

Experience of a Religious Educator

The Equally Important “How” and “What”!

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Method and content are inseparable in the proclamation of Christianity. In this article, the author focuses first on the communication style of Pope Francis and then later recounts her own experience as a secondary school religious educator. Carmela Romano is a theologian and teacher at the Higher Institutes of Religious Studies of ‘Sant’Anna’ in Matera and ‘San Francesco di Sales’ in Rende (Italy). She is also head of the Italian national committee for new evangelization methodologies of the Rinnovamento nello Spirito (Catholic Charismatic ‘Renewal in the Spirit’) movement.

In order to explore both Pope Francis' ideas on language and his communication style, we need look no further than the programmatic apostolic exhortation of his pontificate, *Evangelii gaudium*. There, we find both his precise vision of the Church and his way of proclaiming that vision. For Pope Francis, the *how* is as important as the *what*. In other words, method and content are inseparable for the Christian experience. The method of proclamation that has emerged since Francis' first appearance on the balcony of Saint Peter's Basilica is the *kerygmatic* style: an announcement capable of awakening the human heart. It brings people together and allows all to feel embraced as equal participants in a profound and mysterious dialogue. It is the proclaiming of a mystery, one rendered clear through frank words and the power of the Spirit, a power that is at work also in the hearts of those who listen!

For our reflection, I willingly turn to *Evangelii gaudium* because it also highlights how the great danger facing today's world and its youth is found precisely in the “desolation and anguish born of a complacent yet covetous heart, the feverish pursuit of frivolous pleasures, and a blunted conscience.”(n. 2) Yet it is possible to overcome all this:

Thanks solely to this encounter – or renewed encounter – with God's love, which blossoms into an enriching friendship, we are liberated from our narrowness and self-absorption. We become fully human when we become more than human, when we let God bring us beyond ourselves in order to attain the fullest truth of our being. Here we find the source and inspiration of all our efforts at evangelization. For if we have received the love which restores meaning to our lives, how can we fail to share that love with others? (n. 8)

The “conversational” style of Pope Francis

For our conversation, I turn again to Pope Francis in his January 2014 message written for the 48th World Day of Social Communications, *Communication at the service of an authentic culture of encounter*. If, for the Pope, communication is essentially self-expression and evangelization, such an approach does not ignore what he calls a culture of encounter. To encounter is a transcendent practice: the human person encounters God through the faith experience. But it is also immanent: Through encountering God I open myself to my brothers and sisters. In a few words, encounter means authentic humanity because the individual completes him or herself by nourishing and weaving social relationships, by reaching out to one’s neighbor. To communicate is to share, according to the Pope. Reciprocity, exchange, interaction and integration of intentions all lie at the heart of communication.

Francis' communication is not elitist but rather aimed at the least, the marginalized, those living on the periphery and those wearily living their faith and their existence. His style is “conversational,” simple and understandable, never detached or distant, attentive to those to whom he is speaking even when they hold diverse and even irreconcilable positions from his own. At the same time, it reflects "proximity", cutting across every contextual divide to include even those straddling the middle road. Furthermore, it is strongly narrative. His immediacy impresses me and it is wonderfully edifying. As a secondary school educator, it is of great help to me. In fact, I willingly share here an experience involving three educational bodies: school, family and the Church. It had a profound impact on the twenty people involved, among them twelve youth and eight adults, including a school director.

Religious education: posing meaningful questions

As an educator in an Italian public schools for over twenty years, I consider teaching Catholic religion to be a lay ministry, one where it is possible to introduce the plausibility of faith through culture and reflection. Recently, my responsibilities and service to the ecclesial movement to which I belong required me to step back from my professorial teaching. I was, however, able to continue organizing and planning important events for students, ones capable of impacting their lives in ways like those experienced in my own life at their age.

I can witness to how the wind of the Holy Spirit continues to blow in our world today through the work of so many. The educational method I use is simple and based exactly on Pope Francis’ example. I try to draw out the meaningful questions dwelling in the hearts of young people. I start from these questions and start to speak of historical writers, poets and storytellers from every political, cultural and societal background. I try to understand the deeper meaning behind their questions, also because among their first provocative questions is often: “But what are you doing here?” I respond saying, "You're right, I ask myself the same question." Then, from these first sometimes turbulent meetings, a dialogue

begins, also for the fact that I ask them to bring books and notebooks (without assuming all children are equipped with books today). Then, I also say: "Do me a favor and write some hard questions."

Using positive feedback, I see the kids are with me. They even follow me on social media because this, too, is a tool. Often, in fact, someone will ask: "Professor, what do you really do? We see you in Moldova, then we follow you in Germany, and then you come back on Monday morning after all-night travel looking like you just stepped out of a beauty spa, excited and happy." So, I tell them what I do, why I fly to Moldova, Germany, or other places.

And here the teaching spirit of Pope Francis comes into play, also in ways that link well to the ecclesial movement, *Rinnovamento nello Spirito* ("Renewal in the Spirit"). This is especially because he lived, and still lives, experiences of a charismatic spirituality. In *Evangelii Gaudium*, he affirms: "I am a mission" (273). So, all life is permeated by the grace of God that impels us to come out of ourselves.

Acquiring new awareness of God, oneself, and the world

This year, at the suggestion of Salvatore, a 5th year vocational school student, I was able to help foster an educational project involving twenty Italian students and educators which would visit Moldova [in Eastern Europe] as part of a *Rinnovamento nello Spirito* experience of community and missionary life. The educational project passed the school board and class council

approvals. Its aim was to reduce intergenerational tensions and thus allow for the overcoming of prejudices and every form of racism so often promoted by our culture.

It was a true missionary experience. There were powerful emotions and meanings that often represent a new, acquired awareness of the world around us. Participating in an experience so different from one's daily life, albeit for only a short time, constituted not only a valuable act of solidarity, but it was an invaluable contribution to each one's personal growth as individuals.

In the face of the financial challenges, the bishop of the diocese of Tursi Lagonegro, with the approval of the school board, became involved. He saw the educational value of the initiative and offered support for the entire project. Equally important was the hospitality provided through *Rinnovamento nello Spirito* at their missionary house based in Moldova's capital of Chisinau.

So, after much preparation, we set out with twelve boys, two of whom were Muslim, on this great rediscovery of life as that *place* in which one can reorient one's relationship with one's self, with others and with God. Wonder emerged as the youth, as well as the adults, understood that internalizing this missionary spirit does not arise from ideas or makeshift desires to do good but from living this new experience of one's self, of the world and of God. It is an experience that constitutes the whole of reality and bears the signs of God's

creation and our original dependence.