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Welcoming the Stranger

Fr. Antonio Spadaro SJ

The following is the text of Fr. Spadaro's talk at the 23rd annual Catholic School Executive Leadership Dinner, hosted by the Center for Catholic School Leadership and Faith-Based Education at Fordham University on May 31, 2017.

Dear friends, it is a great honor for me to be here at Fordham as a guest of the Center of Catholic School Leadership. But also a challenge. I feel honored to be invited to speak at such an important event. The challenge, of course, is the following: I am aware to speak to people who want to commit themselves concretely to integration, who call for the respect of diversity, who give impulse to dialogue, who give witness to their encounter with the love of Christ. Thanks for your invitation.

As you know, I am Italian. So tonight, you are welcoming a stranger! But in reality this is not so. Of course we here all know that the dichotomy between friends and strangers is false. Because of your welcome, I do not feel like a stranger. And I am also aware that no one should feel like a stranger in “the land of the free and the home of the brave.”

Just months ago, Pope Francis came here to the United States and spoke before a joint session of Congress. On that occasion, he presented himself as a “son of immigrants, knowing that so many of you are also descended from immigrants.”¹ He presented himself then as a brother to everyone precisely because he is the son of strangers! This brotherhood is rooted in the story of migration that unites Pope Francis' life journey to that of millions of Americans. Only those who feel like migrants are open to this broad and open association. Because in this way, we all feel uniquely as children of the one Father, even though we are of different fathers.

An ancient letter about Christians in society, written in the second century after Christ, affirms that before God we are all “strangers and pilgrims.” This is why Pope Francis said “we the people of this continent are not fearful of foreigners.”² None, in this room, this city, this Country or this World, should be considered a stranger to any other person.

Pope Francis has offered us a great lesson: the roots of his brotherhood are precisely in migration. Only by accepting common roots as migrants can you truly be brothers and sisters without feeling yourselves children and unwanted stepchildren. Only migrants can feel strongly that they are children of one and the same Father. And that is how the Pope identified himself: “a son of this great continent.”³ Son of a shared land whose roots are mixed, complex, multi-faceted.

“We, the people,” he said. And only if we all feel ourselves immigrants can we feel ourselves as “the people,” all citizens without majorities and minorities. The commitment for the Catholic schools to welcome the strangers comes precisely from the fact we feel ourselves as “the people.”

There are three key action verbs that encompass this commitment: to *integrate*, to *educate*, to *work with diversity*.

To Integrate

The first action is to integrate. To integrate immigrant students (but also special needs students, or other marginalized students) into the school and community culture is crucial. It means providing spiritual, academic and material resources. This evening with you, I want to focus only on one of the fundamental necessities: that of responding to the need to learn the language.

“To integrate” is one of the key phrases of Francis’ pontificate. He uses it often in many contexts. And language is a fundamental element of integration. We grow and we develop *within* a language (English, Italian, Spanish, Chinese and so on...).

Francis speaks of the “mother tongue” (*lengua materna* in Spanish). Language is like a mother! We are born into a language. We orient ourselves in the world thanks to the language that we speak. And in this way we name objects, people. And we create bridges with others. To help someone learn a language is a true human, cultural and spiritual mission. To help someone learn a language means to help people to develop in their relationships with the world around them and with people. In this way, you are truly integrated: just by being able to enter into the world of connections that is life. “Life is not time merely passing by, life is about interactions,” Pope Francis said in his recent TED talk.⁴ He followed this idea with an equally powerful one: “We don’t think about it often, but everything is connected, and we need to restore our connections to a healthy state.” Languages are a matter of connection.

A person who is born in one language can grow in another. He or she must do it, if they want to be integrated into a new culture. We are integrated within a language in which we are educated.

Welcoming the strangers means helping them grow in their new language, in the culture that the new language expresses, in its vision of the world. We discover our world anew when others communicate their vision with us too.

To Educate

We are called to educate new generations to not turn their back on their “neighbors” and everything around them. Education considers society as a place of encounter and common commitment to build the nations, the future. It means building bridges and knocking down walls.

The Pope said to the Congress of the United States: “in recent centuries, millions of people came to this land to pursue their dream of building a future in freedom.”⁵ And he also said: “Building a nation calls us to recognize that we must constantly relate to others, rejecting a mindset of hostility in order to adopt one of reciprocal subsidiarity, in a constant effort to do our best.”⁶

Building a future, building a nation: this is the task that we as *the people* have. This is the task you, Americans, have written in the DNA from your origins.

We educate to help people to build, to become *builders*. In the words of Jorge Mario Bergoglio: “To educate means to bet on the future.”⁷ The educational task is not only to improve ourselves, but to help people to build a future together, a shared history. This is welcoming the stranger!

For this reason, Pope Francis has always considered the school as “an important means of social and national integration, one of the principal pillars for the construction of the sense of community.”

Once he wrote that the strangers who disembarked in Argentina found in education the basis for seeking a place in the common construction of a project. And this did not cancel, but overcame the particularities of their origins.⁸

This is why education was a key theme in Bergoglio’s speeches and homilies when he was Archbishop of Buenos Aires. “To educate is one of the most exciting of the arts of existence,” he once said. And education for him “requires you to incessantly broaden your horizons.”⁹ “Our educational task,” Bergoglio wrote, “must reawaken the feeling of society as home.” Education serves to *inhabit* the world as a home.¹⁰

To Work with Diversity

Addressing Catholic teachers, Bergoglio said: “as Christian teachers I suggest to you to open your minds and hearts to the diversity that is an increasingly recurrent feature of this new century.”¹¹ A people is a historic reality that is constituted over the course of many generations. People are dynamic: you Americans above all teach this to the world with the wealth of your diversity. The culture of a people does not consist in the frozen repetition of itself: it is an open process that “tends to open, to integrate, to multiply, to share, to dialogue, to give and to receive within the people and with other peoples with which it enters into relationship.”¹² The school then responds to the call to be a people, “in taking care of diversity.”¹³

To again quote Pope Francis, humanity grows if it accepts diversity of nations, cultures, and people, “undertaking the path of dialogue, of the confrontation of ideas.”¹⁴ We must be careful then, not to absorb the other, but to acknowledge as valid who the other is. Otherwise we fall into an imperialistic narcissism.¹⁵ Integration cannot be understood as “cultural, intellectual and spiritual subordination.”¹⁶ Differences should be considered as *challenges*, but positive challenges, resources. This attitude means welcoming the stranger, all strangers!

Pope Francis, in his meeting with the Bishops of the United States in Washington, D. C. said about migrants that perhaps “you will be challenged by their diversity. But know that they also possess resources meant to be shared” and that are able to “enrich America and its Church.”¹⁷ We too are invited to actively participate in the work of building up the diversity of our communities.

In opposing every attempt to create a rigid uniformity, we must build unity on the basis of our diversity of languages, cultures and religions, and lift our voices against everything which would stand in the way of such unity.

I conclude with the words of Francis: “Let us combat, in our schools, every form of discrimination and prejudice...In this way, we will begin to put up a very clear sign—even controversial and confrontational, if necessary—of the diverse society that we want to create.”¹⁸

Endnotes

- 1 https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/september/documents/papa-francesco_20150924_usa-us-congress.html , para. 14
- 2 https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/september/documents/papa-francesco_20150924_usa-us-congress.html , para. 14
- 3 https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/september/documents/papa-francesco_20150924_usa-us-congress.html , para. 1
- 4 https://www.ted.com/talks/pope_francis_why_the_only_future_worth_building_includes_everyone/transcript?language=en
- 5 https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/september/documents/papa-francesco_20150924_usa-us-congress.html , para. 14
- 6 https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/september/documents/papa-francesco_20150924_usa-us-congress.html , para. 14
- 7 Message to the educational community, Buenos Aires, April 18, 2007.
- 8 Cfr Message to the educational community, Buenos Aires, March 31, 2002.
- 9 Message to the educational community, Buenos Aires, April 23, 2008.
- 10 Message to the educational community, Buenos Aires, April 21, 2004.
- 11 Message to the educational community, Buenos Aires, April 27, 2006.
- 12 Message to the educational community, Buenos Aires, April 27, 2006.
- 13 Speech to the Association of Christian Businessmen, September 1, 1999.
- 14 Speech to the Association of Christian Businessmen, September 1, 1999.
- 15 Cfr Message to the educational community, Buenos Aires, March 31, 2002.
- 16 Message to the educational community, Buenos Aires, March 31, 2002.
- 17 https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/september/documents/papa-francesco_20150923_usa-vescovi.html , para 35
- 18 Message to the educational community, Buenos Aires, April 9, 2003.

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