learning, with the reduced ability of parents to support their children in remote learning, and with the inequalities related to differing types of housing.
- 3) The daily caloric intake of children who live in areas where school lunches are provided has been reduced, thus aggravating situations of economic[6]disadvantage, which have as well increased due to the economic crisis generated by the pandemic. To the contrary, in more developed parts of the world the closure of schools affects lifestyles that are unhealthy by reason of diet and reduced physical activity. Short term weight gain,[7] even modest, can have long-term health consequences (especially a higher incidence of diabetes and cardiovascular diseases). Further, the discontinuance of athletic activities has had a negative impact on human physicality, mental acuity, and relationships.
- 4) The **impact on the psycho-physical, psychological, and social health** of children and on the social interaction generated by the closure of schools has generated anxiety disorders, depression and stress. In addition, the closure of fitness centers and social distancing measures have led to a reduction in physical activity – recommended by the World Health Organization to last at least sixty minutes a day for children aged between 5 and 17 years – resulting in frequent weight gain and negativities for mental health. A reduction in outdoor activity by children is associated with vitamin D deficiency and a worsening of myopia. Moreover, the limitation of physical activity during the COVID-19 pandemic was greater in children whose families had to face economic difficulties or were subjected to greater psychological stress.[8][9][10][11]
- 5) The closure of schools has increased addiction to the internet, video games or television (**binge watching**). The **dramatic restriction of outdoor play** has had serious consequences. Neuroscientific studies show that when limiting the experiences of play and exploration, an over-stimulation of the areas expressing sadness and fear prevails, with negative effects on the development of the child.[12]

Faced with this dramatic situation, the pervasive and worldwide adoption of vaccine therapies and other

preventive measures will not—by itself—solve the problem. Reacquisition of the formational richness of social and mental interaction that is the mark of fundamental learning and research communities is a matter for cultural innovation, and not just for economic policies or resource allocation.

Young people help us out here too. Mandatory school closings have made us realize how important it is to “go to” school. Young people today believe reopening is a goal to be achieved because they sense its educational and social value. Proof is the good results of vaccination campaigns targeting young people and adolescents. Technology, which has been very useful, particularly in the most developed countries and in cities, has revealed the importance of a good and wise use of the internet and of the resources it makes available. The future of school systems will benefit from a wider exchange of skills and knowledge, made possible thanks to innumerable links, online instruction, and sharing capabilities, all these widely used during the pandemic.

2.2 Safeguarding family relationships

The necessary expansion of life activities within the family circle has offered the opportunity to rediscover **shared time as an opportunity**, a time to be valued and used fully, to bear much fruit. The pandemic challenges parents and families as educators. A sudden and striking closeness between parents and children restores to the family an understanding of its responsibilities. Parents are realizing with imagination creativity a renewed presence in the lives of their **children**. Parenting isn't just about sending one's children to school and making sure that they actually go. The closure of schools has returned **vocation to be parents and grandparents** to the heart of the family. Parents play the primary role in raising children and particularly in helping them overcome the difficulties they experience in the new situation. This period of pandemic offers an opportunity to reexamine challenge of education, starting with families.

At the same time, studies show how the pandemic has revealed the limitations of family experiences, with the lifestyle and housing contexts in which they are inserted. Domestic violence (including that due to the economic stress that weighs on families) has, in some countries, experienced a 40-50% increase, while according to trustworthy data requests for government assistance increased by 20% just in the first days of lockdowns.^[13] Worrying signs of **behavioral disorders** have been noted worldwide. The **increase in parental stress** after prolonged lockdowns has a direct impact on the psychological well-being of children. It is unthinkable to face the coming winter months without adequate support (social, cultural, urban, economic) for families, who will continue to be called upon to bear the many consequences of the pandemic.^[14]

2.3 Education toward universal fraternity

Since the beginning of 2020, the whole world has been focused on an epochal problem of universal scope. This universal scope also includes an **educational challenge**. A tendency to limit cultural formation within educational horizons that are too provincial risks eliminating broad and international dimensions. The phenomenon of Covid-19 represents a valuable opportunity to educators. Communicating the origin, effects and consequences of the pandemic means rethinking educational tools in a way that helps children discover and inhabit the world, not to feel like strangers, to understand it. They are challenged to educate to a world-wide dimension, to fraternity with all. We are “connected” not only and not really much because we have the internet but because we are all inhabitants of the same “common home.” Pope Francis writes in *Laudato si’*(92): “*We can hardly consider ourselves to be fully loving if we disregard any aspect of reality: ‘Peace, justice and the preservation of creation are three absolutely interconnected themes, which cannot be separated and treated individually without once again falling into reductionism.’ Everything is related, and we human beings are united as brothers and sisters on a wonderful pilgrimage, woven together by the love God has for each of his creatures and which also unites us....*” We are at the theological heart of that genuine witness of Christian fraternity shown in preaching a God who is a friend to man and who calls all humankind His “friends” (Jn 15:15).

It is necessary to teach the younger generations not to flee the prospects of globalization, the achievements of science, the ecological challenge, the economic and social perspective with its inequalities, the role of social media and technology. We can no longer, and should no longer, just complain that our children are closed in on themselves and within narrow cultural boundaries, outside the world and its problems. With the pandemic the

whole world has entered every home--that of the wealthiest and oldest countries as well as that of those that are youngest but still developing. It is up to the world of educators to translate all this and value it so that the new generations might open their eyes and become more aware of the world and of their responsibility as citizens and believers.

2.4 Transmitting faith in the God of life

We cannot deny that even with many virtuous examples of creativity and renewed pastoral imagination, the pandemic has proved to be a serious source of stress for too many ecclesial realities and has generated, not infrequently and with some reason, a suspension of educational activities ordinarily offered by Christian communities to children and young people. Our recent experiences require, for the immediate future, a dutiful and urgent re-thinking of the pastoral care of the younger generations.

The pandemic itself, as a complex event, needs to be considered an opportunity to deepen and focus on themes of enormous importance for education in the faith. Covid-19 offers the opportunity to propose to the youngest children themes that perhaps have been left too much at the margins of pastoral care before the pandemic broke out: Where does evil come from? Where is God in this pandemic? What is the healthy and balanced relationship that the Church proposes between science and faith? What pages of Scripture help us understand these times? What can we say in the face of this illness, and what can we do to accompany the sick? These are some questions whose answers, if sought and found together with children, in a way that is appropriate and respectful of differing age groups, will undoubtedly constitute a source and an opportunity for growth in the faith.

The pandemic, moreover, by keeping us at home, has re-proposed the home and the family as a “sapiential space” of assimilation and participation in the faith, where there are gestures and words that support, arouse and respond to the profound questions our children raise. To this end, it is urgent to work so that, within the Christian community, families emerge as “network nodes” on the paths of formation and accompaniment. That way, families will give better witness of the link between family life and community life, than does an individual family dealing with the parish administration. In this way, we will begin to heal and life of the community and that within the walls of the home, we will begin to heal and bridge the excessive distance that—even before the pandemic—has separated the life of the community from the life within the four walls of the family home, and has impoverished both. In fact, this is what Pope Francis refers to in *Amoris Laetitia* (279): “*To help expand the parental relationship to broader realities, ‘Christian communities are called to offer support to the educational mission of families,’ particularly through the catechesis associated with Christian initiation. To foster an integral education, we need to ‘renew the covenant between the family and the Christian community’*”.

Conclusion

The roots of the Church's educational concern for her youngest children reach into the very pages of the Gospel.

“And people were bringing children to him that he might touch them, but the disciples rebuked them. When Jesus saw this, he became indignant and said to them, ‘Let the children come to me; do not prevent them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Amen, I say to you, whoever does not accept the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it.’ Then he embraced them and blessed them, placing his hands on them.” (Mk 10:13-16)

The disciples did not want the children to approach Jesus, but He rebuked them. Human society sometimes appears more like a wicked stepmother than a mother. It leaves the little ones alone and without answers; and the answers it offers are often dangerous and harmful.

The Catholic Church, learning from the experience of the pandemic, points out the urgency of removing the serious obstacles that prevent, in the world, a healthy and positive entry of children and adolescents into society, and calls for the creation of all the conditions necessary for this to happen. Children must attend school. Let the children go to school! This is the renewed appeal that comes from the pandemic. Let the school be a healthy environment, where knowledge and the science of life together, and of relationships, are learned. Let the little

ones have good teachers, aware of the talents of each pupil, able to be patient and to listen.

It is also necessary to feel in our hearts – and in our pastoral action – the commitment to bringing the young to Jesus and to teaching them in His school. Let the children know Jesus, healer of souls and bodies, let them go to Him with their questions, their resilience and their own journey of faith. The pandemic has reminded everyone of the need to face the authentic and heartfelt questions of young people that are their response to a sudden and collective evil. Addressing the answers to these questions as part of the initiation into the faith is an opportunity not to be missed. The Covid-19 epidemic is a global phenomenon that once again lays down the challenge of opening minds and hearts to a broad and world-wide reality. Pope Francis reminded us of this in his message of October 15, 2020, on the occasion of the Global Compact on Education: “*We also know that the journey of life calls for hope grounded in solidarity. All change requires a process of education in order to create new paradigms capable of responding to the challenges and problems of the contemporary world, of understanding and finding solutions to the needs of every generation, and in this way contributing to the flourishing of humanity now and in the future.*”

Vatican City, December 22, 2021

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