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## The Reception of Vatican II and Catholic education in France

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As already underlined by the previous speakers, the reception in France of the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II) within the Catholic education community is far from being devoid of complexities. The paradox is that it was only loosely based on the Declaration of the Council on Catholic Education, *Gravissimum educationis*, a text that was largely unknown, while at the same time benefiting from the major lessons of Vatican II, notably in the fields of Revelation theology and ecclesiology. Thus these texts, only indirectly concerned by educational matters, were to have a significant influence on the way people thought about Catholic education in France.

My intention here is to show how the dogmatic and pastoral lessons of Vatican II have led, in the French context, to groundbreaking contemplation centred on Catholic education. That said, I cannot do so without paying attention to the effective reception of *Gravissimum educationis*. This will form the first phase of my analysis.

### **1.- The divergent reactions to *Gravissimum educationis***

It must be acknowledged that the *Gravissimum educationis* Declaration by no means caused a gap in the way Catholic education was perceived in France, before and after its promulgation. Few people have read it, and few people have commented on it. It is clearly one of the least innovative and least inspiring texts of the Council, as noted by Professor Gerald Grace in his 2013 article in *The Pastoral Review*<sup>1</sup>. Theologian Joseph Ratzinger described it as “unfortunately, a rather weak document” and observed: “One unfortunately has to say that the text wasn’t treated by the council fathers with any specific affection.”<sup>2</sup>

However, the impact of the Declaration is far from negligible at a moment in French history that saw the separation of Church and state, and bears the scars of the conflicts surrounding education that marked the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

### **A specifically French context**

The history of Catholic education in France bears the traces of a series of tense periods throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>3</sup>, setting against one another antireligious lay factions (the likes of Combes and Ferry) and intransigent Catholics (Veillot, d’Alzon)<sup>4</sup>. These arose directly from the profound rifts caused by the French Revolution and from a number of decrees: that of

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<sup>1</sup>Gerald Grace, “From *Gravissimum Educationis* (1965) to *The Catholic School* (1977). The Late Flowering of Aggiornamento in Catholic Education Thinking”, in *The Pastoral Review* 9 (2013/3) pp. 22-27.

<sup>2</sup>Joseph Ratzinger, *Theological Highlights of Vatican II*, New York, Paulist Press, 1966, pp. 254 and 116.

<sup>3</sup>Cf. Bernard Poucet, *La liberté sous contrat. Une histoire de l’enseignement privé*, Paris, Fabert, 2009, 254 p.

<sup>4</sup>Cf. Jean-Marie Mayeur, “La guerre scolaire, ancienne ou nouvelle histoire?”, in *Vingtième siècle. Revue d’histoire*, 5 (1985), pp. 101-110.

November 2 1789 transferring all Church property to the nation; February 13 1790 banning monastic religious orders; and August 18 1792 banning secular congregations, notably in education. France then underwent, throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century and in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the effects of a secularisation policy affecting all areas of life, particularly schooling. Notable events in the educational sphere were the expulsions of religious men and women in 1880 and 1903 and the secularisation of teaching staff in 1904 by the Act of July 7, providing that no teaching of any order and of any nature be entrusted to congregations.

### **The lessons of *Divini illius Magistri***

Against such a background, the encyclical letter of Pius XI on Christian education of December 31 1929, *Divini illius Magistri*, takes on a rather particular hue<sup>5</sup>. It reinforces the position of the Church, opposing the state's claim to a monopoly on education in France. The encyclical underlines the primacy of the Church in education and claims moral superiority vis-à-vis civil and secular bodies regarding such matters. It states: "The Church is independent of any sort of earthly power as well in the origin as in the exercise of her mission as educator, not merely in regard to her proper end and object, but also in regard to the means necessary and suitable to attain that end" (n° 18), and: "The extent of the Church's mission in the field of education is such as to embrace every nation, without exception, according to the command of Christ: 'Teach ye all nations' (Matt. 28: 19) and there is no power on earth that may lawfully oppose her or stand in her way" (n° 25).

Thus the teachings of Pius XI may be construed in France as defending Catholic schooling against republican schooling. It can also be seen as calling upon French Catholics to take a radical stand against secular schooling: "The so-called 'neutral' or 'lay' school, from which religion is excluded, is contrary to the fundamental principles of education. Such a school moreover cannot exist in practice; it is bound to become irreligious. There is no need to repeat what Our Predecessors have declared on this point, especially Pius IX and Leo XIII, at times when laicism was beginning in a special manner to infest the public school. We renew and confirm their declarations, as well as the Sacred Canons in which the frequenting of non-Catholic schools, whether neutral or mixed, those namely which are open to Catholics and non-Catholics alike, is forbidden for Catholic children" (n° 79).

### **How true is *Gravissimum educationis* to the teachings of Pius XI?**

Regarding this last point, calling for a radicalisation of Catholics, the lessons of *Gravissimum educationis* must be closely analysed. The first disadvantage of the Declaration is its overt resemblance to the teachings of Pius XI, universally noted by its commentators. Thus Brian Kilty sees in *Gravissimum educationis* a broad "rerun"<sup>6</sup> of *Divini illius Magistri*, while André Lanfrey notes "a greater difference in the tone than in the content"<sup>7</sup>. Furthermore, the intent is the same: to reassert the Church's rights in educational matters and the need for Catholic education.

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<sup>5</sup>Among the commentaries on *Divini illius Magistri*, see Francesco Casella, "Punti nodali della riflessione pedagogica dalla *Divini Illius Magistri* alla *Gravissimum Educationis*", in *Orientamenti pedagogici*, 54 (2007/2) pp. 293-304 and Hubert André, "L'évolution de la pensée pontificale sur l'éducation, de Pie XI à Paul VI", in Guy Avanzini (ed.), *Pédagogie chrétienne, Pédagogues chrétiens*, Paris, Éd. Don Bosco, 1995, pp. 501-507.

<sup>6</sup>Brian Kilty, "Toward a Theology of Catholic Education", in *Religious Education* 94 (1999/1) p. 11.

<sup>7</sup>André Lanfrey, Article "Doctrines catholiques de l'éducation", in Guy Avanzini (ed.), *Dictionnaire historique de l'éducation chrétienne d'expression française*, Paris, Éd. Don Bosco, 2001, p. 188.

However, in France, in 1965, the mood was not one of confrontation. The ordeal of the First World War made it possible to envisage more harmonious relations between Church and state on educational matters. The relations became more stable due to a lasting compromise leading to a declaration in the Debré Act of December 31 1959 “on relations between the state and private educational establishments”<sup>8</sup>. This Act acknowledges the Catholic school system as a partner of the French state in its vocation of providing education as a public service. This partnership takes the form of a contract enabling Catholic schools to engage in “a process of contribution to the educational service of the nation”<sup>9</sup>. Although this compromise is fragile, it now dates back 65 years, a longevity implying a certain respectability.

Within this new context, if *Gravissimum educationis* were only a reiteration of Pius XI’s teachings, the question of its reception in Christian education in France would not even arise. But while the proposals contained in *Gravissimum educationis* are not devoid of originality, the text does not arouse passionate debate. It is the statement of fairly general principles<sup>10</sup>, as made clear in its introduction: “Hence this sacred synod declares certain fundamental principles of Christian education especially in schools. These principles will have to be developed at greater length by a special post-conciliar commission and applied by episcopal conferences to varying local situations.”

Rather than undertaking a study of the text and its reception in France, it would be more relevant to consider the Second Vatican Council as a whole. As Marguerite Léna suggests, the question of education permeates the entire Council, and *Gravissimum educationis* can only be considered in the light of the anthropological, dogmatic, pastoral and ecclesiological teachings of Vatican II<sup>11</sup>. My purpose here is to demonstrate this by exploring the two areas I consider decisive for Catholic education in contemporary France, namely anthropology and ecclesiology.

## 2.- The anthropological question in education

Broaching Christian anthropology in such a limited time is a hazardous undertaking in that this particular anthropology is the result of practice and empirical assessment rather than a pre-established discourse about humankind. Christian anthropology is not a branch of metaphysics arising from a concept of humankind to be juxtaposed with other rival concepts. In this respect, in education, it is not an array of criteria for human success based on a frame of reference provided by the Gospel.

Christian anthropology is a practice informed by the Gospel: it is the expression of a vocation, both an appeal and a questioning of humankind. It arises from a convincing answer to the question “How to live?”, in the words of Cardinal Ratzinger in 2000<sup>12</sup>. It is made up of a set of practices that the Church implements to serve humanity in the name of the evangelical principle restated by this same Cardinal Ratzinger, later Benedict XVI, for whom the truth revealed is a performative truth: “The Christian message is not only ‘informative’ but ‘performative’. That means: the Gospel is not merely a communication of things that can be known – it is one that makes things happen and is life-changing” (*Spe salvi* 2). Christian

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<sup>8</sup> *Journal officiel*, January 2 1960, p. 218.

<sup>9</sup> *Statut de l’Enseignement catholique de France*, June 1 2013, Art. 13.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Henri Derroitte, “De la déclaration *Gravissimum Educationis* à nos jours – Réflexions sur l’éducation chrétienne”, in *Revue Théologique de Louvain* 45 (2014/3) pp. 360-388.

<sup>11</sup> Marguerite Léna, “L’éducation à la lumière du Concile Vatican II”, in *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* 109 (1987/4) pp. 574-586 (here pp. 575-576).

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, “Address to Catechists and Religion Teachers – Jubilee of Catechists”, December 12 2000.

anthropology is thus a questioning that alters one's course, leading one to fulfilment, and as such cannot be a limitative concept of humankind.

### **Education as a service to humankind**

In the educational field, the starting point is a particularly overarching assertion: education is a service to mankind that contributes to the fulfilment of the individual and the construction of human society. My purpose here is to concentrate on the teachings of *Gravissimum educationis*: “[The Church] does all she can to promote for all peoples the complete perfection of the human person, the good of earthly society and the building of a world that is more human” (*GE* 3).

For the Church, the service of human beings and societies comprises a solid educational dimension bringing together the service of truth, the conversion of individuals and the evangelical transformation of the world. The fundamental perspective here is that of the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et spes*, teaching that “The truth is that only in the mystery of the incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light” (*GS* 22). Yet once again, this mystery is not a discourse, but an implementation of the Gospel: “By no human law can the personal dignity and liberty of man be so aptly safeguarded as by the Gospel of Christ which has been entrusted to the Church. For this Gospel announces and proclaims the freedom of the sons of God, and repudiates all the bondage which ultimately results from sin (cf. Rom. 8: 14-17); it has a sacred reverence for the dignity of conscience and its freedom of choice, constantly advises that all human talents be employed in God's service and men's, and, finally, commends all to the charity of all (cf. Matt. 22: 39).”

### **Anthropology as an appeal addressed to humankind**

This would be the right moment to determine why Christian anthropology cannot be reduced to mere discourse. Stating, as does *Gaudium et spes*, that “only in the mystery of the incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light” (*GS* 22) would be a shocking claim if the Church were asserting that it knew all about the very essence of humankind and that all we needed to do to ensure salvation was follow its instructions.

Here is where the reception in France of Vatican II shows its particular characteristics. It is in the way the Church undertakes its educational mission that it shows its understanding of humankind. It does so through the virtues it propounds. In Catholic education, rather than highlighting common values<sup>13</sup>, it is a question of putting the Gospel into practice.

In France, the *Statut de l'Enseignement catholique* set out “the characteristics of Catholic education”<sup>14</sup>, asserting it is “dedicated to human dignity” (Article 36), to the “freedom of conscience” (Article 37), and “particularly considerate of the poor and the weak” (Articles 38-39). This text, the seminal reference for Catholic schools, rather than advocating virtues, encourages putting the Gospel into practice. By thus presenting the characteristics of Catholic education, the *Statut* sets forth a more fundamental reality: “Christ is the foundation of the whole educational enterprise in a Catholic school”<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup>On the issue of values, see the debate between Luc Ferry and Henri-Jérôme Gagey, in Henri-Jérôme Gagey, *La vérité s'accomplit*, Paris, Bayard, collection “Theologia”, 2009, 288 p. See notably Chapter VIII: “Un cas d'humanisme post-chrétien”, pp. 167-190. See also: François Moog, *À quoi sert l'école catholique – Sa mission d'évangélisation dans la société actuelle*, Paris, Bayard, 2012, pp. 92-101.

<sup>14</sup>Part I, Section 5 (Article 36-43).

<sup>15</sup>Congregation for Catholic Education, *The Catholic School* (1977) § 34.

Catholic education depends on an entity both requiring the Catholic school to be a school founded on love and acting within it enable it to deploy all its best efforts in the name of love. The work of Christ towards salvation, guiding all educational practices, opens up broad perspectives for Catholic education.

This is where the principle mentioned earlier comes to the fore: Christian anthropology is the expression of a vocation, not so much a philosophy as an existential questioning of the individual. As Marguerite Léna so perspicaciously puts it: “For the Christian faith, the humanity of our race is neither an abstract ideal nor a pure empirical concept; it is not an idea based on reason, self-sufficient and inaccessible, and yet is not diffused among the infinite meanders of history. It is the space whence comes the call, the domain of convergence: its profoundest essence is that of a vocation.”<sup>16</sup>

Portuguese exegete and poet Jose Tolentino Mendonça, in his *Petit traité de l'amitié*<sup>17</sup>, dwells on the question God asks man in Gen. 3: 9: “Where are you?” A rather curious question coming from an omniscient God. Tolentino draws two conclusions from this. The first is that God seeks us and awaits us, which lays for us the foundations of an anthropology based on promise. The second is that man alone is able to say where he is. In this respect, we can understand that Christian anthropology is centred on questioning and injunction rather than answers. “Where are you?” (Gen. 3: 9), “What do you want me to do for you?” (Mark 10: 51) and “Where is your brother Abel?” (Gen. 4: 9) are some examples.

### **Education as a constitutive practice**

The next phase is to determine the coherence between a definition of Christian anthropology and the educational aspirations of the Church. It is a question, to borrow Marguerite Léna's expression, of situating, recognising and rethinking education “at the point of human emergence”<sup>18</sup>. And, I should add, of the individual who is called upon to recognise, who is questioned on, and encouraged to share the truth on love.

For Christian anthropology is not a mere discourse, rather the manifestation of human life sublimated by grace and that brings about change in the world through the social exercise of charity; Christian – and more particularly Catholic – education is one of the practices through which the Church transforms, by humanising it, “the family of man and its history” (*GS* 40 § 3).

But how do educational practices proceed with such humanisation? In several ways. First, by being a practice guided by the Word of God and the celebration of the sacraments. For “The Catholic school loses its purpose without constant reference to the Gospel and a frequent encounter with Christ”<sup>19</sup>. Second, by being a school that develops charitable practices<sup>20</sup>: by setting up a system of fraternal collaboration among members of educational communities (cf. *GE* 8), by encouraging each and every one to find fulfilment in the love of truth by the combined development of head and heart (cf. *GE* 2 and 10), by enabling all individuals to grow and live in truth in love, to use the delightful expression that the *Statut de l'enseignement catholique en France* borrows from Saint Paul (cf. Article 43, referring to Eph. 4: 15).

The Gospel guides these educational practices in the sense presented in the Acts of the Apostles, Chapter 10,. In this passage, Peter must explain the Christian faith to Cornelius the

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<sup>16</sup>Marguerite Léna, *L'esprit de l'éducation*, Paris, Parole et Silence, 2004, p. 37.

<sup>17</sup>Jose Tolentino Mendonça, *Petit traité de l'amitié*, Paris, Salvator, 2014, p. 19.

<sup>18</sup>Marguerite Léna, *L'esprit de l'éducation*, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

<sup>19</sup>Congregation for Catholic Education, “The Catholic School” (1977) § n° 55.

<sup>20</sup>Cf. Henri-Jérôme Gagey, “Face à la crise anthropologique, les ressources de l'Eglise ?”, in *La Documentation Catholique*, 2516 (October 2014), pp. 123 *et seq.*

Centurion, presenting Jesus thus: “He went around doing good” (Acts 10: 38). So our schools must be incubators of these charitable works, training and forming men and women able to “go around doing good”. They must be sources of new forms of *savoir-vivre* dedicated to freeing men and women of our time, and concurrently of a society based on justice and peace in the name of the Kingdom. Catholic schools will thus be for our whole society schools of hope, moulding men and women seeking to live in the service of humanity.

This perspective is clearly the way Vatican II was received in the field of education in France.

### **3.- Ecclesiological perspectives**

The other area I consider decisive for Catholic education in France given the reception of Vatican II is that of ecclesiology. Both the nature and the structure of the Church are invoked for the renewal of the concept of Catholic schooling in France, along with its implementation. From this standpoint, the 2013 *Statut de l'enseignement catholique* is a quite remarkable example of how the Second Vatican Council was received. I should like to approach this from two angles: first, the sacramental dimension in the mission of Catholic education and second, the educational community.

#### **The sacramental dimension in the mission of education**

The presentation of the Church as a “sacrament of Salvation” set forth in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen gentium* (LG 1, 9 and 48) and elaborated on in *Gaudium et spes*, has a considerable impact on educational matters. It focuses on the Gospel and on faith as a source of initiatives. The Church thus defines itself as possessing specific resources for the good of humanity, particularly with regard to awareness of freedoms, the development of conscience and the application of fraternal practices. In these terms, Catholic education is an irreplaceable means of making these resources available to the greatest number in the name of a social responsibility inherent in the Christian faith.

This is evangelisation, when our social structure, itself built up in the name of the Gospel, engenders humanity in humanity itself. In education, this perspective of evangelisation is and must be a priority. As an ecclesial entity, Catholic education must answer the call to missionary commitment addressed in *Gaudium et spes* 9: “The modern world shows itself at once powerful and weak, capable of the noblest deeds or the foulest; before it lies the path to freedom or to slavery, to progress or retreat, to brotherhood or hatred. Moreover, man is becoming aware that it is his responsibility to guide aright the forces which he has unleashed and which can enslave him or minister to him. That is why he is putting questions to himself.”

This passage sets us at the heart of the awareness the Church has of itself and of its mission. In it, the Church presents itself as being at the service of humanity in our times since, as expressed in the introduction to *Gaudium et spes*, “The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts” (GS 1). From an ecclesologically fundamental viewpoint, service to today’s humankind is not an option: it is part and parcel of the faith that the Church’s mission is to be “a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race” (LG, n° 1).

In GS 9, the life of modern humankind is presented with the pivotal question of its orientation as its starting point. It is in this discernment, in the choice of a just orientation in human life, that the mission of the Church finds its true purpose. Here is also the convergence between the evangelical mission as a work of humanisation and the educational mission as guidance

for humankind towards fulfilment. The imperative of this educational mission thus becomes clear.

### **The educational community**

The second aspect bears on the subjects of this educational mission brought together in a school community the Congregation for Catholic Education goes so far as to describe as a “genuine and proper instrument of the Church”<sup>21</sup>

The challenge for Catholic education is to define the educational community on the basis of all those involved in schooling in various capacities: “teachers, parents, pupils, administrative personnel”<sup>22</sup>, then to assert that the community as a whole forms the objective of the Church’s mission, while accepting that this community is made up of individuals with divergent relationships with the Christian faith. Some are followers, others are indifferent, while still others have no sympathy for the Church whatsoever.

This is the challenge taken up by the *Statut de l’enseignement catholique en France* in Article 33: “To accomplish its educational mission following in Christ’s footsteps, the Church calls upon all willing men and women. It asks them to contribute to the common good. Within the Catholic education system, everyone makes different yet complementary contributions: pupils, students, trainees, interns, parents, professionals (teachers, social workers, salaried workers and volunteers, parish workers, administrative and technical personnel), etc., be they lay workers, acolytes or ordained ministers. All take part in accomplishing this educational mission according to their attributed roles. All take part in the same educational scheme.”

To maintain this challenge in a truly Christian perspective, it is essential to take into consideration the Second Vatican Council. *Lumen gentium* and *Gaudium et spes* lay out precious guidelines so as consider that non-Christian members of the educational community are not excluded from the grace abundantly extended over the world: since the creation of the world, each individual has been included in the journey towards communion with God. And through His death and resurrection, Christ reshapes humanity with a view to salvation. In this context, the educational community can be seen as a unified entity within the ecclesial mission, with the ecclesial and fraternal blessing of those who are not baptised and who agree to make their indispensable contribution to the accomplishment of the Catholic educational mission.

This is notably made possible by *Lumen gentium* 16, which states that “those who have not yet received the Gospel are related in various ways to the people of God”; “nor is God far distant from those who in shadows and images seek the unknown God, for it is He who gives to all men life and breath and all things, (cf. Acts 17: 25-28) and as Saviour wills that all men be saved (cf. 2 Tim: 4).” This is the even more fundamental perspective of *GS* 22: “All this holds true not only for Christians, but for all men of good will in whose hearts grace works in an unseen way. (31) For, since Christ died for all men, (32) and since the ultimate vocation of man is in fact one, and divine, we ought to believe that the Holy Spirit in a manner known only to God offers to every man the possibility of being associated with this paschal mystery.” The authoritative assertion that the Holy Spirit – giving life to each man created in God’s image – makes it possible for everyone to be linked with the death and resurrection of Christ clearly singles out those who have agreed to be bathed in the baptismal waters, but does not disqualify others. It enables the baptised and the non-baptised to work together on a common ecclesial mission at the service of humankind and of the Kingdom, in the name of the vocation of the Holy Spirit present in them all. For this pronouncement makes us broaden our

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<sup>21</sup>Congregation for Catholic Education, “The religious dimension of education in a Catholic school – guidelines for reflection and renewal” (1988) n° 33.

<sup>22</sup>Congregation for Catholic Education, “The Catholic School” (1977) § 61.



concepts of the Spirit, whose presence and actions bear not only upon individuals, but also the history, societies, cultures and religions of the world. Then it becomes possible to conceive of Catholic education as a unified educational community underpinned by the ecclesial mission.

### **By way of a conclusion**

It is easy to see how the Second Vatican Council in its entirety has enabled Catholic education to define the challenges raised by the prevailing circumstances, to be open to the call of God and man, mobilising the resources of faith so as to contribute to the fulfilment of humankind and its history.

But in this field, the Church cannot be content with mere discourse. As mentioned earlier, the Gospel has a performative dimension when it comes to changing the world. Following this logic, any discourse around Catholic education must be an incitement to implementation. It is actual educational practice that brings about change in the world, for the Church takes time by the forelock therein, laying the foundations of the salvation it announces.

I should like to conclude by pointing out that France is alone in having excluded theology from its public universities. Towards this discipline, it has developed a profound epistemological suspicion.

Against the historical backdrop I mentioned at the outset, one final word in favour of the role of theology in the assemblage of sciences working together on analysing educational practices. This very conference, combined with the quality of its participants, makes a good case in its defence. At the European level, we are living proof that it is possible to rethink Catholic education drawing on the diversity of our backgrounds and disciplines. I am honoured to have been invited to make a modest contribution.