

## It is possible to awaken children to the interior life<sup>1</sup>

A great challenge for our times!



How can one access one's inner life in a world where interiority is a stranger fueled as it is by speed, noise and a culture of materialism? How create a connection between the inner and the outer life so as to nurture a fertile interiority?

How can educators today help the youth to discover and live the spiritual dimension of their lives? And first of all to face the challenge owning and naming his/her existential questions? Superficiality diverts us from our own depth, but it is always accessible to the one who seeks it. Marie-Eugénie, foundress of the Sisters of the Assumption, answered a sister complaining how the students were like butterflies: "Oh, but do not cut their wings, just direct their flight!"

St. Augustine points out the challenge : "People go to admire the height of the mountains, the gigantic waves of the sea, the broadly flowing rivers, the limitless horizons of the ocean, the revolutions of the stars: and they leave themselves out of the picture! (Book X, 8, 15 of the St Augustine Confessions).

In his exhortation addressed to the Augustinians assembled in the General Chapter in Rome in 2001, Pope John Paul II affirmed: "You must be the mentors of interiority at the service of the men and women of the third millennium in search of Christ. It is not by the shallow way that one reaches it, but only by the way of interiority. "

It is in this sense that the Assumption Center of Pastoral Education Resources , has reflected on a pedagogy of interiority, which helps students arrive at reasons for living and acting , helping them to develop their inner life in order to allow each one of them to reach his/her true desire and discern the direction of his/her life, in a process of personal transformation.

With these convictions, and enriched by the experience of having welcomed many children to a mountain prayer school, where they opened to me the hidden sources of their inner life, I initiated an interiority workshop, once a month (one hour after class) for the children of CM1 in the Assumption school of Bondy (Seine Saint Denis district).

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.assumpta.org/Education-Decembre-2017>

There were many requests to join, so two workshops were set up to accommodate all. This year 10 children from CM2 have chosen to continue, and another 24 of CM1 are embarking on the adventure. The objective is to awaken their consciousness to gain access and to learn to listen to their feelings, emotions, thoughts and actions. It is where they learn to dialogue with themselves and with others, to taste a silence that integrates them, to discern what makes them grow and what risks harming them.

Children, like our people in this diocese, come from a variety of cultures and religious confessions. The workshops are open to everybody. There is no explicit proclamation of the Gospel, but is an open space where everyone can be helped to be more deeply in touch with his/her life.

What takes place in the workshops? Each workshop has two parts: first, a relaxation exercise using the CD "Calm and attentive as a frog" by Eline Snel, "Happy and relaxed" by Marine Locatelli, or others, with the following points of focus:

- Learn how you feel from observing your breath. Listen to the part our body plays by experiencing that breathing and the heartbeat pulsate together, as we live so does the tempo or the pace goes.
- Consult his/her "personal weather", to learn about the "weather inside".
- Leave the head, feel the body, to learn to avoid reacting impulsively.
- Become aware when attention wanders, to bring it back to the breath; training one's attention is like training a muscle.

In the 2nd part, I introduce some modules of active learning. At the end of each experience, there is a time of reflection following some guide questions: "What have I done? I remember the exercise I did. What sensations, emotions did I experienced? What do I do with them? What does this exercise inspire me to do? What does it invite me to continue? Could I continue having a 'calm time' at home? At the end of the workshop, I give an interiority notebook to the children of CM2, with these questions, so they write what they want to keep in their heart, their body and their spirit.

This training helps children to become aware of several essential points like the following:

- Body awareness: through movement, following the breath, dance movements, being attentive to body sensations, relaxing exercises during stressful situations in daily life. It is primarily to be present to the present moment, to "the here and the now".
- Trust in the other and responsibility towards the other by the activity of being a guide or being guided by another, by turns, while blindfolded. Being guided by others demands having trust in oneself.
- Listen to my body signals, discovering that it is not only making it do what I want, but to see my body as a companion who asks me not to go beyond limits for my well-being. What do I do with what I feel? To feel and make a choice. See and observe, listen and hear, touch and perceive.

- To recognize myself as unique and precious. It is the foundation for the creation of my identity.
- The contemplative dance of blessing, in the gracefulness of gestures, to discover my capacity to bless and to wish good to the earth, to another, to all peoples and to oneself.
- To manage one's emotions. A child once shared with me: "I would like so much to get rid of my sadness!" Working with the "rainbow of emotions" allows them to be in touch with them in an open, nonjudgmental way. Understand that unpleasant emotional states such as sadness are transient; that we can try not to let them invade our inner being, also we can look to our "reserves of joy" to moderate them, or even to make them disappear. In all this, it is a question of learning to feel and to recognize things internally.

What do the children say?

"I love interiority, it calms me down; when I have problems, I learn to let go of them, and this leaves me feeling good ... I become more and more calm, relaxed and light inside. I learn to travel inside my body, I cannot describe it!" Naëlle 10 years.

"Living inwardly helps me a lot in my everyday life; I often practice it at home whenever I'm stressed. I have already tried with my mother and she told me that it worked and she felt well afterwards! We do not always have the chance to do this, it is really magical, everyone should try it!" Zoe, 10 years.

Sophie Godart, a teacher who has joined us in the animation of the workshops, shares with us her experience: It is helping children to discover the treasures they carry within them, to get to know each other better, to live in their bodies, to tame their breath, to feel they are precious, to accept their emotions. I remember seeing Nadir organizing a concert of happy people, the shared faces of Jade and Kayla, Naëlle's serenity finally calm and free from the tyranny of the eyes of others. Also the joy of Inès to discover the Rondo Veneziano and to dance it.

I also those moments of sharing while planning with Sister Marie-Geneviève, when we brainstormed ideas, the meeting of minds, feeling the same passion, the same belief in and the same vision of the human being.

What a great adventure! ... I am sure that the seeds planted in these workshops will give birth to beautiful things in their lives. "

*Sister Marie-Geneviève POULAIN, r.a.  
Community of Lyon, France*