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George Boran C.S.Sp.

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THE POTENTIAL OF NONFORMAL EDUCATION FOR SPIRITAN MISSION

George Boran,
C.S.Sp.

Fr George Boran is an Irish Spiritan. He has become an international specialist in the area of youth leadership training and youth ministry. He has worked as National Youth Director for the Brazilian Bishops' Conference (CNBB). His doctoral thesis in Fordham University was on the role of successful Adult Youth Ministers in Latin America and the United States. George is the author of important books on working with young people that have been published in Portuguese, Spanish, English, German and Ukrainian. He is founder and coordinator of the National Youth Training Center, CCJ, in Sao Paulo.

...a nonformal educational approach: celebrations, groups, formation of leaders...

Although Libermann is not generally regarded as an instigator of educational work (N.D, VIII, p. 248, N.D, IX, p. 44) he was quick to notice that one could not work for the emancipation of the poor without working for their education. **Education can be one of the most powerful weapons against poverty,** ignorance and disease by helping people to improve their lives.

When we talk of education we tend to think immediately of the formal education that takes place in schools. However, we need to **widen our concept** of education. Spiritans are involved in education in many contexts and different situations. Education can be both formal and informal. The Duquesne International Symposium on education in the congregation, in 1991, points out:

The scope and variety of Spiritan involvement in education came as a surprise to many. Of particular significance was the acceptance and even the stress on the importance of non-formal education. Gratifying, too, was the spirit in which educators resolved to implement the orientation of SRL in the educational apostolates, especially provisions regarding justice and the poor.

In many places the congregation does not have its own schools, so missionaries work with a **nonformal educational methodology.** Even when they work with government or Catholic schools, within parish boundaries, they tend to use a nonformal educational approach: celebrations, groups, formation of leaders... A document on education, prepared by an international meeting for the Spiritan General Chapter in 2012,¹ points out:

*We need to **form educators by preparing specialized people, such as teachers and managers,** for our formal educational works. But we also need to **prepare competent people in the use of the nonformal approach** that starts with peoples' lives and uses the inductive methodology. As in many situations, we don't have a captive audience, so we need facilitators capable of motivating people to participate in an ongoing process where they have ownership and that leads to commitment. This nonformal educational approach is effective in both formal education and alternative educational works.*

George Boran, C.S.Sp.

Although many find themselves in situations where they are obliged to use a nonformal methodology, this is rarely studied in a systematic way. In this article, I hope to contribute to a clarification of this approach.

Differences Between Two Types of Education

Formal Education tends to use the **deductive method of giving a class, of starting with theory, with principles**. This works well in a school situation.

...the inductive method of starting with peoples' lives and the concrete situation...

On the other hand, nonformal education works with the **inductive method of starting with peoples' lives and the concrete situation** where people find themselves. The See Judge Act Method is an example of a well known inductive method in the Church. John XXIII, in *Mater et Magistra*, referred to it as the best method for formation in the principles of social justice. The method was later consecrated by the Latin American Church: getting to know the concrete situation, examining this reality in the light of the Word of God and the Church doctrine and, then, "acting in accordance with the time and place" (MM, 236).

Theory is important, but not the starting point. The inductive methodology requires a continuous interaction between Theory and Practice, an attention to Praxis as the relation between the two. Reality will correct the theory and the theory will illuminate the reality and organize information so that it is intelligible. Then we can interpret the information and decide on the best course of action. The basis of fundamentalism, whether it be of the right or the left, is the belief that the theory is ready-made and we only need to apply it to reality. In this top-down approach reality has to be made to fit into the theory and not vice versa, that is why it is very difficult to dialogue with fundamentalists. Frequently no amount of evidence will move them from their belief that they have all the answers.

...it is very difficult to dialogue with fundamentalists.

The story of the disciples on the way to Emmaus depicts how Jesus uses an inductive methodology of nonformal education. He doesn't start by giving them a lecture. Rather he walks with them and then uses as his starting point their situation of discouragement and disillusionment. He asks: "What were you talking about on the way?" He then explains the theory, the biblical theory that illuminates the situation in which the disciples find themselves. And it was only at the end of the journey that his listeners recognized him, in the breaking of bread, and committed themselves to spreading the Good News.

Nonformal education is not limited to parishes. Within a school environment both types of education can co-exist: formal

and nonformal. The methodology of nonformal education can also be effective in certain situations within the school environment. In fact, if some form of a nonformal educational approach is not used to develop faith commitment, graduation from a school can also mean graduation from the Catholic Church.

...in pastoral ministry they have difficulty in understanding that the...methods now have to be different.

Many pastoral agents (priests, sisters, laypeople) have been trained to work in a **formal educational** setting, in an institutional way or within institutions (schools, universities, seminaries, hospitals, social institutions) and have difficulty in adapting to the new rules of a nonformal education. They are competent when it comes to giving a talk, a class, organizing from the top down. But in pastoral ministry they have difficulty in understanding that the rules, the attitudes and the methods now have to be different. In a school situation, the teacher can count on the continuous presence of her pupils. Even if she is a bad teacher, pupils continue to attend because they need to get a diploma at the end of the course. Without a diploma they won't be able to get a job in the future. And without a job they won't be able to eat, marry, buy a house and raise a family.

In a nonformal or community situation, on the other hand, the motivation is different. The pastoral agent does not have a captive audience. He/she must motivate people to come to the first meeting. After the first meeting, people must be motivated to return to the next one. And so on for every meeting. When meetings become tiring, repetitive and mediocre people tend to opt out. Pastoral ministry does not have guaranteed clients and so, to be successful, needs a **high capacity of adaptation and creativity**. There are two options open to the pastoral agent: adapt and respond to people's needs and so motivate them or face failure.

However, many church leaders have difficulty when they find themselves in situations where they are obliged to use a nonformal approach. Frequently, they have been trained to lecture people and have difficulty in knowing what to do when they **don't have a captive audience**. They lack training in the inductive methodology of nonformal education.

I. NONFORMAL EDUCATION STARTS WITH PEOPLE'S LIVES.

People's needs are on two levels: 1. Micro and 2. Macro level.

1. At the Micro level.

Nonformal education requires us to start with where people are at. Some of these needs are: the **need to love and be loved, the need to be recognized, the need for material security to develop**

...need to love and be loved, the need to be recognized...

other aspects of life, the need for an **identity**, the need to have **emotional** fulfillment in interpersonal relationships, to be kind and receive **kindness**, to give **meaning** to one's own life, to **transcend oneself**, to be part of a human group and to count on it for dealing with life's challenges and **building a better world**. If we don't start with their interests we can't hold their interest. If we fail to present the Gospel message as a response to these needs, it becomes irrelevant. A young person once remarked: "The Catholic Church has only the Mass, and that is boring." The remark reveals a failure to present the message of Jesus in a way that is relevant to people's lives.

2. At the Macro level.

However, to remain only on the micro level is to deny our duty to form people as citizens to build a better society. The nonformal educational methodology should take into account the need to change people but also to change society, to work on the Macro level. This methodology deals with the way society is organized politically, economically and socially. This involves creating awareness of the deeper structural causes of social ills so that people cannot be naively manipulated by unscrupulous leaders. The way we organize society can often reflect the interests of powerful elite groups in society to the detriment of the majority of the population. **The process of political and social awareness** should take into account the educational principle of a growth that is gradual. The development of awareness is something that involves group work, is gradual and passes through stages.

Nonformal education starts with the reality of people's lives, especially those of the marginalized. **Urgent needs that demand urgent answers** is usually the starting point for the involvement of Spiritan missionaries. It is a way of making concrete the option for the poor.

The Spiritan chapter document of 2004, "Important elements of Spiritan spirituality" states:

*Des Places' renouncing of the possibilities of a brilliant career and money given by his father and decision to live with the poor seminarians challenges the values of our surrounding consumer society culture. He wanted his work to be God's work. **Attention to the poorest** and most abandoned is at the heart of the intuition of both Claude Poullart des Places and Francis Libermann. This is an important criterion for our lifestyle and discerning the works we take on.*

..creating awareness of the deeper structural causes of social ills...

...needs that demand urgent answers is usually the starting point...

*The option for the poor means allowing these intuitions of the founders to **challenge our attitudes**, the choices we make and the work we do, while at the same time, integrating important **insights of modern social sciences** with regard to poverty. We need to distinguish between **'poverty suffered'** and **'poverty chosen'**. While **'poverty suffered'** is a social evil to be overcome, **'poverty chosen'** is a virtue that involves the choice of a simple lifestyle as a sign of solidarity with the poor in their struggle to transform their situation. The option for the poor involves **working for justice** and peace and the integrity of creation. (emphasis mine)*

...people on the margin of society tend to have a magical view of the world...

Pedagogy of the Oppressed

For those who work with the poor, the educational approach is very much influenced by the philosophy of the internationally known Brazilian educator, **Paulo Freire**. His classical work is *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Freire points out that people on the margin of society tend to have a **magical view** of the world in which they find themselves. They believe that the solutions to social problems must come from divine intervention (here some religious preaching can be the “opium of the people”) or by waiting passively for those in power to have pity on them. The disadvantaged see the solution to social problems as **favors rather than rights**. Poor people also suffer from an inferiority complex by **assimilating the opinion of the elite** classes that they have no value and are to blame for their situation. This creates passivity and resignation to their lot. Why fight back if there is no hope, no light at the end of the tunnel!

...involves strengthening civil society rather than electing charismatic “caudillos”...

Freire coined the phrase “conscientization” or awareness raising, to express the need to help people to **discover the deeper structural economic**, social, political and cultural causes of the problems that afflict them - problems related to employment, health, housing, education, transport. The process of conscientization can help the poor realize that they are **subjects** of their own destiny. Through the different **intermediary organizations** in society they can have a voice and have power: grassroots movements, trade unions, political parties, local communities, and youth organizations. There is a **transition from the awareness of being a serf**, as in a medieval organized society, to that of being a citizen in a modern democracy. The poor become aware that all power comes from the people and not from the elected official and the elite classes. They realize that the political process involves **more than electing politicians** every four years and then forgetting about them. A strong civil society demands accountability of its elected officials. So a long term solution for social problems involves strengthening civil

society rather than electing charismatic “caudillos” who, on their own, will take magic solutions from a bag.

Nonformal Education is an Important Method for Evangelizing Young People

The nonformal educational approach starts with where people are. Understanding a challenge is always a first step to finding a solution. **Diagnosis precedes cure.** Mission to young people does not operate in a vacuum, but in the context of the surrounding culture. The minds and **values of young people today are increasingly shaped by modern** and postmodern cultures and these new cultures no longer need a process of industrialization to spread their message. This is done today through the modern electronic means of communication in both developed and developing countries. Therefore, an understanding of these cultures is **the key to understanding young people** and helping them on the road to Christian commitment.

...modern and postmodern cultures require a different type of faith.

The surrounding modern and postmodern cultures require a **different type of faith.** There has been a transition from a **cultural Christianity to a Christianity of personal faith.** Only a personal faith can take root and survive in this new soil. Faith can no longer be reduced to Sunday Mass, to a list of dogmas, to a moral code or to social problems. It must be something richer and more challenging. Faith is especially an **encounter with a Person, the person of Jesus Christ.** And the acceptance of Jesus means also the acceptance of his teaching, of his life style, his world vision, and his formula for human happiness. However, the Jesus Christ of two thousand years ago has to be made relevant to young people today.

An example of the power of the nonformal educational approach

In Brazil and other Latin American countries I have worked extensively with youth leadership programs that use the nonformal educational approach. We organize **Training Courses for Leaders (TLCs 1st & 2nd Levels) & TLC Musicals (Formation through the Arts - music, song, dance, voice training, body expression, playing of musical instruments).** **These courses** are organized on national and local levels.

...programs have been published in four languages...

On a local level, **diocesan teams have been organized and are reproducing** the programs in over 80 dioceses in Brazil. The programs have been published in four languages: Portuguese, Spanish, English and Ukrainian. We also have training videos to facilitate the preparation of facilitators who reproduce the course. The aim is to train trainers. The participants are young people and their adult mentors in parishes and schools.

The inductive **methodology used is very attractive and successful:**

- A number of short talks are complemented by different exercises. Learning situations are created where **participants learn by doing**. They **discover their talents**, their capacity to communicate with others and to think for themselves. This method contrasts with much of the methodology in the Church today of talking at people and treating them as passive audiences.
- There is great **variety; learning is done in a fun-way** and there is a strong spirit of friendship and bonding.
- The program can be easily **reproduced to increase the impact on more people and** to involve an ever increasing number of people. This is one of the most important aspects of the programs.
- Some of those who have done the programs are then **invited back to give the courses to others** and so undergo a **second and more profound level of formation**. Here we use an important educational principle: **“the best way of learning a topic is having to teach it to others.”**
- The programs can also be easily **adapted to very different target groups:** beginners, leaders, students in schools, in parishes and in dioceses.

...the best way of learning a topic is having to teach it to others.

This is just one example of the wide variety of ways of using the nonformal educational approach.

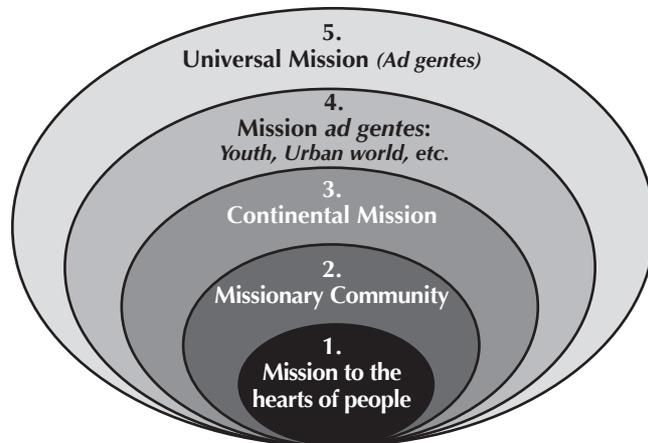
Spiritun Mission Today

An important theological principle is that all our work, whether it be in parishes, communities, groups, programs, schools or universities, **exists to evangelize**, independent of whether we use a formal or nonformal educational approach. We are not just social workers or nongovernmental organizations. We have a mission which we received from Jesus Christ. We need to aim for **quality and excellence in education but, also, to pass on a value system**. Otherwise, we can be educating cleverer exploiters of their own people. In the midst of the joys and hopes, the sadness and anguish of the human person of each age,

...be educating cleverer exploiters of their own people.

notably those who suffer (cf. GS, n.1), the **Church proclaims through words and actions, Jesus Christ, the way, the truth and the life** (cf. Jn 14,6). However, **evangelizing is wider than proselytizing**. The way we evangelize will depend on the setting and the circumstances where we find ourselves. As sowers we need to understand and prepare the soil where we plant the seeds of the Word.

The Latin American bishops, in their **Aparecida Document of 2007**, propose a radical inversion of the ecclesiastical system, from a concentration by the Church on the **conservation of the heritage of the past to a proposal that everything in the Church should be orientated towards mission**. The bishops talk of **mission on five levels**. **The fourth and fifth levels are seen as the mission *ad gentes***. The debate over this has intensified in recent decades, to the point where it is no longer possible to refer to mission *ad gentes* only in terms of territory or first evangelization. So the fourth level, mission *ad gentes*, *deals with the areas in modern society that is now mission "territory" (youth, the urban world etc.)*. The vast world of youth stands out as an important challenge for mission *ad gentes* (cf. RMi 37). The fifth level, of mission *ad gentes*, *is reserved for mission in another country*.



The nonformal educational approach **should help to make the shift from a purely cultic and sacramental church** to one which also includes the skills for moving out of the sacristy to evangelize people, especially the youth, in their modern and postmodern cultural setting. The nonformal educational approach has a key role to play in this.

The nonformal methodology presupposes training in leadership skills. However, leadership skills on their own are ineffective. There is need also for a strong, **enthusiastic belief in**

...must be prepared to take risks... risks that involve careful preparation and planning.

...for a world that, in the words of Bonhoeffer, has become adult.

the message to be transmitted. One lay person remarked ‘You need to believe, to be enthusiastic, and to be passionate about the message you have to transmit.’ The word Gospel means Good News. Good News cannot be communicated in a dispirited way. Otherwise, we are salespersons trying to sell something in which we have absolutely no faith. The message we have to transmit was never more relevant. However, in the present climate of a retreating and sometimes crumbling church, such a posture is not always easy.

Work with young people is not for the weak-hearted. One must be prepared to take risks, but risks that involve careful preparation and planning. This is the most difficult, the most challenging and the most rewarding mission ‘territory’ that exists today. Here will be fought the **battle that will determine the survival or not of many religious congregations, and to some extent in many places, of the institutional church itself.**

We Need to Work on Two Battlefronts at the Same Time

The future of our mission will depend on a battle to be fought on two fronts at the same time:

- **A battlefront where we are seen to be fighting for the dignity and the rights of the marginalized sectors of society – the evangelical option for the poor**
- **A battlefront where we are fighting to build a model of Church which has credibility for a world that, in the words of Bonhoeffer, has become adult.**

We have studied the first battlefront, the option for the poor. The second battlefront is equally important.

The model of Church that we present is of fundamental importance for the credibility of the message today. The nonformal educational approach presupposes a model of church which is community based, ministerial and where laypeople are empowered and seen as co-responsible through their baptismal vocation.

However, there is a tendency today to retreat and to strengthen a more clerical, more bureaucratic and less prophetic model of Church. This model may still work in mission countries where many people are poor and have low educational levels. However, it has less attraction for those who live in large cities, are more secularized, have a reasonably secure economic situation and a higher educational level. The solutions to health and

*...a clerical culture of
secrecy and cover up...*

other problems that are offered by emotional and conservative Pentecostal churches are less attractive.

The limitations of the clerical model, however, are most dramatic in developed countries where the scandals of pedophilia and sexual abuse have undermined the credibility of the Church. In recent developments, the blame has shifted from individual priests to a realization that the deeper causes have to do with a clerical culture of secrecy and cover up, where the image of the Church appears to be more important than defending victims, many of whom are children.

A symptom of the crisis of this model is the lack of vocations in developed countries and the quality of many vocations in developing countries, where candidates are not always the most idealistic and dynamic, and many have a low educational level. Some have fundamentalist tendencies, which make dialogue with the modern world more difficult. As a result, the Church runs the risk of losing the future leaders and formators of public opinion. This tendency can lead to a loss of moral capital and of credibility, especially among young people.

In the long term, Spiritans working in large cities in mission countries **run the risk of getting to the stage of some developed countries**; where the Church is in the process of losing the youth generation, and where the survival of religious congregations and the institutional Church is at risk. So this second battlefield of an impasse between two models of Church is just as important as the first one, the option for the poor. They are really different sides of the same coin and complement each other.

II. SIGNS OF HOPE

*...sign of the option of
the universal Church
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evangelization of young
people.*

There are signs of hope. In many countries, the Church is giving priority to the work with young people. As I write, World Youth Day 2011 in Madrid has just come to a close. Some newspapers talk of almost two million youth present from around the world. The event is a sign of the option of the universal Church to give priority to the evangelization of young people. Large rallies have an important sociological function of creating credibility in the wider society and also encouraging those who participate to persevere. The large numbers strengthen the belief that s/he is not alone in his or her beliefs, as is often the case on the local level when colleagues don't appear at Sunday Mass, or make fun of those who practice their faith.

However, many in the Church run the risk of seeing big events as a magic solution to bringing young people back to

the Church. The emotional impact of encounters or rallies on their own is not a solution. In 1979, John Paul II, on his first international trip, thrilled the Irish young people in Galway. One year later, there was a significant increase in vocations to the religious life. Today, vocations have slumped to alarming levels. The motivation of young people in big events is not only faith based. Many are also motivated by the need to meet other young people, the fascination of meeting people from different cultures, the desire to visit other countries (tourism), the joy and the singing, the financial support made available through a church with its structures which stretch from parish, diocesan, national and international levels.

Big events need to be complemented by the slow process of evangelization that recognizes that all human growth takes place through stages, and involves systematic accompaniment by persons and groups, using the nonformal educational approach. Without continuity, big events can be like the match, which is scratched and then dies out soon afterwards.

...it can still work its wonder like the yeast in the dough.

Perhaps the Church of the future will have fewer people. It will no longer evangelize from a position of power. But it can still work its wonder like the yeast in the dough. It can be relevant through the witness and dynamism of its members, especially its young people. According to Biblical spirituality, when we are weak, we become strong. The role of the nonformal educational methodology to form committed Christians will be central in this battle.

Endnotes

¹ The meeting of 12 Spiritans, representatives of Spiritan formal and alternative educational works around the globe and five members of the General Council took place on 3 – 9 July 2011, at the Spiritan Generalate in Rome. (cf. *Our convictions with regard to the Spiritan educational works, no.14* – unpublished account of the meeting.)