The Holy See

DIALOGUE BETWEEN HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS
AND THE STUDENTS, TEACHERS AND PARENTS OF

COLLEGIO SAN CARLO OF MILAN

Paul VI Audience Hall
Saturday, 6 April 2019

[Multimedia]

[Adriano Tibaldi, student] Good morning Holy Father! My name is Adriano Tibaldi. I am in my final year of the ib Diploma Programme at San Carlo: in these months I'm preparing for final exams and at the same time, I am looking into possibilities for my future: which university? Where? I come from a family with an American mother and an Italian father. In recent years at San Carlo I have been able to participate in many volunteer experiences: last year I spent a few weeks on mission in Peru with some of my classmates. I saw with my own eyes extreme poverty, children and entire families without a home. I met three girls my age who had suffered violence at the hands of their fathers or of strangers, and have become mothers. I heard stories of boys being kidnapped by their families, killed and robbed of their organs for a couple of dollars. I was very upset by that experience and I wonder: Why does God seem to play favourites? To us, to me, to my friends, he gives us a wonderful life and to others he doesn't.... In concrete terms, what can we do about this issue? We who are preparing ourselves for life, who are choosing the best universities in the world? And what can a school do? Thank you.

Thank you. "Why does God seem to play favourites?". Yours is a good question. I knew the questions; I have them written down here, and I have some ideas to propose in response. But first and foremost, I will tell you something I did not come up with myself, something that the great Dostoyevsky asked: why do children suffer? There are questions that neither have nor will have answers, and we must get used to this. Some among you who want to have prepackaged answers are going down the wrong path, will end up making mistakes and their lives will be misguided, because prepackaged answers are useless; they are like air conditioning in a room. I tell you this to ease your heart, but your heart still asks: why, why? It seeks the answer, and there are things

that have no answer. Think about children, when they start to grow and see the world and do not understand, and what people call “the why age” begins. Children either get scared or have doubts and they look to their father and mother and ask: but ‘why, why?’, and when the father or mother starts to explain to them, they immediately add another ‘why’; they do not listen to the response. This thing that we can all see in children, and that we too did as children, helps us understand that the real response a child is looking for with those ‘whys’ is not what the father or mother says, but the gaze of the father and mother. The child is deeply uncertain and needs the father and mother’s gaze, and that gives him or her strength to go forward. And this is not a prepackaged response. The gaze of a man who has become a father, of a woman who has become a mother, cannot be bought in stores. It is the magnitude of fruitfulness that helps you grow and the unanswerable questions will help you grow in the meaning of the mystery. “Why does God seem to differentiate?”. It is a good question; always repeat it: but why, why? And grow with this ‘why’, unsatisfied, without a prepackaged answer. Do you understand this or not? Or do you need to ask “why, why?” one more time? Another thing I would like to tell you. Why does God seem to play favourites .... I will tell you one more thing: it is we who establish the differences. We are the creators of differences. Why are there so many hungry people in the world today? Why does God create this difference? No! This unjust economic system where every day, there are fewer and fewer rich people — but with *a lot* of money — and more and more poor people — with nothing! It is we, with an unjust economic system, who create differences, who allow children to go hungry! Someone might say to me: “Pope, I did not know you were a communist!”. No! Jesus taught us this, and when we go there, before Jesus, he will tell us: thank you, because I was hungry and you gave me to eat. And to those who, with this system, starve children and people to death, he will say: go away, because I was hungry and you did not look at me. It does us good to challenge ourselves with this “protocol” on which we will be judged: Matthew 25. We create differences. I am certain that all of you want peace. “And why are there so many wars?”. For example, in Yemen, in Syria, in Afghanistan. Why? If they had no weapons, they would not wage war. But why do they wage such a cruel war? Because other countries sell weapons, with which they kill children, people. It is we who create differences. And you must state this clearly, up front, without fear. And if you young people are not able to ask these questions, to say these things, you are not young; you are lacking something in the heart that “makes your blood boil”. Do you understand? It is we who differentiate. Whether with unjust economic systems, or building weapons so others may kill each other. The death of every child, of people, the destruction of families, is on the conscience of a people who manufactures arms and sells them. The other day I read in *L’Osservatore Romano* that there are, if I am not mistaken, over 900 million anti-personnel mines in the world. They have been planted; and after a war, the poor farmer who goes to work in the field ends up dead or maimed because one explodes. Did God do this? No. We did it, those who manufactured the mines. At the Synod on young people there was a young engineer who recounted his story. After graduating, he began to look for work and sent out his resumé. They called him.... In the end he participated in a competitive exam for employment, and he won.... A large factory. But it was a factory that also built weapons, and he had to be an engineer in the weapons plant. And this young man who wanted to get married, who wanted to move forward, who was happy to get the

job, said: no, I will not lend my intelligence and my hands to create things that will kill others. These are the courageous young people we need.

To sum up, we must always ask ourselves these uncomfortable questions. There are questions that will never be answered, but by asking the questions we will grow and become adults with concerned hearts. And then to be aware that it is we who create differences. And someone might say to me: “You have spoken about Syria, Yemen, Afghanistan, of these wars...”. Let us speak about school; in your classes, a child arrives, a boy who does not know how to play — who is it that invents and organizes *bullying*? Is it God? It is you! And every time you bully a child, one of your classmates, every time, with this act you are making a declaration of war. We all have within us the seed to destroy others. Be attentive because we always have that tendency to create differences and to enrich ourselves through the poverty of others. This came to mind to tell you. Forgive me if I was a bit passionate but this “makes my blood boil”!

[Silvia Perucca, teacher] Good morning Holy Father. My name is Silvia and for the past 13 years, I have been teaching at the classical high school, Collegio San Carlo. We teachers at all educational levels are faced with ever-greater educational challenges on a daily basis. We live in a multiethnic and multicultural society, oriented toward the future and which constantly offers the opportunity to meet and encounter different people, tools and educational methods — just think of the technology and the opportunities it offers but also of the inevitable risks it brings with it. As educators, we wish to teach our students a way to better seize these opportunities by opening ourselves up to others without fearing possible challenges, aware that this does not mean losing our own identity, but rather enriching it. Today, therefore, we would like to ask you how we can best convey to our students the values rooted in Christian culture and at the same time how we can reconcile them with the increasingly inevitable need to educate in relationships and encounter with other cultures. Thank you.

Thank you. I will begin with the last part of the question and then work backwards. “How can we reconcile ourselves with the increasingly inevitable need to educate in relationships and about encounter?”, and “How can we better convey to our students the values rooted in Christian culture?”.

The key word here is *rooted*. And to have those roots, it takes two things: consistency, that is, soil — a tree has roots because it has soil — and memory. According to analysts, scholars — following the school of Bauman — the bad thing today is *liquidity*. Bauman’s last book is called “*Nati liquidi*” (“Born liquid”), and it says that you young people were born liquid, without substance. But German tradition — and this is a curiosity — rather than saying “born liquid”, says “uprooted”. Liquidity is created when you are incapable of finding your identity, that is, your roots, because you are incapable of going further with memory, and to confront your history, the history of your people, the history of humanity, the history of Christianity: those are the values! This does not mean that I must close off the present and wrap myself up in the past and stay there out of fear.

No: this is cowardice.... But you must go to the roots, take the fluid from the roots and bring them forth with growth. Youth cannot move forward if it is not rooted. Values are roots, but with this you must grow. Water those roots with your work, challenging it with reality, but grow with the memory of your roots. For this I strongly advise you to speak with the elderly: I defend my age group, but we must speak with the elderly, because they are the memory of the people, of the family, of history. “Yes, but I speak with dad and mom”. This is good, but the intermediate generation is not very capable — today — of passing on values, roots, like the elderly. I remember in the other diocese, when several times I said to the young people: “Shall we go do something? Shall we go to this rest home and play the guitar to help the elderly?”. “Father, how boring. Let us go for a little while...”. The young people went there, began with the guitar, and the elderly who had been sleeping began to wake up, to ask questions: the young people to the elderly, the elderly to the young people. In the end they did not want to leave. But what was the allure of the elderly? The roots! Because the elderly brought to life the values of their history, of their personality, values that are a pledge to go forward. This is why root values are important — I am using your word: it is really important.

Then, a second thing is one’s identity. We cannot create a culture of dialogue if we do not have identity, because the dialogue would be like water that ebbs away. With my identity I dialogue with you who have your identity, and we both move forward. But it is important to be aware of *my* identity and to know who *I* am and that I am different from others. There are people who do not know what their identity is and live *à la mode*; they have no inner light: they live off fireworks that last five minutes and then go out. To know one’s identity. This is very important. Why did you have this or the other reaction? “Because this is how I am...”: to know your identity, your history, your membership in a people. We are not mushrooms born alone. We are people born into a family, a people, and many times, this liquid culture makes us forget that we belong to a people. One criticism I will make is the lack of patriotism. Patriotism is not just going to sing the national anthem or to pay homage to the flag: patriotism is belonging to a land, to a history, to a culture ... and this is identity. Identity means membership. One cannot have identity without membership. If I want to know who I am, I must ask myself the question: “To whom do I belong?”.

And the third thing: at the beginning you spoke about a multiethnic and multicultural society. Let us thank God for this! Let us thank God, because dialogue among cultures, among people, among ethnicities is a richness.... Once I heard a man, a father of a family, who was happy when his children played with other people’s children, of another culture ... people whom perhaps we underestimate and also scorn, but why? Perhaps your children will not grow up sheerly in your race? “Father, what is more pure than distilled water?” — a man once said to me. “But to me ... I do not taste the flavour of distilled water ... it does not help to quench my thirst”. The water of life, of this multiethnicity, of this multiculturality. Do not be afraid. And I am touching a wound here: do not be afraid *of migrants*. Migrants are those who always bring us richness. Even Europe was made by migrants! Barbarians, Celts ... all these who came from the North and brought cultures; this is how Europe expanded, with the juxtaposition of cultures. But today, pay attention to this:

today there is the temptation to build a culture of walls, to raise walls, walls in the heart, walls on the land in order to impede this encounter with other cultures, with other people. And those who raise a wall, who build a wall, will end up a slave within the walls he has built, without horizons. Because he lacks this otherness. “But Father, do we have to welcome all migrants?”. The heart open to welcome, first and foremost. If I have a racist heart, I must really examine why and convert. Second: migrants must be *received, accompanied, integrated*; so they may receive our values and we may know theirs, the exchange of values. But in order to integrate, government leaders must do the math: “But my country has the capacity to integrate only this”. Dialogue with other countries and try to find solutions together. This is the beauty of human generosity: to welcome in order to become richer. Richer in culture, richer in growth. But building walls is not helpful.

A short time ago I quoted that beautiful phrase of Ivo Andrić in the novel “*The Bridge on the Drina*”, when he speaks of bridges and says that bridges are something so indescribable and so great that they are angels, they are not human things. He says this: “The bridge was made by God from angels’ wings so that men can communicate”. The greatness of building bridges with people is for *communication*, and we grow with communication. Instead, closing off within ourselves leads us to be non-communicators, to be “distilled water”, without strength. This is why I tell you: “teach young people, help young people to grow in culture and in encounter, to be capable of encountering different people, differences, and to grow with differences: this is how we grow, with comparison, with good comparison.

There is another thing underlying what you are saying: today in this western world of ours another culture has really grown: the culture of indifference. The indifference that comes from relativism: mine is mine, period; and from the abolishment of all certainty. The culture of indifference is a non-creative culture, which does not allow you to grow; however culture must always be interested in the values, in the histories of others. And this culture of indifference tends to extinguish the person as an autonomous, thinking being, so as to dominate and drown him. Be attentive to this culture of indifference. Integralism, fundamentalism, and the sectarian spirit derive from this. This, more or less, we must consider: an open culture that permits us to look at a foreigner, a migrant, a member of another culture as a person to be *listened to*, considered and appreciated. Thank you.

[Giulia Missaglia, special education teacher] Good morning, Holy Father! My name is Giulia. I am a former student and for five years I have been a high school teacher at the Collegio San Carlo. In my years of training I met people who were able to guide me and support me on a journey of free personal and emotional growth. The vocation for teaching arose in me thanks to the passion I saw in the eyes of the educators who accompanied me on this journey. My greatest desire is one day to also be able to be for my children, what [teachers] have represented for me. Today at school I am also the special education teacher for Stella, a sweet girl who is now here with us. In my direct experience with her I have been able to meet the fragility and vulnerability of a certainly more “uphill” life than that of other people, but of great strength, courage and dignity, which inspires in

those around her respect and admiration and, hopefully, ever greater inclusion. Unfortunately, not all of this always happens; in a society like the present one, where there is increasingly less time, where it is accelerated, convoluted, I believe the task of us educators is above all that of helping young people to still recognize the value of meeting with others, of welcoming those who, for whatever reason, are different from us, but as such, are a resource for us, a source from which to draw. In order to do this I think it is essential to transmit the value of time to young people. Encounter, in order to be authentic and sincere, requires it, demands it, just as it requires caretaking, protection, "support" and also effort, because above all it challenges us and demands that we allow ourselves to be challenged. We ask you Holy Father, how can we educators be an example to our students and witnesses to this noble but equally difficult task? Thank you.

Thank you! The key phrase is "witness and support". One cannot give support without — I will use an Argentinian expression — "*putting all the meat on the grill*". If you want to support someone, not only must you give it your all; even more: you must put everything on the line! This is witness. And there, with witness, one supports, one gives support, true witness. I spoke of distilled water; I will also say: a true educator cannot be "distilled", something created in a laboratory. A teacher must be challenged by life and also — I will say something else that is used as an expression here in Italy too — "*get your hands dirty*", "*roll up your sleeves*" with reality. Witness is not being afraid of reality: put everything on the line! This is important. And then support. With this witness you will not just give advice and then go home. Stella — for example — or many young people will feel that behind the words, behind the advice, there is something else first: there is the support of witness. I say to the educator who is not able to bear witness: "Either convert or choose another career, more scientific, more in the laboratory". But to teach without witness does not work, and to educate with a poor witness is bad, because it does a lot of harm.

Then another thing. Support also calls for "loving kindness". One cannot educate without love. You cannot teach words without gestures, and the first gesture is the caress: to caress hearts, caress souls. And what is the language of the caress? Persuasion. One teaches with the patience of persuasion. Witness, loving kindness, caresses, persuasion. Now you understand what it means to "*put all the meat on the grill*".

Then a little thing, which perhaps will help you to not confuse, thinking about education. To educate is to introduce to life, and the greatness of life is putting methods into action. May you teach young people to put methods into action and not to take up space! People who are taught to take up space end up only competing to get a place. Those who are taught to put methods into action play for time, not just for the moment, not for space. Time is superior to space. May you play for time, put methods into action. These are the things that come to mind to tell you: support, closeness, witness, loving kindness, and putting methods into practice, teaching how to put methods into action.

[Marta Bucci, Parent — school board president] Your Holiness, we have had the grace to become

parents; we have been entrusted with precious lives to protect and love and we thank the Lord for this every day, even if it is not always easy. We want to ask you, as parents, for help on this day of celebration: we want to ask you for three words. A word for our little ones, for when in the evening we hug them tight, trying to make their fears disappear, for when they feel helpless and frightened because the world outside, growing, becomes bigger and bigger, for when they ask to be reassured and comforted because they are learning that everything does not always end well. A word for our young boys and girls, for when we see them waking up, smiling and melancholy, strong and weak at the same time, for when in their tiring navigation through many emotions, they ask us to help them really understand who they are, for when they would rather not turn away but feel that their heart is not yet so strong, for when they would like to look up to the heavens but are not sure that they too have wings. But above all a word for us parents, for when we will have to let them journey alone in the world, to be able to stay one step behind, to be able to understand their choices even if they will be different from those imagined, to remind us that those talents that we have lovingly safeguarded are not ours, but belong to our children and to all humanity, to be able to instill in them that courage that we have sometimes lacked, to be able to overcome our resignation and encourage them to believe that the world can still change.

Thank you. Three words. It is not easy. You used a very beautiful word: “hug ”. And with the littlest ones, closeness. Remember what I said before about ‘why’. They are closer to the ‘why age’; they have somewhat outgrown it but they need the closeness of the gaze. To embrace means closeness. Closeness with the little ones. Because they also need a closer guide, so they do not fall down, at least so they do not slip, things that happen when people walk. For young people I will say the opposite: encourage them to go forward, to walk, not alone, always as a group. And in the same way as with the little ones: with closeness you will try to keep them from falling down; with young people, let them fall, so they may learn, but so they may know that falling is not a failure. It is a test in life. But then speak, help them to pick themselves up. There is an alpine song which, to me, says a lot. You who are from those parts, perhaps you know it: “In the art of climbing the important thing is not avoiding the fall but not staying down”. Teach this gesture. Consider that it is acceptable to look down on a person only to help him get up! Otherwise looking down on a person from above is never acceptable, never! But at that moment it is acceptable. You young people, go forward, not alone, but as a group. There is a famous expression: “If you want to hurry up to arrive first, you go alone. But if you want to go safely, you go as a group”. Always the community, always the group, friends, so they may support one another. And about falling down: what I have already said. Then for you parents, there is an expression that psychologists use often and that I like very much, and also for you educators, the experience that teachers have the last day, when they leave definitively: “empty nest syndrome”, as psychologists call it when one at home gets married, the other one gets married and the couple ends up alone, as at the beginning of life but alone, the “empty nest”. You parents and teachers, do not be afraid of solitude! It is a fruitful solitude. And think about the many sons and daughters who are growing up and are building other nests, cultural, scientific, of political, social communion. With the little ones, closeness, to help them walk, so they do not fall down; with young people, encourage them to go

forward and if they fall, to pick themselves up, or help them get up, always remembering that it is the only acceptable way to look down on someone from above; and you [parents], with that nostalgic but beautiful heartache for the “empty nest”: take strength to go forward, because the family nest will be filled again with grandchildren; and with you teachers, it will be filled with others who come. Thank you very much for what you do. Now I invite you to pray together for one another and also pray for me, because work always has difficulties, each person has his or her own.

Let us pray for one another.

[Hail Mary....]

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