

Interview with Angelo Vincenzo Zani

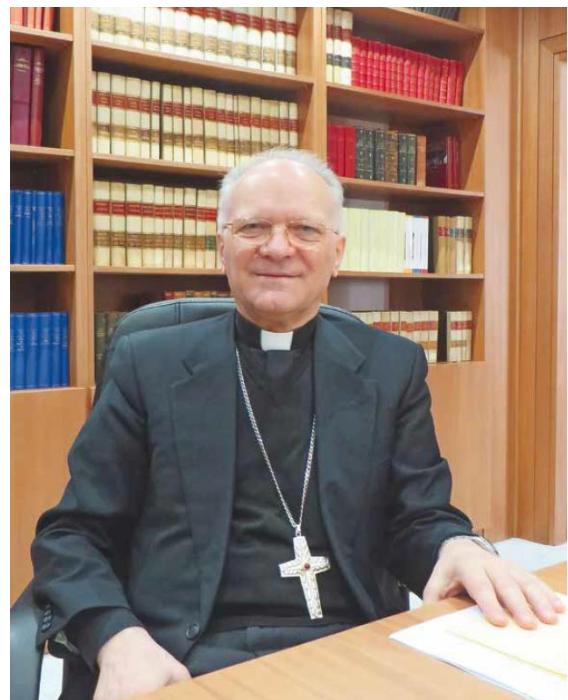
“Our image of God supports the model of a Catholic dialogue school.”

Catholic education remains a significant service to society worldwide. Archbishop Angelo Vincenzo Zani is certainly convinced of this. “Our goal is for every young person to grow into someone who takes the lead in contributing to a better world”, states the secretary of the Congregation for Catholic Education in an exclusive interview with the Belgian Christian Weekly Tertio.

Angelo Vincenzo Zani warmly welcomes us in a stately reading room of the Congregation for Catholic Education, in a building not far from *Piazza Pio XII*, the square at the intersection of the *Via della Conciliazione* and the St. Peter's Square. The archbishop begins with the following line: “Throughout history, you can see that the Church has always been committed to education. This was one of the first commitments of Christians. Schools were already popping up in North Africa during the early history of Christianity. These schools were reserved for limited groups of young people, but apparently, there were parents who saw an important connection between an intellectual education and faith development. They believed that there shouldn't be a distinction between education and faith. They wanted their children to be raised in a Christian context. They clearly felt that faith was not only part of the spiritual dimension of life, but that people should also reflect on faith on an intellectual level. The opening of monastery and cathedral schools, and of universities, were also milestones in the history of Christianity.”

“A new phase in Christian history began when modern states started to provide education for everyone. These modern states wanted to form citizens who could contribute to society. Catholic education has done the same thing, and still does, but here, the emphasis lies on personal development and evangelization. How that takes shape in reality differs, depending on the specific context. Some countries are pleased with their Catholic schools, while in other countries you can notice that our education is at odds with the

government. In some countries we receive subsidies, in others we are purely seen as private institutions.”



“Worldwide, more than 61 million students choose Catholic schools, 40 percent of those young people are non-Catholic or non-religious. This proves that our education is a very welcoming service.” – Angelo Vincenzo Zani © evl

Were there also other milestones in the history of Catholic education?

“The Second Vatican Council must certainly be mentioned. *Gravissimum Educationis*, the declaration about Christian education, is not as profound a document as the other constitutions of that council. But it puts forward a few simple principles that you can apply in all the various worldwide contexts in

which we conduct education. That statement remains our frame of reference even today.”

“What is education? It is a process that focusses on two poles: the person who has the right to education, and the objective of this specific education. The aim is for young people to become people who take the lead in contributing to society and its general well-being. What is Christian education? Our schools also aim to serve society, but we do so through our own vision of ‘the human person made whole’: Christ. Our own Christian view on humanity forms the basis of our education. That colors our thinking about what it means to grow up. After the Second World War, organizations such as the United Nations and UNESCO sought to formulate a universal vision on human rights. On the one hand, Vatican II has taken over those universal rights, but at the same time, this council has developed a Christian view of it. Worldwide, more than 61 million students choose Catholic schools – 216,000 in total – 40 percent of those young people are non-Catholic or non-religious. This proves that our education is a very welcoming service and that many families seek out this service. The same goes for the 1,760 Catholic universities, faculties and ecclesiastical institutions of higher education with 11 million students. In these institutions, an equal percentage is also non-Catholic.”

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Is there a typical Christian pedagogy and a pedagogy of God?

“That is a good question. If you read the Bible, you can indeed discover an extraordinary pedagogy. God gradually educates his people. Therefore, you can find the building blocks for a Christian pedagogy and anthropology in the Old and New Testament. The human person lies at the center: the entire human person and every human person. No one is excluded and no human dimension is left out of the picture. Allow me to explain a few elements. From a

Christian point of view, every individual is first and foremost a child. Before you grow up and get older, you are a child. You did not make yourself, you were created. Therefore, every human being is a gift. God the Creator lies at the basis of all life and transcends us. One consequence of being a child is that we must be guided in our growth into adulthood. This also shows that we are not lord and master, we are not absolute and autonomous rulers. In fact we are called to enter into relationship. We are called to be open to God and to the other, to step out of ourselves, and to open ourselves up to transcendence. The concept of ‘relationship’ is crucial in our Christian thinking. Human beings are not like islands. We come into fullness in and through community. God entrusts us with his creation. Therefore, we are also called to engage with the world: culture, civilization, economics, politics, and so on, are all important. We don’t live for ourselves. Egoism and the exploitation of the other or of nature do not make us happy, but sharing and giving, loving the other and caring for creation, these do.”

“From these convictions, education consists of both *pars destruens* and *pars construens*. In addition to building one’s own personality, there is also the need to have natural obstacles removed, such as egoism. Every teacher is charged with the task of freeing people. They have to teach students to go against their natural tendencies. That goes hand in hand with promoting the good in humanity so that young people become leaders of a new world, where justice, peace and care for creation are paramount.”

How can Catholic schools preserve their identity in a secular and extremely diverse context? To this end, the model of the Catholic Dialogue School is being put forward from Flanders, also in Australia.

“Pope Francis gives us a lot of advice on how to be Christian in a non-Christian culture. He sees major challenges as opportunities and not as threats. If you want to move forward, you have to take two steps. The first step carefully tests for solid ground, the second step dares to advance wholeheartedly into the challenge.

You cannot remain safe in your current position, otherwise you will freeze up, nor can you avoid uncertainty. Every time, you need two legs to stand on and to find a new balance. Pope Francis invites us not to stand still, but to set out together. Whoever sets off with young people should take them seriously and see the total reality.”

“The precise name that’s given to our model or our project, is not so important to me. The fundamental question is what charge is hidden behind that flag. What are the sources that inspire our educational model? This is what I was talking about earlier. It starts with the idea of creation. God created the human person in his image and likeness, and he seeks dialogue with his creation. The *communio*, understood as community and dialogue, is already contained in God’s own Trinitarian self. There is diversity and communication in God’s own self. That is the theological foundation of our dialogue.

There is no sociological cause or need at the basis of our Christian attitude. It's not about tolerating the other for the sake of peace or something. It is not about a superficial dialogue, but about a dialogue with deep roots in God’s own self. We want to confront ourselves with the other who differs from us. We want to consciously step out of ourselves. We don’t want to lock ourselves up with like-minded people, and we do this because God gave us this example, because we are relational human beings, influenced by his image. We must not fear the other. Pluralism is a wealth and it is only through the difference of and in the dialogue with the other that we can grow and discover ourselves. Therefore, our image of God supports the model of the Catholic Dialogue School. Because God is dialogue and also enters into dialogue, we also opt for dialogue.”

“If nothing is absolute and holy, then everything becomes poor and worthless. We cannot live in relativism.”

There are also Catholic schools in Muslim countries. Sometimes they are not allowed to offer religious education to their students. Where does the Catholic inspiration and identity show forth in these schools?

“Of course religious education is important, but it is not the most crucial thing of a Catholic school. I recommend that you read the statement *The Religious Dimension of Education in Catholic Schools*, published by our Congregation in 1988. Catholic schools follow the laws of the country in which they are based, but they also operate out of their own pedagogical point of view. The religious dimension is not limited to one subject, but should permeate all the education of the school. It is true that we have schools where no specific Catholic religious lessons are given. Sometimes, there is the subject of ethics instead of religion, but the whole life of the school still reflects our openness to transcendence. Students are confronted with our religious inspiration in implicit ways. Parents know this. They also want their children to come into contact with it. Many Muslims consciously choose our schools because they value our openness to the transcendent and the way we deal with non-Christians, with the other. We also have schools where only a few staff members are Catholics. It is important that non-Catholic staff members also support our pedagogical project and that our inspiration is given many opportunities to shape the soul of our schools. It is important to see the difference between Catholic education and catechesis. Education focusses on knowledge about Christianity and fights against the indifference and relativism that threaten humanity.”

“In addition to the above: education is not an individual effort, but a joint endeavor. As a teacher, you can’t just do your own thing in class, apart from everyone else. It is through working together with colleagues that we create a living and learning community that can lead to conversions among the students. This team spirit plays an important role in our testimony, inspiration and identity, and this requires a certain humility from teachers. One is not the owner of education, one is in service

to it. We must avoid teachers who go their own way and do not commit to the whole, to our pedagogical project.”

What do you expect from religion teachers and religious education?

“Faith that is not being incarnated, remains a good, but an abstract idea. Faith must be lived. It is important that religious education teachers, like all other teachers, are properly formed, know their subject, are competent in instruction and are deeply engaged with the culture. Crucial for them is a lived faith. Nurturing one's own spirituality is essential to their role as a witness of faith. Religion teachers do not only transfer knowledge, they also offer an example of a Christian lifestyle, of a "mysticism of fraternity", as Pope Francis describes it in his exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*. As with dialogue, this is not about a superficial friendship, but about a fundamental closeness and connection that is nourished by God's presence in everything. I might also dream that religious education teachers have a special ability to sense where God is at work in our world and where he transforms and breaks open our culture. Today, we almost live in an anti-human culture. How do we bring in

evangelical radicalism and the revolution of tenderness so that our culture develops more humanity? How does God's grace accomplish that? To have an eye for that and to cooperate with it, that is also the task of religious education.”

You stress a concern for humanity. Is this a major challenge for education?

“Perhaps because I am from Brescia, I have always looked up to Pope Paul VI, who also came from that diocese. In his encyclical, *Populorum Progressio*, he points out the weakness of thoughts, the lack of fraternity and the imperfection of humanism if it's not open to transcendence. Those are three important challenges for the school and for education. Many facts are repeated indiscriminately, but our post-truth-culture lacks critical thinking. I also understand that this openness to the transcendent means nurturing a hope and a vision without which we have no future. And then there is *service learning*, allowing young people to gain experiences of service so that they acquire a culture of hospitality and solidarity. That is what it is all about: what do we give young people? What kind of people do we help them grow into?”

Bio

Angelo Vincenzo Zani (1950) studied philosophy and theology at the Priest Seminary of Brescia and at the papal universities of St. Thomas of Aquino (*Angelicum*) and of the Laterans in Rome. He studied social sciences at the Gregoriana. He was ordained a priest in Brescia in 1975. From 1983 to 1995 he taught at the Salesian Philosophical Theological Institute and the Theological Institute of Paul VI. At the Catholic University of Brescia, he helped establish a center for religious studies, where he also taught from 1990 to 1995. From 1981 to 1995, at the request of Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini, at the time the Archbishop of Milan, he was also responsible for school pastoral within the ecclesiastical region of Lombardy (the church province of Milan). In 1995, Zani became the head of the education office of the Italian Bishops' Conference and in 2002, he was appointed to be Vice-Secretary of the Congregation for Catholic Education. Ten years later, Pope Benedict XVI promoted him as secretary - the second in rank - of the same dicaster in the Roman Curia.