

Don Lorenzo Milani (1923-1967) and Education

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Last 27th May, we commemorated the centenary of the birth of Lorenzo Milani, priest and educator, who dedicated his life to providing the conditions for the least socially positioned to come into voice. About the Prior of Barbiana, much has been said and written, not always accurate, and more will be said and written as this year draws to a close. Some will quote or refer to him as an authority to validate their own ideas. Others will depict him as the cause of all ills that have befallen the Italian school. Others will represent him as an inimitable model. Not all read what he wrote or study his actual experience. Some do not allow themselves to be provoked by his own testimony. As aptly put by his spiritual advisor, don Bensi, in an interview with Fr. Nazzareno Fabretti in June 1971, don Lorenzo Milani, “transparent and hard like a diamond, was at risk of being wounded and wounding” (literal translation from Italian original). Allowing oneself to be touched by this diamond, at risk of being wounded, would even today be a healthy move as this can help convey the art of 'doing school' and of allowing the poor to come into voice.

Revisiting Don Lorenzo Milani's writings, even today, offers the reader a 'formative' experience. Spurred on by the Prior of Barbiana's words, at times provocative, at times full of paradoxes, never banal, the reader is urged to engage in profound critical reflection as part of the pursuit of truth. A careful reading would allow one to gain access to what don Lorenzo Milani defines as "the pedagogical secret of Barbiana". This is described in *Esperienze Pastorali* (Pastoral Experiences): “Friends often ask me how do I succeed in 'doing school' and having it full. They insist on providing them with a method, with specific programmes, subjects and didactic techniques. They ask the wrong question. They should not be concerned with how one 'does school' but how one must *be* to 'do school'”.

It is a question of *being*. One cannot explain in a few words how one should *be*. Read *Esperienze Pastorali* thoroughly until the end and you might well understand how you should *be* to carry out popular schooling.

One needs to have clear ideas with regard to social and political issues. One has to not be interclassist but take sides. One should be gripped with the anxiety to raise the poor to transcend their current status to reach a superior one. I am not saying to the level equivalent to that of the actual ruling class but to a superior one: more to that of a fuller human being, a greater spiritual level, more Christian, more in every respect." (free translation from Italian original, in Milani 1958, 239)

The way of being educators, the way they would go about things and their commitment to dedicating themselves completely to the service of those who are socially least positioned is at the heart of the Milanian experience. These are what even today make his message timely and relevant.

The Popular School of San Donato: bringing the poor into voice

Before being appointed Prior of the miniscule parish of Sant'Andrea a Barbiana, on Mount Giovi, don Lorenzo Milani carried out his apostolic mission at the parish of San Donato a Calenzano (Florence). He arrived there in October 1947 with all the enthusiasm of a neophyte and a newly ordained priest. He betrayed all the anxiety and eagerness to communicate his 'interior discoveries' among the faithful. His enthusiasm was quickly dampened. It did not generate any interest on the community's part. The general religious practice lacked any internal significance. Mostly absent were the "interests worthy of a human being" as he himself put it in his Italian original centered around the popular Italian androcentric conception of 'uomo' (Man, *sic.*) - human beings viewed holistically in all their subjectivity.

The identification of issues in a society undergoing rapid transformation and their connected pastoral perspectives are expressed with great lucidity and remarkable understanding, quite unusual at the time, in *Esperienze Pastorali* (Pastoral Experiences). This text is a must read for one to understand the pastoral and educational experience of don Milani at Calenzano. In this regard, one ought to lament the fact that, though providing important educational insights, the book was almost totally ignored by scholars of pedagogy. In this volume, don Milani expresses his profound conviction that an adequate civic education is an indispensable prerequisite for embracing the Holy Gospel. He discarded the usual apostolic practices - he did not hold back in his severe criticisms of orators, Catholic associations, parish cinema halls. He gave pride of place to education as the kernel of his pastoral activity.

Don Lorenzo Milani posits the conviction that the effectiveness of religious instruction is contingent on the quality of civic education. The challenge is not so much that of fostering religious instruction, which can be more or less reduced to a few fundamental precepts, but to spread a widespread and holistic education. On 15th January 1949 don Primo Mazzolari wrote: "To speak of the poor...to speak to the poor...to speak in the name of the poor...all these are different from giving voice to the poor. It is easier to give them a flag, a membership card, a chant, a pass, a hand bomb, a gun...than to foster the ability to reason".

The key importance attached to the teaching of language in the popular school derives from the conviction that what differentiates the poor peasant from the bourgeois citizen is not the treasure that each one carries within oneself but the means to express it. With this view in mind, don Milani proposed to his friend, G.P. Meucci the idea of establishing in Florence a great popular school: "Not as a gift to the poor but as a debt to pay and a reward to receive. Not to teach but only to provide the poor with the technical means (language) to reveal the inexhaustible richness of equilibrium, of wisdom, of concreteness, of religiosity that God has hidden in their heart almost as if to compensate for their cultural inequality of which they are victims"⁸. (translation from original in Italian, in Milani 2017, 352).

To possess the 'right words' involves having the means of expressing oneself, of communicating with others. It also means that entering into dialogue also with the same Verb is an essential condition for engaging with what is real in its most hidden significance. Through teaching the use of words, don Milani reveals his general conception of life, "a conception for which one breaks away from the confines of ignorance and distances oneself from the temptation of being entrapped in one's own partial visions. It means that one tenaciously embarks on the quest for the truth of things and regarding persons. One uses such knowledge not for egotistic purposes but to be attentive to the word that seals that sense of love towards others rendered as one's purpose in life." (approximate in spirit to the Italian original in Pazzaglia 1983).

The School of Barbiana and *Lettera a una professoressa* (Letter to a Teacher)

Don Lorenzo Milani reached Barbiana on 6th December 1954, after having experienced seven years of pastoral life at the parish of San Donato a Calenzano. Barbiana was a tiny parish on the northern side of Mount Giovi.

⁸ don Lorenzo Milani's letter to Gian Paolo Meucci of 02.03.1955.

The Florentine curia had decided to close it as a result of the continuous migration of its population towards the plains below. It was kept open specifically to accommodate a priest, don Milani, who proved inconvenient, keeping him out of sight, out of mind. Notwithstanding his 'exile' and confinement to this tiny mountain parish, Lorenzo Milani, for his part, did not stop developing his pastoral approach. No sooner had he arrived there, than he set about organizing the school.

The opening pages of *Lettera a una professoressa* describe, through the narrative of his young student/teachers, the salient features of the School of Barbiana: the lack of facilities, intense rhythms of work, collective writing, peer teaching/tutoring: "When I arrived, Barbiana seemed far from being a school. There was no teacher's chair, no blackboard, no desks. There were only large tables around which we had our schooling and our meals. There was only one copy of every necessary book. The boys huddled together on it. It was difficult to realize who was slightly older and taught the rest. The oldest among those teachers was 16 years of age. The youngest was only 12 and filled me with admiration. From the very first day, I decided that I would also have to teach. Up there, life was tough. Discipline and making of scenes were sufficient to make one lose the desire to return. The child who lacked the basics, however, who was slow and listless was made to feel being the preferred one. The child was welcomed in the same way you would welcome the first in class. It looked as if the school was there only for this child. Until this pupil understood what was taught, the others would have not move forward. There was no recreation. Not even Sunday was a holiday. Nobody gave the matter any great thought because work is worse. But every bourgeois visitor raised a hue and cry about this [...] The following year I was a teacher. In actual fact, I was a teacher for three and a half days a week. I taught Geography, Maths and French at the level of first year middle school. One does not need a university degree to scroll through an atlas. If I was wrong at something, that was not a big deal. It would have come as a relief to the children. We researched things together. We were serene and without fear and awe as the clock ticked the hours. You do not know how to carry out schooling as I do.

Teaching taught me many things. For example, I learnt that others' problems are similar to mine. Tackling and emerging from them together is politics. Tackling and emerging from them on one's own is avarice." (Translation from Italian original, in *Scuola di Barbiana* 1967, 12; 14). What seems *prima facie* a personal issue is indeed a *public* issue.

The school is here conceived as a public good, a vehicle for the humanisation of persons. It has the task of protecting young persons against individualism,

to educate them to care towards others and to inculcate that sense of common social responsibility. Unfortunately, the school, as denounced by the Barbiana students, generally favours competition and, alas, encourages an instrumental use of knowledge and reasoning: "Even the goal of your youngsters' learning is a mystery. Maybe it does not exist, maybe it is vulgar. Day by day, they study for the register, the results sheet, for the diploma. In the meantime, they are distracted from the beauty of the things they study. Languages, history, sciences... everything becomes empty and nothing more. In those sheets of paper lie only individual interests. The diploma and money. No one among you admits that. But at the end of the day, that is the essence of it all. To study willingly, in this system, one must be a careerist at 12. Few are careerist at 12, so much so that the majority of your youngsters hate school."(Original in Italian in Scuola di Barbiana 1967, 24).

Furthermore, the school is a good for all that cannot measure its success by the achievements of the 'cleverest' and by discarding students encountering the greatest difficulties: "We saw this at first hand. With them, schooling becomes more difficult. There would often be the temptation to dispose of them. But if it loses them, the school is not worthy of being called so - a school. It would be a hospital that cures the healthy and rejects the sick " (translated from Italian original in Scuola di Barbiana 1967, 20). Ultimately, the school is obliged to safeguard equality among all pupils without reducing this task to just a quantitative measurement "because there is nothing more unjust than treating unequal parts as equal ones." (translation from Italian original in Scuola di Barbiana 1967, 55).

At the time when the boys of Barbiana wrote to their counterparts at the School of Piadena, in 1963, don Milani's school already had an established organizational set up. The boys of Barbiana describe it thus: "Our school is private. It consists of two rooms in the *canonica* together with two others that serve as an office. In winter, we feel crowded but from April to October, we carry out schooling in the open air and therefore we do not lack space! We are now 29. Three little girls and 26 boys...the youngest is not even 11, the oldest 18. The youngest are at the level of 'prima media'. There is then a second 'media' and a third technical one. Those who accomplish the third vocational one study foreign languages or mechanical design. The languages are French, English, Spanish and German. Francuccio, who wants to become a missionary, is now beginning also to study Arabic. The timetable is from 08.00 till 19.30. There is only a brief break for lunch...School Days are 365. 366 in leap years. Sunday is different from the rest only because we hear mass. We have two rooms we call the office. There we learn woodwork and iron work. We construct all objects required by the school. We have 23 teachers! Save for the seven little ones, all

others teach those who are younger than them. The Prior teaches only the older ones. To obtain diplomas, we sit for exams as private candidates in state schools." (translated from Italian original, in Milani 2017, 948-949)⁹.

There are several occasions for carrying out schooling at Barbiana. Lessons are often geared towards the acquisition of the necessary ability to respond to everyday challenges, tied to concrete situations. In this respect, they are intended as practical courses organized for boys and girls at the school and open to the occasional adult.

Several important documents emerged from Barbiana (*Lettere ai Cappellani Militari* [Letter to the Military Chaplains], *Lettera ai Giudici* [Letter to the Judges], *Lettera a una professoressa* [Letter to a Teacher]). They were position statements that derived from common reflections and the coherence and seriousness with which the Prior tackled everything that afforded an opportunity for teaching/learning: "I live for them. All the rest are instruments for our school to function. Even the Letter to the Chaplains and to the Judges are episodes from our life that serve solely to teach the youth the art of writing, that is to say, to express love towards others, in short, education (*fare scuola - literal translation into English as 'education in its fuller humanist sense', editorial note*) (Milani 2017, 1222)¹⁰. The school had to develop in its students a sense of 'legality' and a nuanced 'political' sense; it had to cultivate the desire for better legislation, also at one's personal cost when and if necessary.

"At this stage, I need to explain the fundamental problem of each school" writes don Milani. "We have arrived at a key moment in this trial because, as teacher, I have been accused of excusing a crime, that of a 'bad school'. We would therefore need to agree on what constitutes a 'good school'. The school is different from a court tribunal. For you magistrates, it is only the established law that matters. The school however is ensconced between past and future and should keep both in mind. It is the delicate art of leading students towards being on a knife edge: on the one hand, conveying among them a sense of legality (in this sense, this is in keeping with your function). On the other hand, there is the need for better laws in the [*deeper*] political sense (this is where one differs from your function)." (Translation from Italian original in Milani 1971, 36).

The school is at the center of all the vital tensions in don Milani and, at the same time, lies at the juncture where the two essential elements in Christianity meet: transcendence and immanence (Acerbi 1983, 141). For don Milani, the School

⁹ Letter of the Barbiana students to those of Piadena, 1st November 1963.

¹⁰ Letter to Nadia Neri, 7th January 1966.

means commitment, entailing one's assuming responsibility and concern for the situation of others. "The sentence 'I Care' was prominently written on one of the school's walls. It is the motto of the best U.S youngsters. 'It concerns me, it's close to my heart.' It lies opposed to the Fascist mantra [*which would suffer in translation - editorial insertion*] 'I do not give a damn!' "(Milani 1971, 34).

Social responsibility or one's responsibility for others signifies tackling situations which become public issues one needs to address. Feeling responsible and engaged in the situation of the other renders possible the raising of social awareness and developing the ability to listen. 'I care' implies the ability to 'jump out of one's skin' to take on the problems of others. Educating is tantamount to problematising, to be ill at ease to allow oneself to be transformed and to transform. The ultimate goal of any educational intervention is to ensure that the other grows, opens up and surpasses her or his teacher: "the school should rest in anticipation of that glorious day when the best student will tell her 'Poor old woman, you do not understand anything anymore!' and the school responds by desisting from exploring her child's secrets, content only that she/he is alive and a rebel." (Translated from Italian original in Milani 2017, 969)¹¹. For don Milani, making way for the other, through the word, communication and teaching are not simply acts of generosity; they are acts of justice marked by a great ethical stance. This is what he himself accomplished, placing himself on the side of the socially least positioned (*dalla parte degli ultimi, translated literally in the Gospels' sense of 'on the part of the last ones', the downtrodden or the oppressed*). We gather this from his writings, recordings or through the testimony of those who knew him personally. He continues to pose a similar challenge to us in this day and age. For this reason, "anyone interested in education who avoids *Lettera a una professoressa*, irrespective of how one estimates it, does so at one's peril. There is a simple reason for this. It is a symbolic text. It affected and resonated with the ideas, choices, feelings and actions of the Italian school. This influence can, in various ways, still be felt today. Because it is a tough book, which does not leave one indifferent, which provokes strong reactions and thoughts, which continues to generate debates and sharp stances. Because it is a useful book, capable of nurturing in the reader an educational commitment within the school, characterised by passion, intelligence, criticality, constructiveness" (Translation from Italian original in Triani 2011, 205).

The *Lettera* urges us to recognise the many imperfections of the school and to explore together pathways to overcome them. It invites us, once more, not to abandon the strong ideal of a school and educational system at large, including

¹¹ Letter of don Lorenzo Milani to Michele Gesualdi, 15th December 1963.

adult and community education, capable of helping to develop liberated persons in solidarity with others: "Find yourself a goal. It is important to be honest... not to wish for the youngster anything other than being a full human being. This is a conception which sits well with believers and atheists. I know this. The Prior has impressed this upon me since I was 11 and I thank God. It saved me a lot of time. I knew minute by minute why I studied. The ultimate justice-oriented end is to dedicate myself to others." (Translation from Italian original in Scuola di Barbiana 1967, 94).

Commenting on the *Lettera*, Pier Paolo Pasolini claims to have discovered "One of the most beautiful definitions of literature I have read, that is, poetry would be a hatred that once deepened and clarified becomes love". Reference is made to the definition of art contained in the *Lettera*: "So we understood what art is. It is to want to hurt someone or something. To think about it for a long time. Getting help from friends through patient teamwork. Gradually what is true underneath the hatred emerges. The work of art is born: a hand stretched out to the enemy to change." (Translation from Italian original in Scuola di Barbiana 1967, 132).

The art of writing is conceived of as an act of love. It springs from the desire to search for truth. For this reason, don Milani writes: "The art of writing is religion. The desire to express our thoughts and understand the thoughts of others is love. And the attempt to express the truths that we only feel through intuition makes us and others discover them. So being a teacher, being a priest, being a Christian, being an artist, being a lover and being loved are basically the same thing." (Translated from Italian original in Milani 2017, 1262)¹².

Conclusion

Lettera a una professoressa invites us to look to Barbiana not as a model to imitate but rather as a stimulus to create something new because the School of Barbiana, "if rendered as an ideal model, can foster a utopian sense of inertia or escapes into the private sphere. It is not a model. It is a message, and the message is never imitated, it is always a call for new creations." (Translation from original in Italian in Balducci 1995, 50). The message of the *Lettera* must therefore still be embraced in its non-conjunctural absoluteness and generative potential: "The proposals of Lorenzo Milani and Barbiana therefore remain all valid and possible albeit probably unfeasible - writes Pecorini - all necessary, therefore all indispensable. And we must continue to focus and work on all of them, though knowing that they may never be implemented. Indeed, precisely

¹² Letter to Dina Lovato, 16th March, 1966.

for this reason. (...) Exporting the secret of the Barbiana of Mugello, which all lies in the objectives, and repeating the method, which is all in the commitment and coherence, in the many Barbianas of the world, is the only possibility/hope we have left" (Translated from Italian original in Pecorini 1996, 150). The writings of Don Lorenzo Milani challenge each reader calling for a response expressing commitment and solidarity for a school that allows each person to become a "sovereign citizen".

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Abstract

This article pays tribute to one of Europe's prominent and innovative critical pedagogues and social activists in the year of the first centenary of his birth: don Lorenzo Milani (1923-1967). His innovative approach to education, which has wider resonance than just for schooling and incorporates adult and youth education and community education, is rooted in his criticism, and that of the students with whom he worked, of the Italian public education system. It is also rooted, as Pier Paolo Pasolini stated, in a critique of Italian society at large. This article underlines Milani's view of education as an act of love, and as a means to create the conditions for the least socially positioned to come into voice. As a result, education can reveal the treasure which lies within them. The text highlights Milani's belief in collective rather than individualistic egotistical endeavour. Students learn, deepen their awareness of issues and write collectively. Their mantra is caring for others whereby individual challenges are perceived as public ones. The article also highlights the true political purpose of Milani's lifelong commitment to education: to help the conventionally marginalised develop as 'sovereign citizens'.

Keywords

Citizens, Law, Community, Collectivity, Love

Don Lorenzo Milani (1923-1967) y la educación

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Resumen

Este artículo rinde homenaje a uno de los pedagogos críticos y activistas sociales más destacados e innovadores de Europa en el año del primer centenario de su nacimiento: don Lorenzo Milani (1923-1967). Su innovador enfoque de la educación, que tiene una resonancia más amplia que la mera escolarización e incorpora la educación de adultos y jóvenes y la educación comunitaria, hunde sus raíces en su crítica, y la de los alumnos con los que trabajó, al sistema educativo público italiano. También tiene sus raíces, como afirmaba Pier Paolo Pasolini, en una crítica a la sociedad italiana en general. Este artículo subraya la visión de Milani de la educación como un acto de amor, y como un medio de crear las condiciones para que los menos favorecidos socialmente puedan hacerse oír. Como resultado, la educación puede revelar el tesoro que se esconde en su interior. El texto subraya la creencia de Milani en el esfuerzo colectivo y no en el egoísmo individualista. Los alumnos aprenden, profundizan en sus conocimientos y escriben colectivamente. Su mantra es el cuidado de los demás, por lo que los retos individuales se perciben como públicos. El artículo también destaca el verdadero

propósito político del compromiso de Milani con la educación: ayudar a los marginados convencionales a convertirse en "ciudadanos soberanos".

Palabras clave

Ciudadanos, Derecho, Comunidad, Colectividad, Amor.

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Résumé

Cet article rend hommage à l'un des pédagogues critiques et activistes sociaux les plus éminents et les plus novateurs d'Europe, à l'occasion du premier centenaire de sa naissance : don Lorenzo Milani (1923-1967). Son approche novatrice de l'éducation, qui ne se limite pas à l'école et englobe l'éducation des adultes et des jeunes ainsi que l'éducation communautaire, est ancrée dans sa critique, et celle des étudiants avec lesquels il a travaillé, du système d'éducation publique italien. Elle est également ancrée, comme l'a déclaré Pier Paolo Pasolini, dans une critique de la société italienne dans son ensemble. Cet article souligne que Milani considère l'éducation comme un acte d'amour et comme un moyen de créer les conditions permettant aux personnes les moins bien placées socialement de s'exprimer. Ainsi, l'éducation peut révéler le trésor qui se trouve en eux. Le texte met en évidence la croyance de Milani dans l'effort collectif plutôt que dans l'effort égoïste individualiste. Les élèves apprennent, approfondissent leur conscience des problèmes et écrivent collectivement. Leur mantra est l'attention portée aux autres, les défis individuels étant perçus comme des défis publics. L'article met également en lumière le véritable objectif politique de l'engagement de Milani en faveur de l'éducation tout au long de sa vie : aider les personnes traditionnellement marginalisées à devenir des "citoyens souverains".

Mots clés

Citoyens, droit, communauté, collectivité, amour.