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## FRATELLI TUTTI AND THE EDUCATIONAL PARADIGM OF CARE

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**Abstract** This short essay on the connection between the *Fratelli Tutti* Encyclical, written by Pope Francis in 2020, and pedagogy is based on my involvement in the socio-educational project Arco Maior and the study about it I have been conducting for the past few years. This alternative educational scheme ([www.arcomaior.pt](http://www.arcomaior.pt)) welcomes teenagers who have left school without having completed mandatory education, following a long period during which they were increasingly neglected by the institution. The project takes place in Porto, Portugal, and it began in 2013. It has supported 400 students up to and including 2021/2022.

Thus, this document is anchored, on the one hand, in the Pope's beautiful and profound reflexion on love, «fraternity and social friendship», in which the systematic and paradigmatic reference to the Good Samaritan parable features prominently, a strong source of questioning and inspiration for those in the field of education concerned with each and every citizen we come across. On the other hand, it is anchored in the analysis I carried out, in 2020, of the Personal Files of 25 students who attended Arco Maior between 2013 and 2019 (Azevedo et al, 2020), looking to understand what schools had done to drive these students away, leaving them in a situation of extreme vulnerability and social exclusion.

This text aims at denouncing the selective and humiliating type of schooling of certain citizens and it intends to name some of the features of a fairer public education service and of a fairer school, which involve practices of recognition and the educational paradigm of care.

**Keywords** *Fratelli Tutti*, the care paradigm, recognition, school leaving, humiliation.

### Fallen by the side of the road

Pope Francis devotes this Encyclical to «fraternity and social friendship», inspired by Saint Francis of Assisi. From the beginning, the letter attributes great importance to the Good Samaritan parable. The document reads: «The parable shows us how a community can be rebuilt by men and women who identify with the vulnerability of others, who reject the creation of a society of exclusion, and act instead as neighbours, lifting up and rehabilitating the fallen for the sake of the common

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good» (67). And it adds: «We cannot be indifferent to suffering; we cannot allow anyone to go through life as an outcast. Instead, we should feel indignant, challenged to emerge from our comfortable isolation and to be changed by our contact with human suffering. That is the meaning of dignity» (68). And it concludes with: «It is the moment of truth. Will we bend down to touch and heal the wounds of others? Will we bend down and help another to get up? This is today's challenge, and we should not be afraid to face it» (70).

The socio-educational project Arco Maior was born out of a refusal of the principle that there is nothing to be done with these youngsters, who have left school and *failed to take advantage of the opportunity that was given to them* to attend public school, and that the best option is to move forward, pass them by and fail to truly see these citizens who have fallen into social exclusion, consigned to their poor neighbourhoods, where they remain invisible (Bernot-Caboche, 2016). In other words, we refuse to believe in indifference as the only possible choice.

These youngsters are usually poor, they come from families with low-paying and precarious jobs, such as cleaning staff, construction workers, masons, window washers, kitchen helpers, mechanics, locksmiths, waiters and shop assistants. In the case of mothers, 6 defined their occupation as «staying at home». In 12 of the 25 cases examined, there were reports of unemployment among the parents. The qualifications of the mothers are very low: only 3 mothers have more than 6 years of schooling and 11 have only completed the first four years of basic education. The family units live predominantly in social housing and are often, in 19 of the 25 cases, in situations which make the poverty framework even worse: cases of early pregnancy (2 cases), drug consumption and drug trade (5 cases), alcoholic parents (5 cases), separated parents, with either the mother or the father absent (8 cases), domestic violence (5 cases) and death of the parents (4 cases).

From early on, signs of misalignment between the school and the situation of each child reveal themselves (this takes place during the first four years of schooling, in 20 of 25 cases).

These signs are abundantly recorded by the schools and will be used throughout the years to label these children as «at-risk students» (at risk of academic failure, of leaving school, of absenteeism, of delinquency...) or as «special needs education» students. The school resorts to an impersonal treatment, placing them into categories related to failure and unruliness, marking them as inept and disqualifying them. Children grow older and the conflicts with schools grow increasingly violent and disruptive, like snowballs, reaching undignified proportions, both for the educators and the students: in other words, for the educational institution. Several people take part in this *educational process*, not just teachers, but also doctors, child psychiatrists and social workers. Everyone contributes to consolidating this way of looking at these children as «at-risk students», who lack family backups and who are responsible for their own failed situation. This casts a curtain that stops people from seeing each situation in its singularity, by painting an image of humiliation,

based on weakness, inability, unruliness and risks. These children are thus progressively excluded while still at school (internal exclusion). They are marked for dropping out of school through processes of humiliation and marginalization that push out precisely those who these educational institutions are unable and unwilling to integrate, teach and care for.

### **Reports of vulnerability and humiliation**

It is crucial that we question both this degraded view of educational equality and inclusion and the educational practices of exclusion that are founded on the silencing of the heterogeneous biographies of those progressively «made to be inferior, dismembered and denied» (Esteban, 2008). The other, the one who is different, faces the school and its rhetoric of inclusion in an environment characterised by a «denial of alterity» (ibidem, p.17) and by the reproduction of a hegemonic sociocultural model, which adopts a bureaucratic treatment of identity and difference and excludes the most fragile, vulnerable, sick and disoriented of youngsters.

We must, therefore, break the barriers of a predictable and unethical morality to reveal the concrete human suffering that lingers in our schools and which demands an answer, a different response.

According to Laguna (2020:17), «it is crucial that we recover and create reports of vulnerability in order to neutralise the monocultural neoliberal discourse which, appealing to the solidary principles of a universalist egalitarianism, ignores the particular historical suffering of individuals».

Let us look briefly at one of these «reports of vulnerability». Filipe was born in December of 2000. In 2006/2007, by the end of the first period of the first year of schooling, the teacher says the student *«does not know how to study, he is disorganised and he is not autonomous»*, and that he *«struggles to comply with the rules, in the classroom and outside of it»*. The following month, the teacher notes, in an individual report, that there is no nuclear family, that Filipe lives with his maternal grandparents and that his mother resides elsewhere with his younger brother. She then adds a sort of educational «identity card» regarding Filipe, a six-year-old, who has been at this educational institution for just four months: *«the student is immature, he has trouble expressing himself, his vocabulary is very poor and it is very difficult to have a conversation with him; he barely participates in class, he hasn't improved his writing and reading skills, he shows a deep and continuous lack of interest for activities that demand reading, writing or simply paying attention and focusing; he is constantly getting up and distracting his classmates, he reveals a significant lack of interest and unwillingness to learn, he has little autonomy; when it comes to artistic expression, he shows an interest in the activities; he gets along well with his classmates and the rest of the school staff, he is a gentle child, caring, and reveals no signs of aggressiveness. He loves to play during recess; he struggles severely with learning in all areas; he has trouble with assimilating and respecting the rules of the classroom and with performing the school work; he is disorganized and has yet to acquire*

*any work habits; above all, he is very immature, he lacks interest, he lacks the willingness to do anything, he has no ability to focus and has yet to acquire a sense of responsibility». The report ends like this: «For him, school remains «only» a playful space, in other words, a space where he can play, play, play».*

First, almost everything that the teacher mentions is related to difficulties, inabilities, bad behaviour, in other words, everything that will justify his inclusion in a special and separate category. In the midst of such misery, she mentions, almost in passing, his interest in artistic expression. Later, other characteristics are mentioned, like Filipe's good rapport with his classmates, the fact that he likes to play (how could it be otherwise?), that he is gentle, caring and that his behaviour lacks any signs of aggressiveness.

Conversely, those are the signs that Filipe's teacher manifests by looking at him in this way. The overwhelming weight of this child's inabilities, on top of a history of familiar negligence combined with a number of emotional problems, could not be more devastating, particularly as it takes place so early in the child's schooling. The child and student's individuality begins to fade when his schooling starts.

The school decides, at the end of his first year, that Filipe will be returning the following year «*as a first-year student again*». Thus, the child is immediately included in the unsuccessful and in need of special education category, and thus begins a schooling path which will be characterised by academic failure and increasing violence. By the time he is 13 he is still attending 5<sup>th</sup> grade, and his individual file is made up of 87 pages of reports of disruptive behaviour and subsequent punishments.

The humiliating practices are ongoing and prolonged in time: they will last for nine years. Following this «internal exclusion» (Millet & Thin, 2003, p. 41), school will steadily and gradually marginalise the student, promoting him to the «unteachable and creator of disorder» category (idibem, p.43), pushing him to leave school, which ends up happening when he is 15 and has only completed 5<sup>th</sup> grade. The curtain closes over the perfect scenario: the one the school does not want comes to be convinced that it is he who does not want school.

The analysis of those personal file reveals how an institution built on the principle of respect for individual and universal human rights ends up breaching fundamental rights by disqualifying the particular drama of each child and making it illegible and invisible. The institution is unable to exercise the «imperfect obligations» of hospitality, compassion, respect and solidarity. By abandoning the attention and care matrix (Noddings, 2005; Aranguren, 2021) and by adopting the administrative and technocratic matrix, the school abandons education as a means to pave the way for human development.

### **Attention and care**

Instead of doubling down on attention and care, in time schools develop and expand an institutional violence that ends badly. First, for each student who is marginalised and excluded, and then for the school itself, which loses a good portion of its moral authority. We must question, faced with every «report of vulnerability», how, under the weight of these «dark catalogues of misery» (Berridge et al., 2001:5), is a child supposed to lift herself up?

Violence is the opposite of attention, it represents the «abuse of the other, of the person that the other is in every single one of his or her dimensions: it represents violence directed at the body, at its social presence and at its intimate space» (Esquirol, 2008:50).

As we have seen every day in Arco Maior, only an attentive, caring and respectful focus is able to capture the potential and the weaknesses of of the person who inhabits each student. Simone Weil defines attention as a form of generosity; it leads us to forget about ourselves, we become detached from ourselves and it allows us to dive into the other. The philosopher argues that this exercise allows us to access that which is silent and invisible. Attention is what makes it possible to escape the law of gravity, avoid certainties and possession, and to access the whole instead of just the fragments (according to her, fragmentation is the essence of slavery).

By being close to the other who is looking at me, I can see his look «fall over me imperiously», as Esquirol puts it (208:51), following Levinas. The «ethics of the attentive and respectful way of looking» (Esquirol, 2008:85) triggers the «spiral of attention», which begins with someone pausing, paying attention and wishing to know, and is followed by a willingness to be amazed, an ability to ask questions instead of judging and a readiness to start a respectful and authentic dialogue and to create cracks that will allow us to take small new steps.

Armed with dogmatic procedures, laws and norms, in a morally irreproachable system of self-justifications, filled with preformatted and bureaucratic mechanisms, we can be easily detached from reality, as we immerse ourselves in artifice and moralism, condemning children and young people to an internal marginalization and to social and academic exclusion. Equipped with humility and a willingness to listen and to look attentively, inclined over the student from the moment he or she starts to lag behind and to reveal signs of disruption and stigmatization, educators can ascend the ladder of connection, co-building a relationship of trust and commitment with the student, in order to promote another way of accessing knowledge and development.

Noddings (2000) proposed an education founded on the ethics of care, which implies becoming less trivial and avoiding subalternity. The caring relationships provide a foundation for a pedagogical action that leads to students gaining trust, which in turn allows for dialogue and for the emergence

of work proposals appropriate to the potential and to the needs of each student. This makes it easier for students to progress and to develop and for teachers to know how to improve their practices.

Immerse in so many races towards prescriptions and implicated in many external measurements of results, reducing the number of skills children must learn, repeating preestablished techniques for the transmission of knowledge, organizing classes and groups of students in the same way, schools run the risk of becoming non-places (Augé, 1980) or anthropological wastelands where inequalities e inhumanities are reproduced.

In this regards, the Pope's thoughts on the «unique value of love» are very clear and inspiring. The spiritual stature of a person's life is measured by love, which in the end remains «the criterion for the definitive decision about a human life's worth or lack thereof». «Yet some believers think that it consists of the imposition of their own ideologies upon everyone else, or of a violent defence of the truth, or of an impressive demonstration of strength» (92). And the Pope stipulates what this «experience of love» consists of: «A movement outwards towards another, whereby we consider the beloved as somehow united to ourselves. Our affection for others makes us freely desire to seek their good» (93). Love, then, «is more than just a series of benevolent actions. Those actions have their source in a union increasingly directed towards others, considering them of value, worthy, pleasing and beautiful apart from their physical or moral appearances. Our love for others, for who they are, moves us to seek the best for their lives» (94).

Indeed, this was not what Filipe found at school, despite the institution's claims concerning its democratic and inclusive nature. What was needed was an «acknowledgement of the worth of every human person, always and everywhere» (106), since everyone «has the right to live with dignity and to develop integrally; a dignity based not on circumstances but on the intrinsic worth of their being» (107). Universal love needs to pervade universal schooling, just as particular love needs to pervade the particular schooling path of each citizen. This love reveals itself in the knowledge that we are responsible for the vulnerability of others, it manifests itself in action, in service, «which can take a variety of forms in an effort to care for others. And service in great part means caring for vulnerability (...) Service always looks to their faces, touches their flesh, senses their closeness and even, in some cases, 'suffers' that closeness and tries to help them. Service is never ideological, for we do not serve ideas, we serve people» (115). «Love of neighbour is concrete and squanders none of the resources needed to bring about historical change that can benefit the poor and disadvantaged» (165). «Love takes first place: love must never be put at risk, and the greatest danger lies in failing to love» (92).

### **The educational paradigm of care**

Portuguese schools benefit from a significant apparatus of laws and regulations, ordered according to principles and norms morally based on equality, inclusion and academic success. This is an

important heritage that must be preserved and perfected. However, the Law is not enough, it must be supplemented by justice and by fraternal actions in the face of each situation. In fact, schools can suffer from an excess of morality and a startling lack of ethics (Aranguren, 2021), because, based on the norms, it is possible to step away from a student in need, to label him or her as different and involving him or her in a series of technical and administrative procedures that are unrelated to the child and which are never developed *with* the student, in an effort of recognition and assistance. The child is thus unable to take advantage of the mechanisms offered to her and she is blamed for her own failure.

The myth of meritocracy legitimises and deepens these exclusion practices, as each of these particularly vulnerable children is made to feel responsible for the life they are leading. The categories we impose on them confirm our own prejudices and ignore the ethical choice before us, when faced with a particular situation. As Sandel (2020) mentions, the obscure side of the meritocratic ideal is associated precisely to its most attractive promise: that each person can control their fate and become whatever he or she wishes, based on talent and effort. This denies the glaring inequality of opportunity and takes the arrogance of the individualistic, technocratic and authoritarian paradigm of learning institutions to new heights. The morality cloud that engulfs schools is, without a doubt, necessary, but it is also revealed to be terribly insufficient. Morality is founded on certainties, but ethics demands we get our hands dirty (Aranguren, 2021). The education of each student, beyond the abstract and universal ideals, lacks a deep ethical awakening that takes place when we meet face to face, every day.

The educational paradigm of care can be a key for opposing the bureaucratic and technocratic paradigm of labelling and disqualifying students by stripping them of their identity, by making them invisible in school and, thus, reproducing the original inequalities.

The educational paradigm of care is anchored in the politics of recognition, proximity, respect and assistance. This act of recognition constitutes a fundamental act in education. Aranguren (2021) describes it in four steps. The first has to do with recognising each other, each student as a person, as a unique being who deserves to be known and greeted by name. The student should know that I see him or her as a whole person. The second is to allow the student to emerge, by suspending

prejudices, judgements, demands or impositions. Then we wait and we welcome the person that he or she is, the one that shows up, instead of imposing the person we imagine them to be or the person we think they ought to be according to the educational canons. In order for the other to emerge I must abandon my expectations and even my certainties, because the other «is not the right piece of a system, he or she is a mystery standing before me» (p. 258). This step requires humility and an availability to forge a path together: students, teachers and families, whenever possible. The third step involves listening to the other, to what they have to say and to what they don't say, instead of



dumping on them all that I know and all that I think I know about them (which is always an act of vanity and arrogance) along with the paraphernalia of technical mechanisms. We must ask questions and listen, carefully and attentively. We must listen with respect, care and delight and avoid the superficiality of a consumerist approach. It is sacred: a human encounter at the highest level, face to face, between two freedoms (as Levinas put it). The «I» in every student we welcome will be able to grow soundly if it meets a «you» who recognises and embraces it, in its differences and characteristics, who makes up space for it to walk on and a road for it to travel, without transforming it into an object of teaching. The fourth step is the «I believe in you» credo, not only in what you say and do, but in you, in the person that you are, a being in the making, who I know can develop and emerge as a unique person, and become someone, no matter the departure point.

This is the door sill of the educational institution, this is the beginning, steeped in love, of a co-construction project of recognition and development. «Not to recognise is to make something invisible» (Aranguren, 2021, p. 265). It always involves labelling and judging in advance, reducing the other to something marginal and undeserving of care. This leads thousands of people to spend many important years of their lives being treated technically like just «some other student». To some, this is catastrophic, for all it is always incomprehensible and inhumane. This can only be understood under technocratic and competitive mandates, in light of the rules of the market and the way citizens are disciplined as workers and servants, made to stand in line, in light of the administrative control of citizen.

Without recognition there is no education, which is the same as saying that without actions inscribed in a culture of care there is no education. We get lost too often in trying to justify the need to invest in education, we spend too much time on institutions like the OECD, on the PISA rankings, the European Union recommendations, the advices from round tables, the inspiring UNESCO documents, when the most important factor is within reach, every day, in each gesture.

In education, the recognition is the principle of rebirth, as Aranguren (2021) highlights. The French verb *re-con-naître* is particularly felicitous: to be born again with. Through this encounter a new horizon of possibilities opens up, which had until that moment been denied or closed off. To paraphrase Leonard Cohen, a crack opens up so that the light can get in.

### **In conclusion**

In line with the teachings of the *Fratelli Tutti* Encyclical, the socio-educational project Arco Maior participates in this ethical awakening and in this practice of respectful proximity and recognition, with small groups of adolescents who have left schools, after the latter neglected them ([www.arcomaior.pt](http://www.arcomaior.pt)). We need to get our hands dirty every day; to recreate and reinvent educational environments (alternative educational arenas, as Te Riele (2006) suggests), able to recognise and promote each student's abilities, so that they can pull themselves up and make their own way.

There are no dead ends in education, for the simple reason that nothing is impossible in human relationships and fraternal love. We witness on a daily basis, in our pedagogical practices, with joy, in the midst of significant contradictions and conflicts, these excluded youngsters pulling themselves up, grabbing their tools and marching forward.

Despite our efforts, the differences, tensions, contradictions and paradoxes between inclusion and exclusion and around the quest for equity, equality of opportunity and social justice persist and will remain alive. The contradictory social mandates that hover over the mission of schools will not disappear. We must immerse ourselves in these tensions, contradictions and paradoxes, avoiding calculations, more or less bureaucratic concessions and technocratic subversions, which marginalise and exclude some children.

Indeed, there is no other option for educators in hospitable schools (Baptista, 2016): inspired by moral norms and acting like the Good Samaritan, they are compassionate, they abandon their route and get their hands dirty as they pick up the wounded, adopting ethical practices marked by attention, care and the recognition of others. These practices constitute the answer that is humanly irrefutable in the face of those who ask us to be responsible, starting with the most vulnerable, the poorer and the lost, who are marginalised and excluded within schools. These practices go to the heart of a democratic and fair school.

This is why collecting raw reports of situations of vulnerability and marginalisation taking place within schools that claim to be inclusive remains a political priority.

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