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# ST. JEROME EMILIANI'S EDUCATIONAL CHARISM

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St. Jerome Emiliani (Venice, 1486 – Somasca, 1537), a Venetian, a nobleman, a lay-man, converted to a fervent Christian life, a member of the Company of Divine Love, is the Founder of the Company of the Servants of the Poor (1528-1567), or Clerics regular from Somasca, since 1568.

He is a protagonist of the Catholic Reformation and of the Renaissance.

From his ardent desire to reform the Church through works of charity and the formation of evangelical communities both in hospitals and shelters where he would gather abandoned children, it takes form his educational activity. It consists first of all, in the learning of the Christian doctrine, and then in training for a job that would allow the orphans to be mainstreamed into society.

As a Renaissance man, he is committed to value “man,” in this case the child, in his earthly and individual dimension with his intellectual and manual skills, in his dignity as a citizen who will provide for his sustenance with learning a profession, in his greatness of Christian who, with the faith in Christ and the imitation of His life, becomes a child of God and temple of the Holy Spirit.

All sources agree in underlining that Jerome has a particular experience both in teaching catechism and preparing for a profession. I quote some of them:

- The petition of May 6, 1531, to the Doge of Venice for the patent of a carding-wool machine talks of “a shop for carding and other works under the care and direction of the nobleman Jerome Miani and other masters that supports the poor orphans who are taught to work in those professions and to live as obedient Christians for the honor of God and the benefit of this sublime city;”
- The letter from Galeazzo Capella to the duke Francesco Sforza of January 13, 1534, states that Jerome is committed to “instruct many children first in the divine worship and then in the mechanical arts;”
- The letter of Carafa to St. Cajetan Thiene of January 18, 1534, says that Jerome Miani is the captain of a small army “educated in the way of our Lord Jesus Christ for the good of the souls and the increase of the Catholic faith;”
- And last, the witness of the Anonymous (1537): “he instituted such a school (St. Rocco in 1528) that not even Socrates with all wisdom could imagine: there it was taught how by faith in Christ and by imitating his holy life, man becomes the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit, child, and heir of God.”

We can have a taste of his teaching skills if we analyze the so called catechism of St. Jerome, come to us as the “Instruction in the Christian faith through dialogue,” published by the Dominican Fr. Reginaldo Nerli. It contains an assembling of texts and teaching material, in part written by Jerome himself, in part gathered and spread around by him, and published and updated by the editor. We can say that Jerome would, without hesitation, copy what could be useful to him. He taught with a dialogical method, by question and answer. All the catechism is permeated by an intense spiritual and supernatural charge that gives us the atmosphere in which the lesson would take place and we will not find in other contemporary catechisms.

St. Jerome’s catechism begins with a meditation on the cross of the Lord: other two follow; truly one better than the other. I think that they came out from the heart and pen of St. Jerome, even though they were probably edited in a more current format by Fr. Reginaldo Nerli.

Let us rapidly analyze the first instruction on the cross that opens the catechism. Immediately, Christian faith is connected to the sign of the cross, banner of the blessed Jesus, our victorious emperor. Before the cross, angels bow and demons tremble. We need to adore the cross with all our hearts because it is the synthesis of Jesus’ passion.

We militate under this standard armed with living faith, sure hope, and ardent charity, which expresses itself in good deeds. For Jerome, our hope is certain and sure, tied in with the possibility of realizing our holiness on this earth. Faith is learned in the Creed.

Hope – it is said with Jerome Emiliani’s typical language – is “patiently waiting in this world’s tribulations for the reward of eternal life and trusting that, in His way, God, with His mercy, will lead us to the glory of paradise, provided that it will not lack in us.”

Here, as well as in other places, the language is typical of Jerome Miani: I quote only few expressions that seem come out of St. Jerome's pen: in this case, how could we not remember the second letter: *Thus does the good servant of God who hopes in Him: he remains steadfast in tribulations and then He comforts him and gives him a hundredfold in this world of what he leaves for His love, and eternal life in the other.*" In the same way, the expression "provided that it will not lack" again recalls the second letter *"...if it is not lacking in you."*

What is then charity? It is "to love God above everything, so that we may rather more rapidly suffer thousand deaths than to offend the majesty of so sweet a Lord and Father of ours, who wished to die for us."

Here too, "we may rather more rapidly suffer..." again recalls an expression of the second letter, *"and to want to suffer,"* and *"sweet Father of ours"* refers immediately to the "Our Prayer" that begins with these words.

The catechism, then, expounds in a rapid way on the capital vices and the ten commandments. Then, it asks: "What do we have to do so that the commandments be very easy for us? Answer: We need to continuously pray to God with fervor and to turn to His sweet Mother..."

We are still in Jerome's language we find in Our Prayer: *"we will turn to the Mother of graces..."* and in the third letter: *"to pray so much that we may see..."*, and in the sixth letter: *"to frequently pray before the crucifix."*

We have three beautiful prayers which sustain us in the fight against the devil, the world, and the flesh (liturgical expression that often we also find in Luther's catechism): the Our Father, the Hail Mary, defined as the greeting of the angel, Elizabeth, and Church, and the Litany of the Saints.

Jerome's catechetical teaching is not only for children, but reaches all the Christian people. With a group of children trained in Christian life he goes through the villages of the county and invite the farmers to embrace the blessed life of the holy Gospel.

### *Communication for St. Jerome*

Every person who educates and relates to another person has his/her own inspirational core, a theory of communication that is his/her own, often sub-liminal (unconscious) and un-aware, about the modality of contact with others: there are those who communicate with enthusiasm and passion, those who do it in a rational way, those who want to edify the neighbor, those who simply want to be welcomed, those who want to adopt a serious or severe approach, etc. If we examine St. Jerome's six letters which go back to the years 1535-7, and other minor documents, it is possible to go back to the main ideas of his way of communicating with adult and children.

#### **1. *To communicate is to pray and speak words of life from one's mouth***

St. Jerome with clarity identifies two types of communication: "With Sir John we must not speak with *dead words*, like my letters, but we *must pray for him and speak from your mouth words of life*" (3.13). Jerome always unites prayer and word; he does not like to write dead letters, but to pray and communicate words of life. It is a Biblical reference to John's letters. St. Jerome is aware he writes badly, he does not have a literary style, with the exception of the fifth letter edited in a good style by a friend and only signed by Jerome. However, there we lose incisiveness. More efficient and cutting are the words written in Jerome's own hand in the fourth letter to G.B. Scaini: "The result of your way of behaving shows that you do not ask the Lord the grace to operate: *et fides sine operibus mortua est* (faith without works is dead): you doubt of not being before God what you think you are. Greetings." In the fifth letter (to the same G.B. Scaini) written in a good Italian style, it is said: "We will not miss to remember you in our prayers. Pray to God that He may listen to them and that He may give you the grace of understanding His will in these tribulations of yours, and to execute it: His majesty must be asking something from you, but probably you do not want to listen to. Be healthy and pray to God for me and recommend me to Sir Stefano." It is more incisive and drier the one written by Jerome; more prophetic; that written in a good Italian style is more diluted, with a coating of curtesy and clericalism, I think.

#### **2. *To communicate is to show with deeds and with words***

The first goal of communication is therefore to pray and speak words of life from one's mouth. The second one is to show with deeds and words so that the Lord be glorified in you.

“Your poor father greets and comforts you in the love of Christ and in the observance of Christian life, as at the time I was with you I *showed with deeds and words* so much that the Lord has been glorified in you through me” (Beginning of the 2 letter). The text is a biblical allusion, from the first to the last word: poor, father, to comfort in the love of Christ, the time I was with you, to show, to glorify... everything has an evangelical sound. We find the same expression *to show with deeds* also in a strong polemical context when dealing about work: “others grumble and have this need of words, (while) we have shown the desire with deeds.” Word is empty if not accompanied by facts, witnessing.

### **3. *To communicate is to comfort in the love of Christ***

Another goal of communication is to comfort in the love of Christ, to confirm the brothers in faith. The word is always born in a climate of faith, is never an empty word which sounds and does not create, but a word that sounds and creates a relationship of faith, love, and conversion.

### **4. *To communicate is to make understand on behalf of Christ and grace to operate***

To communicate is to make somebody understand on behalf of Christ (Letter 6). It is to do and say what the Spirit inspires in you or shows you (practically, in all his letters). It is to pray and speak, to pray and say under the action of the Spirit efficient words in that moment (Letter 3 and 6). Prayer and word form an unbreakable link: the word is a form of Christ’s operating in those instruments that let themselves be guided by the Spirit.

The written text of the letters reflects, in its style, cadence, rhythms, syntax, code of oral communication both direct and inspired: I tell you, I reply to you, I state, I make you understand, I have been a bad prophet, the Lord makes me say, etc.

His life vision can be summarized in an active commitment, in the “grace to operate,” in an action dictated by the Spirit: to pray, to see, to operate what in this moment is required of you.

## ***St. Jerome Emiliani’s Educational Method***

Jerome, fervent Christian and refuge of the poor and the little, had his own educational praxis that we can synthesize in the following points that we cannot renounce even today.

### **1. *Staying and living with the children***

It is the Anonymous friend, probably one of the Contarini’s brothers (Marco or Pietro) to tell us the episode that enlightens the Saint’s praxis. Invited by the friend Domenico Sauli (1533) to go to his home in Milan and to leave the little ones in a makeshift shelter, he answered: “Brother, I thank you very much for your charity and I will be happy to come if only you would accept also these brothers of mine with whom I want to live and die. Domeico Sauli found this too overbearing, but he was good enough to mention this to the Duke who sent him the necessary things and gave him a ‘hospital,’ where he used to dwell more willingly than in any other place with his company.”

It is a question of physical presence, direct contact with the little ones. We can extend this to all our educational environments and we must demand it first from us and then from our cooperators and teachers. Our children must see us physically in their midst, as educators. They must feel that we are there willingly, because this is our mission, our way of being. If we only delegate, our Somascan method ends up losing its educational flavor: more than in any other place we must dwell where there are our students.

In all this we can see an intuition that will be taken and developed later by St. John Bosco who proposes the physical presence of the educators as a preventative method and not a repressive one.

### **2. *Knowledge derived from love in a welcoming environment***

It is always Contarini, the Anonymous friend of his life, who repeatedly visits Jerome Miani at San Rocco and at the Incurables, and sees him at work when he shows him the works made by his hands and a bunch of children, each one identified with his talents, his spiritual, intellectual, moral qualities (this one prays and thanks the Lord, those read and write well, these one work... that one is very obedient, this one can keep the silence...) It

is a question of having a positive knowledge of each one, derived from love, without doubting/despairing of anybody: in the educational field this knowledge is possible only through a direct dialogue, awareness of the family situation and, as far as possible, of the history of everyone. Students should feel in the educators of our institutions this rich human warmth and welcoming.

Today, someone speaks of the pedagogy of the face: "The face is only for itself. You are you. In this sense, we can say, the face is not seen. It is what that cannot become a graspable content from the thought: it is uncontainable, it takes you beyond" (Levinas, quoted in the Anthropological educational guidelines of Collegio Gallio, pg. 13, 2008). As to say, that everyone is unrepeatable, that he is a door wide open to the transcendent and mystery, that he has a name given by the Name par excellence, by God, that I can know the person in front of me only if I know God (Romano Guardini, *Accettare se stessi*, Morcelliana).

### **3. Everybody must follow the law of work**

If there is a point in which Jerome Miani shows himself to be severe in his letters is work: everybody must follow this fundamental rule, adults and children, otherwise they cannot be part of the educational community, must be dismissed, and sent to the hospitals. The word work has a very high frequency in his letters: it appears 18 times. Even though he belonged to a noble Venetian family, Jerome had a direct experience of work in the family environment. In fact, the Mianis got their decent sustenance from the wool trade and art. Work must appear to Miani, after the religious education, the first way to open to the little orphans the possibility of a moral and social ransom. We know that it was a work done with discretion, alternated with moment of relaxation, study, and prayer. Moreover, the children, before learning the art of working, must be clothed with the will to work and be educated in this need, by internalizing the Sacred Scripture saying, "he who does not work, must not eat." We know from the Anonymous that at Bersaglio and San Rocco, Miani had brought some masters who would teach "to make iron pitchers, art that he and his children exerted." Jerome utilized specialized masters so that the learning of a trade would be the most rigorous and exact as possible. Another work in Venice was wool carding, according to a special patent by Angelo Romitan. In Brescia Jerome began a production of hats.

The personal commitment is a difficult point to obtain today, but in our educational institutions we must demand fidelity to the school work, the sound desire to become professionals prepared and accustomed, since the years of adolescence, to personal responsibility. Life is not desperation for some and feast for others, but for all a service and work of which we must give an account, as says our alumnus Alessandro Manzoni.

### **4. Devotion as faithfulness to the values of the Christian tradition**

Devotion is another foundation of our educational project. Surely for St. Jerome it was a value greater than our: it was due to the spiritual tension of prayer, Christ's imitation, poverty, service, discipline (good manners) which make possible the assimilation and spreading of the Christian values. It is because of this that the communities stand. Without devotion, without the fire of the Spirit, everything collapses.

"Devotion" involves all the components of the educational community: religious and faculty who must feel they are sent by the Church to witness the faith that must go from heart to mouth, from mouth to life, to profession, to witness, while making a synthesis between culture and faith, and while trading the treasure, that is the charism left us by St. Jerome. Students must be educated to interiority, to the sense of life's meaning, to opening to the proposal and practice of faith's life that may enlighten the journey of their existence. Moments of proposals and Christian praxis, like prayer before classes, offering sacraments of Eucharist and reconciliation, study of Christian religion in its mysteries and morals, cannot be missing in our education.

Historically, the word "devotion", which appears 9 times in his letters, recalls the Renaissance spirituality of the modern devotion, shared by other Saints of the time, especially by St. Ignatius, and it finds its expression in the spiritual exercises which must guide to the dominion of all man's faculties so to be more available to the needs of neighbor. It is however a lay spirituality, made their own by the confreres of the Divine Love, who wanted to imitate Christ without the burden of a heavy legalism, and serve Him in the brothers with works of charity.

### **5. Charity as welcoming and love inside the communities and as solidarity with the poor**

Charity, with work and devotion, constitutes the other fundamental element of the educational work. Charity, term that appears 9 times too in his letters, has a value only if it is present in the educational community, if all the teachers and student feel welcomed, accepted, respected as persons, if there is an atmosphere of interaction and empathy among the school components. They are unacceptable and must be strongly eradicated

the aspects of abuse of power and bullying among the students. And then charity must be open toward outside, to the values and practice of solidarity and edification of peace. To love each other and to take care of the poor is, in its practical aspect, Jerome Miani's spiritual legacy. He has dedicated to creating a climate of love inside his communities and to serving the poor in order to make them grow and be fully mainstreamed in society, all his energies, to the point of sharing his own life with the last.

In synthesis, Jerome Miani says that work, devotion, and charity are the foundation of educational work: in the first place there is work that is the first rule even for the adults otherwise there is a counter-witness because, if they do not work, little they confirm the brothers in the charity of Christ.

### *A little history*

#### **1. The First Fathers**

We can find these characteristics of the educational project, adjusted to the times, in all our educational history. For example, in the minutes of the meeting of the Administrators of the Misericordia in Verona, held on July 18, 1540, about an agreement with Fr. Federico Genovese (Panigarola), who came after another priest, Agostino, we find expressions very meaningful: "...as it pleased God, came into our town some priests of religious life who delighted in following Christ in poverty (theirs was a joyful and educational poverty based on work) and succeeding in it, by educating children in the Christian life." Their specialization is to educate children in Christian life. They are specialists in educating (they look there for their way to holiness): "they succeed in it." In order to be faithful to their educational charism, the Fathers wanted a uniformity of environments and age for the little ones, demanded separate quarters for the orphans and the hospital of the Incurables, claimed the faculty of choosing 2 or 3 supervisors and freedom of education about the way the orphans lived and dressed, in accepting, refusing, and dismissing children, as well as the direction for a set time, and not forever, of the institutions (Bonacina, L'origine... pag 69).

It is moving to note how are identified our Fathers and Brothers in the trial for the inquisition against the Bergamo's Bishop, Vittore Soranzo:

- Fr. Leone Carpani: priest from Milan, vicar of the venerable priests who serve orphans and poor in different places;
- Fr. Agostino Barili, interrogated in the Hall of the Hospital S. Maria Maddalena by the Fr. Inquisitor, Friar Domenico Adelasio, "venerable Sir priest who serves the poor orphans;"
- Fr. Giovanni Belloni, interrogated after Fr. Barili: "venerable Sir priest John Belloni, from the diocese of Milan, already serving the poor orphans of Christ in Bergamo and other places;"
- Fr. Giovanni Cattaneo: "Sir John Cattaneo, already serving the poor orphans of Bergamo and other places for many years;"
- Fr. Vincenzo Gambarana: "venerable Sir priest of the Congregation with the office of serving the students, currently living at the Hospital of Mercy in Verona;"
- And once again Fr. Giovanni Belloni: "venerable Sir priest of the Congregation with the office of serving the students, currently living in the town of Brescia at the place of Mercy."

It is a reason for amazement to see "venerable Sir Priest" united to "serving the poor orphans of Christ." Our characteristic is really this one, despite the noble origins or priestly dignity: to live where there are orphans, to live with them and serve them; these orphans belong to Christ: they are his.

#### **2. The first Journey of the Congregation**

We were recognized as Congregation on December 6, 1568, by St. Pius V, after we obtained from St. Charles Borromeo the Church of S. Maiolo in Pavia with a property connected, because without the property to support the livelihood no priest could be ordained. It is very significant what is said in the Bulla: "These religious live in exemplary way: among other works of piety, they are devoted to educate the orphans in the Christian piety, in letters, and manual work, by paying attention to everyone's abilities. In various seminaries (*in Tortona we*

*entered in 1564 and probably we were the first religious to take this task in the Church) they have the direction and formation of clerics. Because of all this, there is no doubt that this Congregation will last forever.”*

In 1579, they start working in the Patriarchal Seminary of Venice, in 1585 the Collegio Gallio is founded in Como, in 1595 the foundation of the Collegio Clementino in Rome, instituted and entrusted to us by Clement VIII, great Pope of the Counter-reformation, friend of St. Philip Neri, St. Robert Bellarmino, St. Francis of Sales. He wanted that the Somascan Congregation to take the commitment to forming the leader classes, both the Italian and foreign youth. At the Clementino studied 40 future Cardinals, a Pope, ecclesial princes, 12 dukes of Genoa, one of Venice, and many literates. The school work was hard and demanding, and required commitment to study, participation in the classes, compositions in high Latin style, but also in Italian. The students were pushed to learn by heart, to dispute, to write compositions, to participate in academies, to organize recitations in front of personalities. There were two academies: that of the “willing ones”, trained to speak and write prose and poem on any topics (they gathered every Thursday); that of the “extravagant ones,” who gathered only twice per year. The inauguration of the 1690 school year took place in front of the queen Christine of Sweden and 14 Cardinals. Besides letters, they were taught fencing, dancing, exercising with horses, flags, and spears, jumping, music, fortification, mathematics, foreign languages, theater, etc. All the religious were to be involved: the Rector, the Dean, the professors, the teachers, the lay collaborators. There was a great library. Spiritually, there were the very active Marian and the Guardian Angel Congregations. Unfortunately, after the Italian unification, the Clementino was taken by the State and then demolished because of viability reasons.

### **3. Foundation of School in the 1600 and 1700**

In the first half of the 1600, there was a great development in founding Collegios and School: Collegio of San Clemente a Casale, S. Maria degli Angeli (Fossano), S. Lorenzo (Biella), S. Bartolomeo (Merate), S. Maria Egiziaca (Rivolta), S. Giorgio (Novi), S. Zeno (Verona), S. Carlo (Albenga), S. Angelo Custode (Lodi), Mensi and Macedonio (Naples).

In 1650, the Congregation could count 60 institutions: 19 Collegios, 4 public schools, 16 orphanages, 11 houses of formation, 19 between churches and parishes, 5 seminaries, and 4 hospitals. In the same year (1650) the Somascans were 486, of whom 188 were lay and associates who professed the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience only in private, but who led a community life like the religious. In this period the Somascans began also the parish ministry and 12 were ordained bishops.

This trend, sometimes with a less enthusiasm in 1700, but with new schools, such as the School for Nobles in Venice, where the Somascans were considered the best specialist in education, continued until the Napoleonic suppressions, that confiscated all the goods of the Congregation; there was a rebirth at the beginning of the 1800 and then, after the unity of Italy, we had a second suppression, more radical than the Napoleonic one.

We owe to the zeal of our Fathers of the end of 1800 (about 50 religious) the beginning of the rebirth. The School in Rapallo, opened in 1850, was saved from the suppression and allowed the purchase of the property of the Nervi's school that started its activity in 1899.

Enormous is the patrimony of holiness and culture that our Congregation has developed in its five centuries of existence. In the past, our Congregation was very proud and spoke of the cult of doctrine, besides the cult of holiness: it could list historians, mathematicians, scientists, poets, philosophers, experts in Dante, university professors, cardinals, bishops, educators, and life masters. We hope that their memory will remain, that their works will be catalogued, preserved, and studied. In order just to name only few Fathers of the generation just passed away, let us mention the cultural work of Fr. Rinaldi, Fr. Barvalle, Fr. Raviolo, Fr. Quaglia, and Fr. Pigato.

In the Constitutions of the past (used until 1929) it was clearly stated the cultural mission of our Order: “Our Order... educates in Christian piety and studies the youth of the Seminaries, Public Schools and Collegios and Academies of nobles (# 4). On the other hand, ours must be educated in literary disciplines, especially in sacred subjects and in sacred canons, be educated also in languages, especially the Biblical ones, so that at proper time they may work at the service of our Great God and Holy Church (# 801)”. The current CCRRs too, at # 3, after the care for orphans, speak of the Congregation's commitment for the human and Christian education of youth, and a particular chapter is dedicated to the Somascan mission in the youth ministry and school (# 75 A-H).

The Ratio Studiorum (1741), required for the intellectual formation of our clerics, was really demanding even in the past at either literary level or philosophical or theological one. More limited was the study of scientific subjects (mathematics and geometry), left usually to personal inclination. However, are not lacking in our tradition

even excellent mathematicians and physics, teachers in our schools, at times in universities and military academies (Fr. Crivelli, Fr. Della Torre, Fr. Besio, Fr. Santini, etc.).

#### **4. The current schools**

Our current schools are numerous and require a lot of energies from our Congregation: in Italy, Nervi, Rapallo, Albate, Como, Maccio, Corbetta, Albano Laziale. In Spain there is a strong school component: La Guardia, Caldas de Reyes, Aranjuez. In Central America: La Ceiba de Guadalupe (El Salvador), in Guatemala and Honduras. In South America: Tunja (Colombia), as well as in Ecuador, Brazil (Campinas) and Mexico (San Raphael). In the Philippines (Sorsogon, Lubao), in India and Sri Lanka. To all these we need to add all the parochial schools both in Italy and abroad that, with the lay help, carry out our educational mission.

In this educational activity we must make work the charism of our Founder: to stay as fathers with our students, to know them and love them, to demand a life of commitment to the school work, to propose the values of interiority and faith; we must create a family atmosphere inside our schools where everybody may feel welcomed and accepted, and outside we must promote sensibility and attention to the problems of the poor and marginalized.