



## INTRODUCTION BY FATHER JEAN-MARIE PETITCLERC

### 60<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY OF BICE

#### “Tomorrow, which future for our children?”

It is for me a great honour to introduce the works of the symposium on the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Bice. I know that your organisation played an important part both in the drafting of the Convention on the Rights of the Child as in the efforts made to get its ratification in many countries. I am happy to see the vitality of your organisation at the age of 60 years.

I have a lot of pleasure meeting the friends of Bice. I remember with emotion, the Congress of the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 1989, a very important year for the recognition of the rights of the child; but also with some anxiety, because there are other persons with more legitimacy than I have that could be in this platform, but I shall not give up the invitation I got!

I would like to develop as an introduction to this day of celebration the viewpoint of an educator. For my part, I have been working in France with the adolescents of the difficult neighbourhoods for thirty years. Let me speak about the work that the Valdocco teams carry out.

If I should summarise the pedagogy employed by these educative teams, I would employ the tree following words:

- **Approach** the street children. It is easy to differentiate an integrated teenager from another one in difficulties by the time he wanders in the streets. For the first, the street is a space of circulation whereas for the second the street is a wandering place when he feels bad at home and/or in the school. He spends most of his time in the street; he immerses himself in the existing culture and builds links with those who, unfortunately, are in the same situation. Gangs form like this.
- **Catch:** once approached, the child must be “caught” in the educative relationship, share with him strong activities, dare to take risks together to establish a supporting relationship.
- **Support:** support the child in the three settings of his life which are his family, the school and the street; to create links with the adults who walk along with him since the first right of the child is the right to the coherence of the adults that support him in his educative path. I carried out many works on violence that allowed me to establish a

correlation between the level of violence that a child shows and the level of incoherence among the adults who support him.

### **Some important points in the analyses of the situation of childhood**

To introduce the works of this symposium, since Bice's 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary coincides almost with the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the International Convention on the Rights of the Child, I read with interest all the reports that the delegations in the four corners of the world have prepared. I would like to highlight certain important points:

- You all note that this Convention has allowed a positive evolution of the way in which our societies see childhood and adolescence. From now on, the child is recognised as a subject whereas before his status was that of an object that had to be educated. The Convention invites us to see the child as a subject of rights. This premise starts a real conversion of pedagogy: it means no more to "train" but to "address". The rights of the child correspond to the coming of a new culture where the child can really find his place. This implies that the political will, which has developed in certain countries, is prepared to make people respect the rights of the child.
- This evolution of the vision of society towards the child does not accompany a real improvement of the poverty of children in many countries. The reports highlight insufficient education: in the rich countries, the gap does not diminish; sometimes it even tends to deepen. In other countries, there is a real deficit in the possibility children have to exercise their rights to education.
- These reports underline all the significance of the issues regarding migration: the children whose life is currently the hardest, whether in rich countries or poor ones, are all the cross-border migrants. They are obliged to take the road to escape from a situation of misery, and discover that it is very difficult to find their place within the societies that welcome them.
- Your reports show also that we are not witnessing improvements regarding ill treatment, be it interfamily or institutional, within institutions welcoming abandoned children. It is more insupportable when ill treatment takes place in an institution where the child has been sent by the courts.

It is not enough to come to an agreement on a declaration to make visible its effects in terms of a better situation for children. We have to mobilise ourselves in favour of the cause of children.

You also note that there are certain drifts in the interpretation of the International Convention on the Rights of the Child. I will cite only two:

- The trend to use words too legalistically. People would be limited to the juridical aspect. We know that in France all deputies voted the right to a place to live, but local authorities lack housing units! It is fine to make proclamations but if they lack the support of a strong mobilisation to transform the institutional reality of the country, these proclamations will be vane. The rights of the child have been proclaimed but we must not take them for granted, the Convention must not be considered as the culmination but as the starting point.
- The second trend some of you censure is the development of assistance. When we speak about citizenship, it means that we recognize the child as a citizen. We speak about balance between retribution and contribution. In a given society, when

retribution is higher than contribution we speak about assistance. On the contrary, when contribution is higher than retribution, we enter into exploitation. Citizenship is a balance between contribution and retribution, between rights and obligations.

I think that there is the risk of speaking only about the rights of the child and the obligations of the educators. We must also speak about the obligations of the child and the rights of the educators. In my country, I meet many adolescents ready to decline all their rights; I recall them that they are obliged to respect their teachers and the schoolwork. I deem it important to be able to call this child a citizen, to have a balanced discourse when referring to the rights and to the obligations. In my opinion, this discourse carries the real notion of citizenship.

### **The double approach “already” and “not yet” needed for the development of the child**

I retake the original contribution of your organisation in everything regarding the advancements of the children’s plight and of the education practices. In my opinion the originality of Bice comes from the kind of regard it gives children, an evangelical regard that is double: on the “already” and the “not yet”. One of the central messages of the Gospel is to make us discover that man is truncated if he is only regarded under the perspectives of “already” or “not yet”. The moral basis of the teachings of the Catholic Church is precisely this double regard.

I think that the most beautiful parable on education extant is the parable of the seed: a seed that will become a tree.

Abbé Pierre spoke about three categories of men and women: there are those to whom you show the seed who only see it. Then there are those who already dream about the tree, its leaves, and the birds. The drama of these big idealists is that by only dreaming they risk walking on the seed and then there will be nothing afterwards. Finally, there are those that can always see both the seed and the tree. The latter pay attention to the soil that will allow the tree to grow.

This parable on education or educate, means that the child must be allowed to take roots in his country’s familiar, social, cultural, and religious heritage. It is always a matter of balance between the transmission and the opening to novelty.

In our societies, sometimes we witness the pendulum swing. For instance, in France, prior to May 68 everything turned around transmission, and then came the explosion that accompanied the opening to novelty, as if the child could reinvent everything. Nowadays, I think that we must return to a more balanced discourse.

Always based on this double approach, when we are before the seed, we can say with the same degree of truth: “the tree is already there” or “the tree is not yet there”. If we do not plant it, if we do not water it, there will never be a tree.

If I decrypt this parable within the educational sphere, I could depict three categories of educators:

- There are those who only see the contemporary child, they have a limited view of his reality; they do not risk to transform all the potentialities of the child in capacities.
- The second category includes those who only see the future adult; they risk the non-respect of the development of the child. Certain institutions are incapable of being interested in the present reality of the children under their care when they have to inscribe them within an institutional project: it is “first, you pass your baccalaureate”, the current reality lived by the child is of no importance for them.

- In the third category, we find all those who seek their inspiration in the Gospel, those who have this double regard, this balance between “already” and “not yet”. This double regard leads us to the view of a double pedagogical attitude, where, at the same time, the child is secure and responsible. To accompany the child in the building of a better world needs that children have a secure present by establishing rules, and limits, but also by giving them a sense of responsibility since becoming a responsible adult implies learning how to be one; children must exercise their responsibilities.

What I find dramatic in our contemporary societies is the determination of the adults to be insured against all risks. It is true that to confide responsibilities to a child carries risks, but an education without risks is the most risky education since it forges irresponsible people. It seems that the evolution of our legislations and rules based only on protection do not help to awake the sense of responsibility.

I deem it important, within the context of our modern societies, that Bice become the hero of these practices based on this regard on the child conveyed by the Gospel where one must pay attention to “already” and “not yet”. The foundation of the real right to respect is to respect the rights of the child by recognising first the rights of the child to respect.

“Tomorrow, which world for our children?”

A world where the child could be respected. Maybe we must learn now to pass from the concept of “taking care of” to the concept of “taking into account”. In my country, I see many days of study organised by the departments on how to take care of children, perhaps what they need more is to be taken into account.

Recently, I was discussing with a politician that was telling me that adolescents have become a societal problem. I answered him that it was very sad for a society to consider childhood issues only from the point of view of its problems. Childhood, adolescence in a society, are first of all a chance. In the often negative discourse of our societies regarding children, it is important for Bice to transmit a positive discourse and a positive regard on those children. This means that we, the adults, must be inhabited by a regard of hope. Being fully aware that the principal source of the malaise of many children and adolescents is the negative opinion adults have about the future.

How can we help children to take their place within tomorrow’s society if our discourse is declined as “yesterday it was beautiful, today it is difficult, and tomorrow is catastrophic”? Let us start by measuring the impact these dramatic words, pronounced by so many Christians, will have on the impossibility of certain children to get a hold on the present to be able to build the future. To build some sense, we are obliged to conjugate past, present and future, one cannot make sense with only the present.

Saint John Bosco, founder of the congregation to which I belong, loved to say to those who obstructed his path “Salesians never lament about their time”. You cannot be in an educative position when you lament yourself constantly about time. How can we inspire enthusiasm in our children and adolescents to make them take their place in tomorrow’s society? How can we arouse their enthusiasm to build with us the more just, more fraternal society we dream about if our discourse is full of lamentations, if our vision is fixed on the rear-view mirror? It would only mean the restoration of our grandparents’ school. We must always be the harbingers of this regard of hope to make children and adolescents our partners in the construction of a world of sharing, justice and peace.

Thirty years practicing the profession of specialised educator with young people, generally victims of processes of exclusion and marginalisation made me discover that what these

adolescents need more is not probably the help proposed by the adults but adults capable of telling them “I need you to build together tomorrow’s world”.

### **An appeal on behalf of children**

To end my intervention, let me retake the words that closed Bice’s meeting held during the year of the promulgation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. These words seem to me particularly contemporary, in which we can recognise their prophetic character: *“do not fear us, do not fear to speak and to forbid, let us make mistakes, give us a nest and let us learn how to leave it. We ask for a school where together is different, where we keep the desire and the pleasure of knowing and learning, where each one can grow at his pace. We love all media, we learn fast how to use them, and we do not want to face them alone so they can make us laugh and dream. We want to be welcomed, looked upon, heard, and respected. We want a welcoming planet, full of colours, peaceful, safe and happy. Close to us, many people suffer exclusion; we reject the violence of racism, the violence of destitution and isolation. We want to be better acquainted with the other’s living experiences to be able to build together a world where everyone has a place, a brotherly world”*.

I borrowed my final words from that great pedagogue, Janus Korzack:

*“You say that it is tiring to spend time with children, you are right.*

*You add that it is because you have to put yourself at their level, to bend down, to lean forward, to become small. There, you are wrong. Those things are not the most arduous, the most demanding is the fact that we are forced to raise ourselves to the height of their feelings, to stretch, to spread out, to raise ourselves on the tip of our toes so we won’t hurt him”*.