

Interpersonal Relations: Family Spirit

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A Marian style of education is characterized by its humanizing qualities of welcoming, kind, and fraternal relationships. To sum it all up, the student is not simply a number or just a task. There are relationships of family in fraternity, not in dominance or indifference to each other. The Second Vatican Council said that all who have a role (a mission) in the Church should be animated (enthusiastic) about Mary's maternal and motherly love and, therefore, should work together for the rehabilitation of humankind. We are speaking of an important aspect of education, in relation to community: the *type and the quality of the relationships* established.

We often speak of family spirit as a characteristic of Marianist education. When it comes to young adults, research done by sociologists in recent years shows institutions that inspire or foster more self-confidence in these students are those based on interpersonal relationships. The institutions with authoritarian or hierarchical characteristics are the ones that have less of an impact. However, acceptance of a given institution may grow with time based on its democratic dimensions and likeness to daily life. In other words, two types of institutions that exist and are accepted due to the fact that they are both made up of interpersonal relations are *family and friends*.

It is true that these two spheres, especially family, could be frustrating at times when they do not fulfill their role. But what I want to emphasize is the importance of family and friends, those interpersonal relations nurtured in the educational center. I do not want to sound naive or speak of fairy tales or describe an American movie where educators are nice, approachable, and caring enough for their students that they find a gratifying answer to the most difficult questions. We are done with magic formulas and we know, like in every other relationship, there are so many factors in the teacher-student relationship that are such that mere good will may not be enough to create an environment of trust. . . .

One of the difficulties for the adult is the tendency to interpret every reaction of the child or adolescent from the adult viewpoint and values. At times the teacher may look at the external manifestations as if they were the language of an adult (related to such things as infractions and "impertinent" replies). Empathic understanding is neither the pure affective understanding, nor is it the pure affective identification (educators would stop being themselves and become a student), nor is it the coldness of bureaucrats who do not place themselves in the other's shoes. It is the effort to enter into the affective and conceptual world of the student *as if* it were their own world; but always "as if," that is, without losing the necessary distance for dialogue between two persons.

It is a matter of being *within* the student but also remaining *without*. The touchstone of a good educator is the *balance between identification and objectivity*. Therefore, the situation of the students does not leave them indifferent, but neither does it involve them to such a degree as to render them unable to see reality. Educators are not mere spectators who do not care; at the same time, they will not get lost in a child's world in order to be able to lend a hand in times of need.

An aspect of family spirit is *presence*, to know how to be present. The Gospel teaches us that Mary was at the cross: she was there, present. She respected Jesus' independence, but she never abandoned him. In times of need she was always there: to encourage, support, accompany. Even if she does not speak much, the son feels she is there.

Almost without realizing it, we can distance ourselves if we are not present with the students, if we do not talk to them, show interest in what they like, if we do not laugh and cry with them. A word, a joke, a friendly greeting does not go unnoticed. Moral support and practical support to any initiative gives the sense and feeling that we are not indifferent. And that gives them a sense of security. If by our "presence" students get the sense they can count on us as educators, we are contributing to their own sense of security and self-esteem. Students do not feel lost in a void or in anonymity. They feel accepted and loved as they are. We must listen, not only to their important issues, but also the "silly" thing and stories of every day; which may not be so silly for the student. . . . By our attitude, we are doing them a great service. We can do all of this without creating a sense of dependency which may limit the integration into the group (of students).

On the road to adulthood a student will need role models. Otherwise students could develop insecurities that may affect their values and may not be explained in simple theory. In other words, students need to be around people who represent those values in their daily life. Is it not a huge responsibility to become a role model? One would think there is a contradiction in the need to be present and in becoming a role model. "I am not perfect, therefore, I will stay away and no one will notice my imperfections." But we must be aware of our own faults and errors and accept them . . . and look at it all as relative. For example, if a teacher makes a mistake, accept it, correct it, and do not go around finding excuses in order to avoid being corrected.

When we speak of "living by example," we do not mean for people to take on the role of someone who has nothing to do with who we really are. We do not need to pretend. At times it is best for our friends to see us as weak and in need of strength. It is better to speak to a human being, a person, than to a statue.

What will help our students is not for them to witness the spectacle of our lives, but for them to see how we handle and live them. Because of this, the authenticity needed in relationships does not mean we must show all our own defects and negative thoughts we think. To sum it all up, teachers' authenticity toward students are made up of two aspects:

- 1) Be honest with ourselves. Do not hide feelings toward students, positive or negative. Accept them and move on.
- 2) By being honest with students, educators must always want to better the situation, to improve the relationship.