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BASIC EDUCATION AND CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION

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BASIC EDUCATION AND CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION

I have been asked to talk about BASIC EDUCATION AND CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION and, as by-line, it was added that the items should include Literacy programs, specialized elementary schooling, radio schools, vocational training, religious instruction and other educational services available to the masses. How these affect cultural transformation; what Christian values should underlie mass education in the context of a rapidly changing society. Also, cultural values and the media of mass communications.

Additional suggestions from individual CICOP committee members added that "many of these means are old hat", and that I should "set forth the philosophy, the 'raison d'etre' for them and in support of them. How do the people, the users and beneficiaries evaluate them on the scene". It is from here that I will take my cue: the 'raison d'etre' of basic education, and how the users and beneficiaries evaluate them on the scene. Let us begin with the expression "basic education" itself.

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I - THE MEANINGS OF BASIC EDUCATION

Basic Education, Fundamental Education, Integral Education, Functional Literacy, are expressions coined during the more recent decades and officially accepted by UNESCO.

Very often these expressions merely represent a set of subjects such as: reading and writing, notions of hygiene, agricultural information, the elementary workings of a cooperative. According to this traditional, conservative, point of view, the "have nots" have nothing because they do not have the knowledge accumulated by the western civilization. Therefore, this ignorance places these "ignorant" in a state of marginalization with regard to the

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economic and social benefits that the modern world puts at their disposal.

The expression "basic education", and its synonyms, according to this concept, stands exclusively for the basic notions which, once acquired, incorporates the "ignorant" population into a society which is well organized, and perfect, and ready, and even eager to receive them.

The role of the marginalized should then be to accept, without arguing, without asking questions, the efforts which are carried out for their benefit, and adapt themselves to the patterns of behaviour, the set of values, the techniques established by the existing society.

Because the ignorant populations, as soon as they acquire these informations, will have jobs waiting for them; medical doctors and hospitals to attend to them; their salaries will be raised; they will contribute to the improvement of the productivity of the industries and of the nation; and each nation will, per force, reach the level of the progress and prosperity moulded previously for them by the countries which were the immediate beneficiaries of the Industrial Revolution.

It so happens that the history of Latin America, of Africa, of Asia - by far the majority of the population of the world - demonstrate that enough money and energy has been spent on behalf of this utopia, without any valid results. Experience has shown that liberal capitalism and its reflections on the individualistic philosophy - and resulting educational concepts - is not a magic formula which always gives positive results.

Let us admit: the efforts, and some very well intentioned ones, to mould the problems of the Third World to the solutions which were successful in other cultures and at other times, have met with dismal failure.

Let us admit: the world society as a whole, and the western society in particular, are at fault.

Let us admit: the prevailing concepts about education may be questioned.

No one of good faith can deny the relation that exists between education and society. The disagreement arises with regard to the type of education which will better contribute to a given type of society.

In 1965, UNESCO, during its World Congress held in Teheran, let it be known in very clear terms that Functional Literacy cannot limit itself to the mere transmission of information, but demands that the education of adults have in mind that man is committed to life itself; with his opinions; with his own experience and knowledge, with his family; with his social responsibilities. UNESCO, in the Conclusions of the Congress of Teheran stresses that education must encourage man to participate in his own education.

Still according to the Congress of Teheran, education must emancipate man from the limitations of an unfavourable "milieu" not adequate to his development. Education for adults, far from being an end in itself, must be conceived having in mind the need to prepare man for the social and economic role he must have in society.

Starting from the statements of UNESCO, we may go still much further and affirm that, in order to demarginalize the marginalized, society itself must be desestratified. And this desestratification can only be achieved by the marginalized themselves.

Basic education then, must consist in rendering men, all men, capable of participating consciously in the process of transformation of the culture.

If we are christians, we must admit that "God alone exists of Himself, and is infinite in all perfections". Therefore, society, created by man, is subject to perfectioning. And education is one of the essential tools in the effort to render the whole social context more just.

This more modern concept of society, and of education, is however, in opposition to the traditional concept of education which states, or

uncounselously thinks, that man must be integrated into a predetermined form of society.

## II - BASIC EDUCATION AND CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE

In some catholic areas, these words would be targets for criticism and we would hear arguments saying that these ideas on education place too great an emphasis on man and that it runs the risk of leading into materialism, into some form of atheist humanism or, even, of seeing man as a new "God". Let us have a closer look into the problem.

We are told by the Bible in the very beginning of the Genesis that God created man to his image and likeness and He entrusted to us the mission of dominating nature and completing creation. To fulfil this human mission, Christ gave us very clear instructions: "Thou shalt love the Lord Thy God with thy whole heart and thy whole soul and thy whole mind. This is the greatest of the commandments and the first. And the second, its like is this Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments all the laws and the prophets depend".

It is never enough to recall this because we simply do not have the right to forget that economic, social, political organizations, or other accidental conditionings, do not alter the central nucleus of our doctrine which states that the measure of man is his dimension as image and likeness of God.

The old catechisms used to stress the first part. But they did not stress the second part so much: That man was ordered to love other man, also, and that all men were made to the image and likeness of God.

We cannot satisfy ourselves with the effort to save ourselves. It is part of the mission of christians to proclaim, that each man is a son of God

and must find in his concrete life the opportunity to develop fully and responsibly, according to the plans of God.

All this has become very clear in the Documents of the Vatican Council and, with regard to Latin America, in the Document of CELAM, of Mar del Plata, in the chapter where the theology of earthly values is sketched, and where it describes man as a co-creator. And, with regard to education, I would like to stress the importance of the document of Buga. The document of Buga contains the Conclusions of the meeting held at Buga (Colombia) by the Department of Education of CELAM that studied the role of catholic universities in Latin America.

Throughout all these documents, and with the very negative results of experiences in the past it is becoming each day more evident that, if the faithful is consciously committed, if religion for him is not a mere repetition of rites, or a series of acquired habits, if his religion is based upon an intellectual contact with the Gospel and the Sacraments, it is legitimate to expect that it will open his eyes to a sense of social justice and to a "Collective moral" aiming at the advancement of all human beings in an effort to impregnate all human structures with Christian values.

The Christian can no longer limit his interest to his own salvation, or of his "ghetto".

Tradition, the scriptures, social and rational demands, all lead us to understand the need to live in an organized structure where responsibilities are defined, and each member has its place. It is, however, clearer each day, that the behaviour of the People of God is subject to evolution and this evolution projects itself upon the history of man.

Although the Pastoral work is the direct mission of the Hierarchy, the elaboration of the projects and their application, are the responsibility

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of the whole Church, of the whole People of God. In it, the Papacy, the Episcopate, the Clergy and the Laity have specific tasks, but are part of one whole effort to incarnate in the world.

While we are at it, we may as well have in mind some inheritances of the past that we simply must overcome.

One of them is the old concept of elite. By hearing some people talk, one might think we were having a nightmare in which we are at the Palace of Versailles, or at the court of Philip II, in Madrid. We simply must stop perpetuating an aristocratic notion of a static, permanent, "elite" versus the "masses" which will forever be down under.

The "Masses" can become the "people", if each and all elements of the family, of the local community, of the nation, of the world, stop being a mere object, or a mere individual recorded by statistics, and becomes a person.

We should rapidly forget about an "elite", permanently better educated than the "masses", forever holding positions of leadership. Forever handing out some alms in the form of jobs, or information, or make believe positions in local governments.

God never said that He had step-children, be they negroes, quechuas, aymaras, tupi-guaranis, or plain campesinos.

And let us beware of a new aristocracy that is developing: the aristocracy of the technocrats. The knowledge of some developed techniques does not give any man the right to decide upon the destiny of the others.

And, if some social or economic structures are a hindrance to human development, why not scrap them? Let us face it. We do not have the right to baptize, or beautify, or try to mask unjust social structures, with new forms of face-lifting.

Sometimes we are told that a civilization that is not religious, does not exist. In the contemporary age we can yes, say, it exists. The first really atheist civilization did not begin in Russia, but in the so called christian western world.

Another concept that must be scraped refers to poverty. Poverty will always exist. But misery is another thing. We can talk about the misery of the rich as well as about material hunger. But we cannot forget that Christ multiplied wine, bread and fish, nor can we forget all the words of Christ condemning the rich.

These examples of negative concepts can serve as warnings to us all. As red lights to show us the perils of new forms of negation of the spirit of poverty.

### III - EDUCATION FOR TO-DAY

From all that has been said so far, it becomes obvious that the educational effort has surpassed the period when it was directed only to children and adolescents, and now it is reaching all human groups: it is the emergence of permanent education.

To-day, even in the developed countries, the new generations refuse to accept the mere transmission of old values. They feel the urge to discuss, reject, or accept, values on a level of equality with the older generation. Persons, groups of persons, countries, are beginning to refuse to be classified as immature or dependent. Instead of teachers versus students, we are coming to the new concept of permanent education for all, young and old. All, together, striving for permanent improvement.

Our times have also reached the stage when brain cramming can be classified as vicious. We have reached the stage where we think in terms of learning by doing it effectively, not by listening to masters

who speak "ex cathedra" and don't accept being contradicted by the pupils.

It has become now very clear that human progress can be meaningful only if man himself assumes the responsibility for his advancement and, therefore, the general objective of education should be to cooperate in the formation of man, offering him the basic information which will allow him to take upon himself, consciously, the role of agent of his own advancement.

And here, the creative capacity of man must be stressed. Man has the capacity of distinguishing and choosing one object from another object, and thus, of choosing values. By the communication of these values, the possibilities of choice appear and, thus, man participates in the creation of the cultural world.

Education must ensure the participation of all in adapting the previously existing values, the ever arising new situations, new behaviour, new relationships, the attitudes. Education must lead to the discovery, by all, of the "stragulation points" of society, to the understanding of the political mechanisms and of the structure of power that runs society, and to the discovery and implementation of new and better solutions.

This education must render each student aware of the limits, obstacles, and possibilities to which he is subjected, allowing him to participate responsibly and productively.

If education is the process which aims at forming an integrated man, the real man, to attain this, it is necessary to offer man the elements which will allow him to reach a clear vision of his dignity as a human being. And of the dignity of the other human beings.

It is this vision of his own dignity, and of the dignity of others,

that will render him, man, capable of a critical analysis of the situation in which he is inserted, and lead to the discovery in himself of the potentials capable of transforming him into an agent capable of playing an original and active role in the creation of culture; making him a subject of history capable of transforming a natural world into a humanized world.

#### IV - WHAT BASIC EDUCATION CAN BE

All I said about education in general, applies, of course, to what basic education can be. As I mentioned in the beginning, basic education can be understood as a term to express the minimum elements needed to rise above the level of ignorance and poverty. Or, in more polite words, to lead a human life. But, as I said before, this definition is not sufficient. Basic education must be what comes first, what is fundamental, what reaches man at his core. Basic education is that which can offer:

- elements enabling man to understand what he is (consciousness of self), what other men are (communication of persons as subjects), what the world is;

- elements enabling man to assert himself as a human person, a participant in the transformation of the world, a creator of culture;

- elements capable of enabling man to satisfy the basic material needs without which he cannot live on a human level;

- elements which will lead to a communitarian action aimed at transforming the social structure of competition into structures of cooperation.

The synthesis of these concepts is expressed for us from MEB, BASIC EDUCATION MOVEMENT, by the expression "conscientizagao", which I may translate roughly as "the awakening of historical consciousness", "or creating an awareness of man's active role in the historical process".

#### V - MEB

I mentioned MEB. Basic Education Movement. I will say a few words about it. I mention MEB, not as an example but as a sample of organization that

that attempt to work according to the principles I am describing here.

The origin of MEB may be traced to the experience of education through radio conducted by some Catholic Bishops in the north-east of Brazil. Now it also operates in the Amazon and in the Center-West of Brazil.

Seven years of practice, have shown us how to transform the radio--schools into nucleus of "popular animation" where men can exercise their creative capacity, their capacity to communicate with other human beings on equal terms, discover their full dignity of human beings, and develop their critical capacity to analyse the situation in which they are inserted.

MEB is a service to the communities and takes upon itself the role of "starter", of "touch off", for the social emergence of the marginalized communities.

All the methods used by MEB are the result of the effort to give value to the actions performed by man over nature, trying to render evident man's natural condition of an intelligent and conscious human being. This means stressing the importance of elementary manifestations and also of self-expression through popular art.

To understand the transformation that takes place when man cuts down a tree, makes a hut, makes a song - creates conditions for man to integrate himself in the context in which he lives, without running the risk of alienating himself in this process. Or of being submitted by another human group, or of accepting as superior the culture of any dominating group.

MEB tries to make the best possible use of many types of group-dynamics methods such as panel discussions, socio-drama, debating groups, circular discussions, etc. Many of these methods and techniques are used in the grass-roots by the local level teams, and by the community leaders who are not always experts in reading and writing and in some cases may even be illiterate.

In the grass-roots level the real aim of the work, normally initiated by trainings of two or three days, is to lead to the discovery, by the elements of the communities, of a motivation for a joint effort, analyse the possibilities of discovering a common interest. One of the results of the discussions is the analysis, by the group itself, of the characteristics of the community, the possibilities of action, the planning of action towards improvements of the local situation. The initial motivation may be the decision to organize a school for the children of the community. It may be building a football field, a cemetery, organize a pharmacy, organize a chapel. Of course I am not talking about building a large chapel. I am talking about a hut, where the community would like to gather to pray together.

Those responsible for MEB do not consider themselves as geniuses who have all the answers. The secret of MEB is the feed-back that it receives from the population of the underdeveloped areas, and the constant communication on all levels.

But, in January 1968. MEB is only a ghost of what it has been and of what it can be. MEB has been about to close time and again. The level of efficiency has deteriorated. MEB is having the fate of so many other organizations that provoke the fear of those who detain power. But although a palid shadow of what it used to be, we in MEB, believe that it is better to do something, while we may, rather than do nothing at all. But the struggle of MEB is now staunchly supported by the Brazilian Hierarchy. In spite of this, it is still possible that our day of reckoning will come and that we will be crushed by the "status quo" any day. What we cannot do is become another literacy campaign trying to mould the people to the requirements of the powerful. We refuse to act as a buffer between the aspirations of the people and the present unjust social structures.

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And now, to conclude.

You know, I know, that there are countless efforts of education in Latin America under the responsibility of Christians. There are radio-schools, elementary schools, vocational training centers, secondary schools, universities. It would be pointless to describe to you the quality of some of the buildings, the high level of some of the equipment, the dedication of many of the teachers and organizers. Or talk to you about some very elaborate methods of transmission of information.

But now it is my turn to ask you:

Wouldn't some of them, even unconsciously, be aiming at the maintenance of a dual society, with an "elite" versus the masses?

Or are they all aiming at a healthy cultural transformation towards a society centered on man, each man, and based upon Truth?

Now it is your turn to speak.

This paper may be quoted in whole or in part in any manner that will promote the interest of the Church in Latin America. Please acknowledge the CICOP Conference of the U. S. Bishops' Committee for Latin America. Mimeographed copies may be purchased at the CICOP Headquarters, Box 946, Davenport, Iowa. 52805.