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The education of affectivity and sexuality of young people in contexts of complexity and fluidity

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Introduction

Urged by the requests proposed by GCXXIV which invited us to face the challenges that question the charism and our educational mission today, the Salesian Family and the FMA-animated Associations have provided this objective in planning the formation meetings for the delegates:

“To plan, implement, and accompany specific formation courses on the education of young people, in the perspective of a youth-vocational pastoral, starting from some rather crucial and critical instances of today’s times, such as, affectivity-sexuality, gender and fluid identity, freedom-responsibility, critical thinking towards the media and digital technologies...”

To listen to *reality* in order to understand its deepest challenges in relation to the affective and sexual question of young people and to accompany with discernment and discretion the processes of maturation in the construction of their identities is undoubtedly a sign of great courage deriving from a clear educational and pastoral passion that is its soul and mover.

Faced with such a broad theme, so delicate and 'challenging' in contemporary culture, and which, due to its complexity, requires a systemic and interdisciplinary approach, I believe that the commitment to reflection required by the Institute and by the entire Salesian Family, and undertaken in collaboration with many people and institutions, is truly bold and future-oriented.

Moreover, attention to the *affective dimension*, especially through the *educational relationship* and the creation of an environment in which one breathes an atmosphere characterised by the family spirit, is a typical characteristic of the Salesian charism, in particular of Don Bosco's Preventive System.

However, in *today's context*, *educating about affectivity and sexuality* has become much more difficult. Often we do not find the words and an adequate language to communicate the value and importance of affective and sexual education and to plan *formative programs* in this direction. Perhaps we lack the interpretative keys to understanding the new scenarios and cultural paradigms present in the current contexts of complexity and fluidity.

The cultural revolution that has been triggered in recent years with regard to affectivity and sexuality, as well as to identity, has modified, almost radically, the theoretical paradigms that are the basis of an anthropological and humanistic vision of the person, so much so as to generate confusion and disorientation, not only at the ethical-moral level, but also at the level of behaviour, lifestyles and choices both in individuals and communities.

It is not easy, then, to rethink education and formation, as well as youth pastoral, in this historical and cultural context without being accused of moralism, with the accusation of being obstinately anchored to ideas and customs of the past, which reject social progress and civilisation itself.

It is important to be careful to maintain a certain balance in defining some *key concepts* and not to take extremist and confrontational positions. Instead, it is appropriate to have a respectful and discreet attitude towards a changing situation that is rather problematic because of its negative implications on the processes of growth, in particular on the processes of identity construction.

We are aware, however, that it is not easy to combine conceptual clarity and simplicity of language so that it is understandable to all, and at the same time to preserve the rigor of a reflection that is based on scientific acquisitions.

Listening to reality: current situation and 'new scenarios'

In our societies characterized by complexity and fragmentation, in a time of uncertainty and existential precariousness, the reality of young people finds itself immersed in new and worrying

scenarios, faced with unprecedented problems and therefore new challenges. This is especially true in the context of affective and emotional life, in the context of significant social and cultural transformations that have changed the way of considering sexuality and the identity of the human person, through cultural models, paradigms of thought and theories such as to induce a progressive and profound change in mentality, lifestyles, personal values, expectations towards the person, both male and female, strongly challenging the education of the new generations. Here are some *key elements* of the situation.

- * Data from statistical surveys on the theme of the *relationship between young people, affectivity and sexuality*, at national and international level (cf. *Osservatorio giovani e sessualità*), reveal that the new generations have an increasingly precocious and very often unconscious approach to *sexuality* and *affectivity*. An approach that leverages wrong knowledge, confused information and consequently is based on behaviors that are risky for self and for others.
- * The central issue seems to be *information*, but not only: unfortunately there is a lack of confrontation and dialogue on the subject, both at school and in the family, and young people increasingly get information on the internet more than by talking about it with peers. There is a lack, therefore, of *adequate formation*, or rather, an education in affectivity and sexuality. The lack of discussion and exchange with more experienced figures, such as parents or adults of reference, combined with the need and desire for knowledge, leads to the exposure of adolescents and young people to *indications potentially at risk of wrong and misleading information*.
- * Important role of *media, social networks and video game platforms* (e.g. Roblox), in particular *online pornography*: at the origin of a dangerous *disconnection of sex and sexuality from affections*, from the *relationship* that transforms, corrupting the ability to build bonds rich in affectivity and open to possible projects (affectivity without a project...).
- * The massive *virtualization of affectivity and sexuality* has increased the phenomenon of the lack of *affectivity* of young people, altering the delicate relationship with corporeality and emotions and consequently with the other (be it male, female or other...) and with otherness, that is, with diversity or with any other difference. The affective experience lived 'without a body', without a 'real' physical presence, generates, among other things, the inability to 'feel', in the sense of 'suffering', lacking the possibility of an internalisation of the affective and emotional experience.
- * The virtualization of *sexual intercourse*, the excess of *pornography* and *autoeroticism*, a phenomenon that seems to be more widespread especially in males, creates *cultural blocks, insecurity and affective and emotional fragility* which, especially when mediated by social media and the internet, is achieved without contact, not only on a relational and affective level, but also on a physical one. This results in widespread forms of *abstinence from sex* (a kind of "chastity"?) that has its negative repercussions on interpersonal relationships, on one's self-concept and self-image, on one's identity and on one's sense of personal worth.
- * "*Affections without love*": fear of bonds, emotional confusion, desire for experimentation (adolescents and young people 'tossed about by emotions' rather than being guided by choices and/or projects), frantic search for self-realization and narcissistic satisfaction that makes it very difficult to meet and relate authentically with the other. Emotional bonds do not last long, are unstable and end when the emotional and sentimental attraction ends. Affectivity is one of the areas in which indeterminacy, uncertainty and doubt are most experienced in a context of extreme confusion: young people who mistake sympathy for friendship, sexual desire for affection, and affection for love; unable to distinguish between an affective attraction at the level of friendship and a homosexual tendency, between experiences of falling in love and feelings of true love; married people who believe they no longer love because they have lost the initial attraction, or they say they love another person because they feel attraction, sexual desire, or have fallen in love with them.

- * *The emergence of sexuality as a developmental task, 'beyond the imaginary'* is a real educational challenge, especially in adolescence, since puberty and the search for identity constitute the background against which the profound transformations of the personality are placed, precisely starting from the *body image*: from the body perceived, 'dreamed of', lived and then experienced not only in an individual way but in relation to others. In this sense, relationality must be oriented '*beyond the infantile imagination*', which is still narcissistic, to arrive at the creation of a bond that is nourished by realism and commitment. In evolutionary dynamics, it is essential to take into account the *relationship with time and space*, which today is 'denied' by the virtuality of the imaginary. The result is a great difficulty on the part of young people to occupy their own inner space (*interiority*) and to live a healthy relationship with *corporeality* and *physicality* (expression of their own identity).
- * *The uncertainty of the identity processes that lead to the construction of male and female identity* is linked to the influence of historical-cultural processes that have led to questioning (to the point of negation) this fundamental difference that allows us to recognize the other and all other differences. The emphasis placed on *homosexuality* 'against' *heterosexuality*, the exaltation of *unisex* as a cultural fashion seems to constitute an obstacle to initiate processes of *identification* and *differentiation* necessary for the growth of the personality and, at the same time, makes interpersonal relationships and the integration of affectivity and sexuality more problematic. The search for the *identical* and *the similar*, which is observed especially in adolescents who live mainly friendly and fusional relationships, increases affective problems marked by immaturity and identity disorders. The affective and sexual life of young people seems to be characterized by a certain *oscillation between unisexuality* (sexual confusion) and *distancing from the other* (tendency to isolation or to choose a 'single' life or a tendency to take refuge in celibacy, even consecrated).
- * Another point considered to be the source and cause of affective distress is the *question of the 'bond'*. In the current market culture that has created the so-called *liquid love*, a way of living relationships has spread in which the laceration or conflict between the desire to experience new emotions and the need for authentic love is visibly manifested. It is a way of removing feelings from the rapid dissipation of consumption, so that remaining faithful is no longer a given and loving each other and staying together for life, which was once the norm, is no longer possible. The person is constantly pushed to look for new stories, to live short relationships without ever being sure of remaining sufficiently satisfied in his need to love and to be loved. Liquid love (Bauman) presents itself as a love divided between the desire for emotions and the fear of bonding. On the contrary, every bond that is born of love is entrusted to our care and our freedom of choice: it requires a constant commitment that regenerates and recreates it every day.
- * To all this must be added a 'misunderstood' *conception of freedom* that rejects everything that constitutes a *constraint* and that is moved by *rules*, that claims to go beyond all limits or is nourished by self-referentiality both in decisions and choices, in relationships, and in action and planning of oneself, of life, of mission. The idea of *freedom* understood as an *absolute*, as an *arbitrariness* that allows one to do everything without any limit is simplistic, however it is very widespread and goes very well with the illusory tendency, deriving from the technocratic society, to be able to do everything, even to force one's biological and mental limits. The space given to spontaneity and immediacy is another way of considering the freedom of individuals without taking into account the typically human capacity for self-determination and emotional self-regulation (*self-control*).