The Intuitive Method in Religious Education

Romano Costetti

The intuitive method consists of making an impression on the senses, but especially sight, in order to arrive at the intellect’s comprehension. This method, which was organized in schools by [Johann Heinrich] Pestalozzi [and] applied in kindergartens by [Friedrich] Fröbel has now become universal. Indeed, what modern school does not have abacuses, wall charts, and other intuitive objects?

Catholics, however, have not always done a good job in this regard. I remember that at the Seventh Italian Catholic Congress held in Lucca in 1887, a certain Professor Bottaro, a Genoese priest with broad-minded ideas, proposed that we adopt the Fröbelian system in our religious boarding schools and recreation centres.1 Commendatore Paganuzzi, with that excitement, that impetuosity, and with that eloquence all his own, sprang into action.2 He railed against such a method, calling it heretical, worthy of excommunication, and a promoter of materialism, since—as he rightly said—it is not possible to have objective representations of spiritual or supernatural things. He added that the Catholic members of Venice’s city council have only one victory, which was using their vote to prevent the city from adding a bronze crown to the tomb of Doctor Froebel. By stating these words with the aforementioned vehemence, [Paganuzzi] aroused the enthusiasm of the assembly, which broke out in waves of applause. That applause naturally buried the proposal of poor Professor Bottaro.

Despite this applause, I remained sceptical, and with melancholy, uttered that famous verse: ‘Victrix causa Diis placuit sed victa Catoni’ (‘The victorious cause pleased the Gods, but the conquered cause pleased Cato’).3 Indeed, how can you call a method heretical and excommunicatory when it coincides perfectly with the genesis of our ideas and follows the sequence of our learning? Who doesn’t know that the higher faculties always start from some perceivable element in order to exercise their function? In other words, who doesn’t know that sensation is the primary material that when elaborated on by human intelligence is transformed into an idea? Call to mind, gentlemen, that stupendous tercet with which the divine Alighieri sculpted in just two [sic] verses the entire gnoseological system of scholasticism: ‘Così convien parlare al vostro ingegno, | il quale solo da sensato
apprende | ciò che fa poscia d’intelletto degno.’ (‘It is necessary to speak to your faculty, | since only from sense perception does it grasp | that which it then makes fit for the intellect.’)\(^4\)

But, if all of the senses are worthy helpers of the intellect, sight is the most precious of all. It is indeed the king of the senses, the most active of all because it acts from a distance, it is more comprehensive than all the others because it perceives the most disparate objects and understands not just the existence of each one of them, but their dimensions, their shape, and their colour.\(^5\)

These ideas, as you must understand, inspire in me a feeling of profound bitterness because they remind me of having had almost lost the most precious of all the senses, sight, and my words put me in a rather strange position before you since I must seem like a bankrupt man who, despite his poverty, persists in speaking about millions.

Be that as it may, if sight is the strongest aid of the intellect, no, rather, if sight is the most ordinary way of reaching the intellect, isn’t it reasonable to employ sight in order to arrive at intellectual perception? And if this method is the most suitable for human psychology, it is much more suitable to the child’s psychology, because a child lives primarily on the senses and populates his mind with ideas because he keeps his great big eyes focused on everything and everyone. This method is taught by Mother Nature and is unconsciously used by all mothers—even the stupidest ones—who, by pointing out various objects to their child, promote the development of the child’s intelligence. This method, then, has been around for a long time and existed many centuries before Pestalozzi made it into a discipline with principles deduced from science and experience. Even good old Horace was saying back in his day: ‘segnius irritant animos demissa per aures, | quam quae sunt oculis subiecta fidelibus’ (‘Matters transmitted through the ear stir the spirit | less forcibly than those set before the trustworthy eyes’): which, in simpler words, means that things that are seen make more of an impression than things that are heard.\(^6\)

But someone could observe that if this method is very useful for lay education, it would not be equally useful for religious education, whose content does not always lend itself well to an objective representation and sometimes does not even lend itself to a figurative one. And I immediately exclude objective representation for certain notions since, for example, we do not claim to visually show God, the soul, grace, etc. to the child. But, we can indeed use figurative representations with symbols whose meanings were consecrated by art, by tradition, by conventionalism, and correspond to those phantasms that spontaneously swarm about in the children’s imaginations when they hear talk of certain things.
And then the invisible God was made visible under the veil of flesh, was born, lived, and died among us, and therefore by taking advantage of historical elements of religion, we can represent the wonderful mysteries of his childhood, the splendours of his public life, the tragic scenes of his painful martyrdom.

The Church has always adopted this method and in the Middle Ages, in that time of living and industrious faith, it covered the walls of its basilicas with a mass of symbolic images and historical figurations which, used in the instruction of the ignorant, were called the ‘Bible of the Simple’: *Biblia pauperum*. The Council of Trent in its twenty-fifth session established the use of images as a powerful means of religious instruction and our bishops in Emilia in their famous ‘practical norms for catechists’ recommend images and illuminated projections as aids in teaching the catechism.

What I have said up until now serves to prove the legitimacy of the method and to overcome the mistrust of those who are sceptical. I want to add a few words to demonstrate its precious advantages and thus to awaken the most lively interest in favour of this very method.

Let us recall that every good catechist seeks to study the means by which he can make his instruction clear, easy, and appealing. Teaching by means of images unequivocally achieves these three goals and adds a fourth one: efficacy.

**Clear:** Often catechetical education ends up being abstruse because some religious notions are too abstract, too transcendent, and too far from that which forms the object of our perceivable experience. Let us remember, gentlemen, that the mentality of people our age is absolutely positive, because they were born in an environment rich in materialism. Even more positive is that of children, either because, as I just mentioned, they live primarily on the senses, or because they find themselves surrounded by the triumph of the material. Now, go and speak to them about God, about the soul, about grace. They will stand there cold, indifferent, and unenthusiastic—as if they were faced with a discourse whose meaning they cannot grasp. But try to materialize, so to speak, these notions, by supporting your words with symbols appropriate for them. They will instantly grasp the things that are necessary to know about those notions. In other words, with the use of images, teaching more abstract things becomes clear.

Remember that guy who had to write a sonnet for the Capuchin sisters and had to make it simple and clear enough to be understood even by the porter? He made it so clear and transparent that he could declare: ‘*Un sonetto più chiaro di così | le cappuccine non l’avranno più*’ (‘A sonnet more clear than this | The Capuchin sisters will never have again’). And now it
is my turn to say that with the use of images: ‘Un’istruzione più chiara di così | i nostri bimbi non l’avranno più’ (‘An education more clear than this | Our children will never have again’).

Easy: In order to learn, it is not enough to listen to or to read an explanation. It takes the mind going back into itself in order to grasp the connection and the coordination of the things that were read or heard. In other words, it takes reflection. But this act of reflection takes a bit of effort, and many children, dragged by their own, in-born indolence, flee from this effort or commit as little to it as possible. We see this in our elementary schools where they are even teaching things that should be interesting to the child and certainly are interesting to the parents. Despite the fact that our poor schoolteachers make themselves hoarse shouting from morning until night, after a few months, half of the students will have understood barely 20 per cent of the things they have explained. Now, just imagine what must happen in our catechisms, where they teach things that are often dry and difficult, that are not materially interesting to the child, and which, unfortunately, most parents take no interest in. We must save kids from this struggle, we must insure they are up to the task of reflecting without effort. And we can achieve this very well with the assistance of images. To see an image takes no effort—it is enough to have two eyes in your head. To understand its meaning takes no effort because the child is drawn in by natural curiosity. Therefore, teaching through images is the easiest kind of teaching there is.

Appealing: The sight of an image is suggestive for everyone, but it should be even more suggestive for us Italians, who have inherited from our fathers a rich patrimony of artistic glory. A child buys a book or an illustrated magazine. I guarantee you that before reading a line of text, he will look at all of the pictures. And children aren’t the only ones to do this—even we adults with grey hairs and a half a century in the saddle do the same thing. Watch with what enthusiasm kids scrutinize all kinds of figurative representations—good and bad—that they see in the newsstands and how they press their noses up against the store windows selling illustrated postcards—even though there is a chance of stumbling across something that would damage their innocence. So, let’s take advantage of this yearning, this passion for the image in order to teach our young people the principles of faith and morality. We will succeed in teaching them by entertaining them, or rather, we will achieve the goal that Dr. Fröbel was proposing.

But I also said that teaching by means of the Image makes instruction more effective because the effects of it will be longer-lasting. Think about how we remember things in direct proportion to the impression that they make on us. But the image makes a big impression on us because it strikes the
imagination and leaves an imprint there of a little idol, a phantasm which, even though it vanished, will reawaken one day or another. Oh gentlemen, yes, without acknowledging some kind of incrustation on the cortical walls of the brain like the materialists, it is certain that the phantasm remains fixed in our imagination and will come to life continuously in the presence of the idea with which it is associated. Look at your own experiences. Have you ever thought about the transfiguration of Jesus Christ without your imagination reminding you of the canvas of the divine Raphael? Have you ever thought of that great leader of the Hebrew people without your imagination reminding you of that great statue by Michelangelo Buonarroti? Using images to teach, we imprint on our children's imaginations a mental image of the drawings they have been shown, and this indelible or nearly indelible imagery makes the lesson unforgettable.

But what are these means of intuition that we could take advantage of for this purpose? They are the catechistic images, among which the most recommended are those of the Bonne Presse of Paris. They are wall charts like those by Bertarelli of Milan, Don Vincenzo Minelli of Genoa, Paravia of Turin and the Bonne Presse in Paris. They are the illustrated text books, like Storia Sacra (Sacred History) by [Antonio] Parato, that by [Joseph Charles] Benziger from Einsiedeln in Switzerland, La vita di Gesù narrata ai fanciulli (The Life of Jesus Told to Children) by the Society of St. Jerome in Rome, the illustrated Breve Catechismo (Brief Catechism) by [Don] Bosio of the V.E.R.E. of Treviso and the Lezioni di Catechismo illustrate (Illustrated Lessons of the Catechism) of the School of Brescia.

But the king of these intuitive methods is indisputably the illuminated projection. If a small five centimetre by seven centimetre image in chromolithography is effective, if a 60 centimetre by 80 centimetre wall chart is even more effective, then an illuminated image that, depending on the intensity of the light and the distance of the apparatus from the screen, can reach enormous proportions, will be extremely effective. Even among children there are some near-sighted people who cannot clearly see a wall chart, but no one can miss a beautiful projection that measures 25 or 36 square metres.

Throw in the instantaneous appearance of the luminous frame on the screen, which seems almost a creatio ex nihilo (‘creation out of nothing’) and the equally instantaneous disappearance, which one could call a vanishing vision, and you understand that all of this gives the spectator a certain air of mystery that is perfectly suited to religious subjects.

Finally, the projects are always accompanied by the living word of the orator who explains the subject of the frame, puts into action the immobile
figures, makes them pulse with life, makes them jump from the screen in order to imprint them on the imagination of the listeners. With this method, you can more easily allow religious notions to penetrate into the children’s psyche because it enters there through two means—through vision and through hearing. And you understand that it is easier to seize a fortress when two breaches have been created instead of just one.

I am initiating a challenge that I hope some of you will take up. Let’s take 20 children with the same intellectual development and the same religious upbringing. Give ten to me, and give ten to someone else. We will give both groups the same lesson on the catechism, but I will use the projections, and he will not. At the end of the lesson, we will test the kids, and I would bet my life that you will find that my ten will have understood more from my uncouth and boorish words than the other ten will have understood from the brilliant and carefully crafted words of my competitor.

So, gentlemen, I invite you all to use this great tool which will double, as if by magic, the effectiveness of your lessons. […]

But you will tell me that the movies are more effective and more suggestive than fixed projections. It is very true, gentlemen, the movies add movement to figurative representation, and with movement, comes life, with its charms and passions. But we must be aware that it cannot be useful for religious instruction for a number of reasons that I won’t get into explaining to you. I will point out only two. First, it is difficult to accompany the cinematograph with words. The second is that there are very few films with sacred subject matter, and these few are for the most part profane, scenographic, and sometimes grotesque. Nevertheless, even the cinema could help us reach our goal in a direct way, that is, as a way of enticing children to our catechisms. If you, dear parish priests, will promise them a film projection after catechism, attendance would instantly double because with this distraction, you would neutralize those many distractions that attract children on Sundays and that for the most part keep them away from catechism.

But I insist on fixed projections because only they are able to effectively bolster your teachings. By now thankfully, the projectionists are no longer satisfied and those opposing projections are rari nantes in gurgite vasto (‘few and far in between’). Would you like to know who these last ones are? They fit in one of the following categories: (a) the misoneists, or those stuck in their ways, who are alarmed at everything that is new; (b) the lovers of quiet living, who are reluctant toward the thought of a new intrigue or a new effort; (c) those misers who cling so tightly to their purse strings that they are
appalled by the idea of sacrificing another lira for the blessed cause. Which of you, gentlemen, could it be safe to say fit into one of these three groups?

Monsignor Ketteler has said that if St. Paul had lived in his time, that is, in the middle of the nineteenth-century, he would have been a journalist.14 I do not have the authority, like that of the great Bishop of Magonza, to claim that if they lived in our times, the apostles would all be projectionists. But I can assert with the certainty of the most profound conviction that if the honourable Senator Cesare Bianchetti were to find himself at the dawning of this century, instead of walking through the neighbourhoods of Bologna with a cross in his hand to call the children to Christian doctrine, he would arm himself with [a magic] lantern and go from place to place illustrating his stupendous explanations of catechism with luminous projections.15

Let’s do it ourselves then, gentlemen. If the apostles bolstered their words with the power of miracles, we who unfortunately don’t have their miraculous power, let us at least bolster our words with the miracles of science!


Notes

1. [Editors’ note. Luigi Bottaro (1819–1904), priest, middle-school teacher, anthropology professor at the University of Genoa, promoter of kindergartners and professional institutes for teaching.]
2. [Editors’ note. Commendatore is an honorific title. Giovanni Battista Paganuzzi (1841–1923) was a lawyer and leader of a prominent national conservative, pro-papal Catholic movement.]
3. [Editors’ note. Lucan, Pharsalia, p. 128.]
4. [Editors’ note. Alighieri, Paradiso, pp. 40–42.]
5. Some maintain that hearing is superior to sight. In response, we distinguish the senses as such and as having a relationship with the intellective faculty. So, as a sense sight surpasses in activity hearing for the reasons mentioned above, but in relation to the intellect, it remains in second place, because it represents only the object, leaving the interpretation to the perceiver, while hearing with the means of language, not only represents the idea, but gives an interpretation and even the nuances of it. Moreover, that does not harm the efficacy of the intuitive method because it embraces both senses and harmonizes them in such a way that about them one can say with Horace: ‘Alterius sic altera poscit opem et coniurat amice.’ [Editors’ note. Original can be found in Horace, Ars poetica, pp. 410–411.]
[Translator’s note. The suora portinaia—the nun who is the gatekeeper—apparently a task that does not require great erudition according to the author.]

[Editors’ note. The author is citing, in a not exact form, the verses of the famous sonnet of the Abbot of Vicenza, Angiolo Berlendis (1733–1793).]

[Editors’ note. A well-known Raphael painting, The Transfiguration, now housed in the Vatican Museums.]

[Editors’ note. The statue referenced is Michelangelo’s famous Moses, which is found in the church of San Pietro in Vincoli in Rome. To describe Moses, the author uses the term ‘condottiere’ for leader, which is a military term, really. Moses is positioned almost as the warlord or military captain of the Hebrews.]

[Editors’ note. A process of lithography that produces multi-colored images.]

[Editors’ note. The original text in Luce et verbo has an editorial note that disputes this point, saying ‘On this point, we cannot agree with the distinguished speaker: that is it more convenient to not explain cinematographic scenes, we’ll let that pass; but that this is difficult? No. It is rather easier than explaining fixed projections.’ The note is signed ‘T.M.’]

[Translator’s note. This Latin quotation is from Book I of Virgil’s Aeneid.]

[Editors’ note. Wilhelm Emmanuel von Ketteler (1811–1877) was a Catholic bishop, theologian, and politician, who led the centrist party in the German Parliament and supported the major themes of social Christianity.]

Cesare Bianchetti (1585–1655) was a nobleman and senator from Bologna who founded the congregation of San Gabriele in Bologna.]