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

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3. Educational and Pastoral Issues

In order for affectivity and sexuality education to be effective and well-designed, it is essential to frame them within the framework of an integral education, which calls into question all the dimensions of the person, from corporeality to sentiment and the emotional world, from sexuality to psychosexual identity, from knowledge to motivations and values, from temporal perspective to planning, from choices to decisions, etc. Affective maturation, in fact, cannot be distinguished or detached from the global maturation processes, which concern all the other spheres of the personality, from autonomy to intelligence, to will.

In order to be able to combine the dimensions of affection and sexuality in relationships and emotional bonds or friendships or in the relationship between couples, the human person must possess more general relational and emotional skills, such as the ability to identify and evaluate the consequences of one's own behaviour, the ability to make decisions and choices, the ability to negotiate in interpersonal exchanges, the capacity for self-determination and emotional self-control, the ability to take the right distances and to create sufficiently free and satisfying emotional bonds.

In the path of personal growth towards the construction of a freely chosen life identity, maturation and affective integration occupy a central place. Every choice of life finds its solidity and, at the same time, its full realization on the basis of a sufficiently autonomous personality, which has built a suitably harmonious and unitary concept of self such as to constitute the central nucleus of personal, cultural and vocational identity. In this sense, it is legitimate to ask whether education that neglects self-awareness, self-esteem, empathy and the relationality that correlates with solidarity can be authentic.

Learning to stay in *touch with one's emotional world* and with it knowing how to interact with reality in certain situations of life is a mental health goal that sustains men and women throughout their lives. The lack of education of the affections prevents a correct growth and fixes on inadequate or wrong objects a quantity of energies that, especially in adults, should instead find more specific, more 'human' objects. If, at the educational level, more attention were paid to the *education of the heart* and the ability to remain in touch with one's own emotions, many difficulties and crises could be prevented and people would be more available and open to reach out to others, both in daily relationships and in the educational and pastoral mission. The consequences of such a lack of affective education are often seen in family life or social interactions: children who do not learn to read their own emotional code and remain "fixated" on childhood needs, adolescents who read reality according to an *emotional code* internalized in the archaic relationship with their mother, women who are dissatisfied because they cannot always express themselves in an adult way, and men who harden themselves in an attempt to prove themselves "rational" in every situation, unable to express their inner world or any emotion, whether positive or negative, in relationships with others, especially those with whom they have established an emotional bond.

The education of the 'heart' finds its unequivocal efficacy in *the centrality of the relationship*, in particular in the *educational relationship*, which is implemented in both personal and group accompaniment. The setting in motion of affective dynamisms through interpersonal relationships allows a more realistic knowledge of self and of one's emotional world (knowing 'inside' the experience).

The ability to experience *affection*, to express one's *affectivity*, through harmonious emotionality, is indispensable for the formation of a healthy personality. For this reason, affective maturation concerns the subject as a whole and not only his somatic aspects or the functions pertaining to the sexual sphere.

Affectivity and sexuality are dimensions of the person, which is nevertheless always a unitary reality: they must be combined with intelligence, corporeality, will and one's own system of values. In this sense, an affectivity and a sexuality that is poorly integrated or disturbed will always lead to some disturbance in other spheres of the personality.

Affective education: how to understand it?

In the first place, I would like to clarify that affectivity and sexuality, from a strictly psychological point of view, present themselves as *processes of development*, as particularly complex realities, both linked to the personal identity and psychological history of each one. They profoundly mark the person at all levels, starting from the bodily level. These are therefore pervasive dimensions of life and of identity, so much so that they permeate all expressions of human existence, from work to relationships, to life choices, to love, to religiosity. Studies and clinical experience show that it is not easy to distinguish psychoaffective development from psychosexual development. These processes, which are not parallel, sometimes interfere with each other and with other dimensions or aspects of the personality, such as aggression, relationality and corporeality, motivations and values, strength and expansion of the ego, etc.

After all, sexuality itself does not concern only the biological level, but also motivations, values, and the ability to pursue goals of an anthropological, social and religious nature. Experience shows that when there is a division between these aspects, all of which are important and essential for living sexuality in a harmonious way, forms of immaturity and regression are reached that fix the person to primordial stages of development.

Affectivity, in particular, embraces the whole world of emotions and feelings and allows the person to participate in events, to establish affective bonds, friendship, fraternity and couple relationships. It is not separated from sexuality which, although closely linked to the biological sphere without being reduced to a question of genitals, presents itself as a complex system in which, in addition to the energetic and instinctual dimension, there is the ideal and meaningful dimension that makes it profoundly 'relational' and therefore 'human'. Both are structurally 'relational', because they push the person out of him/herself, to the encounter with the other, in the overcoming of individualism or narcissistic isolation. *Affectivity and sexuality*, therefore, are two complex and ambivalent realities, with differentiated but interdependent paths that continuously interact with other dimensions of the personality (such as corporeality, aggressiveness, relationality, motivations and values, religiosity, strength and expansion of the ego...).

Affective maturation, therefore, must always be considered in the global context of a dynamically understood *human maturity*: the option for marriage, consecrated celibacy or for any other choice requires certain conditions of balance and unity of one's life, and also presupposes the development of a certain autonomy and clear personal planning.

The maturation paths of affectivity and sexuality are intertwined with all the maturation paths that simultaneously take place in the global development of the person. It is a matter of progressively achieving a certain *unification of self* as the central nucleus of the identity of which the individual areas of maturation are a part. It follows that, in the face of diversified life choices that would require different levels of maturation, certain conditions of *balance and unity* of one's life are required, such as a certain *autonomy* and clear *planning*, whether for the choice of marriage, parenthood, consecrated celibacy or any other choice of life.¹

In Conclusion: Maturing in the Capacity to Love

It is important to recall one of the key concepts of every path of affective education which needs to overcome the ambiguity to which it is often subjected in contemporary culture. I am

¹ Cf Del Core Pina, *Educazione all'affettività*, in AA. VV., *Evangelizzare educando, educare evangelizzando. Emergenza educativa*, Roma, Il Calamo 2010, 141-172.

referring to the term *love*, which - as Benedict XVI emphasized in his Encyclical Letter *Deus Caritas Est (DCE)* - has a multiplicity of meanings that sometimes indicate totally different realities.

Maturing in the capacity to love involves taking into consideration the three fundamental dimensions or *constitutive factors of authentic love: intimacy, passion, commitment*.

Intimacy, a complex factor, typical of love relationships, includes the feeling of bonding, which derives from a positive experience of acceptance and recognition by the other, through listening and care, respect and esteem.

Passion expresses the most emotional component that derives from attraction, not only physical, which finds its immediate origin in the erotic dimension of sexuality, where the aesthetic aspect would lead to idealization. The instinctual aspect is a source of passionate energy, in itself intoxicating and vital, but which can lapse into exclusivity, possession and pure uncontrolled pleasure.

The *decision*, rooted in passion and supported by the bond of intimacy, involves determination, the choice to love and to continue the bond long-term, that is, it requires the commitment to prolong the bond over time, for it has become a close and continuous sentimental 'bond'. Without the decision-making component, that is, without the choice of the bond, passion and intimacy (including sexual intimacy) will dominate the relationship, which of themselves are still indeterminate and always looking for something or someone else. There can be no true discovery of the other, nor can love become care of the other and for the other without a lucid availability to this decisional process. Thus, there can be no stability and security, because it is more easily exposed to the erosion of the bond: the whimsical fire of emotion can soon be extinguished or rekindled if necessary.

On the contrary, true love invokes stability and security: "Love promises infinity, eternity – a reality greater and totally different from our everyday existence. [...] The way to do this is not simply to let oneself be overwhelmed by instinct. Purification and maturation are necessary, which also pass through the path of renunciation" (DCE 5). "It is part of love's growth towards higher levels and inward purification that it now seeks to become definitive, and it does so in a twofold sense: both in the sense of exclusivity (this particular person alone) and in the sense of being 'for ever'. Love embraces the whole of existence in each of its dimensions, including the dimension of time. It could hardly be otherwise, since its promise looks towards its definitive goal: love looks to the eternal" (DCE 6).