

Milan, January 26, 2013. Presentation of Antonio Polito's Book  
*Contro i papà. Come noi italiani abbiamo rovinato i nostri figli (Against Daddies: How We  
Italians Ruined Our Children)*, Rizzoli, Milan 2012.

**Educative Emergency**

By Julián Carrón

*President of the Fraternity of Communion and Liberation*

I would like to start by thanking Antonio Polito for honoring me with the invitation to speak.

The book that we are presenting today (*Contro i papà. Come noi italiani abbiamo rovinato i nostri figli*, by Antonio Polito) is a cry, a provocation, a question: where are we bringing our children? Many parents will identify with this interrogative. It is a question that often becomes concern, and sometimes anguish, because many parents do not know where to turn, where to look, in order to emerge from the impasse in which they find themselves. This is an evident sign of the confusion that dominates our time. We have seen the birth and development of many beautiful things, many scientific achievements. But we don't know how to offer something truly meaningful to those dearest to us, our children, so that they can make their way amidst the confusion that they find themselves living.

We have in front of us a book written by an acute observer, who grasps the greatest challenge that society is facing, that is, the educative challenge, with respect to which the others—economic, social, and political—are but consequences.

Antonio identifies not only the challenge, but also its origin: fathers. Or, more generically, adults—be they fathers, educators, teachers, or priests—who are not capable of offering a hypothesis of a response at the level of their children's needs. The author addresses the issue in a cutting way from the very first pages of the book: "Who among us fathers [...] can deny the truth, that is, that everything around us tells us that education (understood in a much broader sense than simple instruction) is the crucial factor for the success of a community and, within it, of our children? So why have we completely abdicated our educative function, transforming into our children's awkward advocates?" (p. 16). This is the challenge.

How do we document the fathers' abdication of their educative function? Basically, in two ways.

1) Parents have wanted, at all costs, to spare their children the struggle of living. "Instead of being parents, we have gradually transformed into our children's advocates, always ready to fight so that the road to nothingness is paved for them [strong words], because there is no ambitious goal that does not have an impassable road. This is a widespread cultural phenomenon, and it is becoming a trait of our national character [...]. And it is acting as a brake not only on the economic growth of our nation, but on its psychological growth, as well" (p. 21).

That is, instead of launching our children toward an ambitious goal that corresponds to their needs, to their heart, even if the road is impassable, we have preferred to pave the way for them, so that they don't have to work too hard, so that they can avoid the uphill struggle. Instead of Steve Jobs's *Stay hungry, stay foolish* from his famous speech at Stanford University, we have preferred "stay full, stay conformists" (p. 12).

"The fault is ours. We are the real 'big babies'" (p. 23), writes Polito. We have pursued a social model that is aimed at making life easy for our children, without realizing that, by doing this in the name of our children, we are ruining them. "We don't want them to be hungry even for an instant. Rather, we have built our lives and our society around their nourishment. [...] Around protecting them from need, with relevant and not always positive social consequences" (pp. 12-13).

We have lived “a misguided sense of protection toward our children; misguided because it actually betrays a collective distrust of their means, the fear of letting them swim with their own strength as soon as possible. And they feel this distrust, and it depresses their self-confidence” (p. 20). In my opinion, these are extremely acute affirmations of how we, in doing this, give a judgment about their abilities, their possibilities to be themselves, to grow, to develop. We don’t say it explicitly, but they grasp this judgment anyway.

In the third place, we have practiced a harmful paternalism. Antonio calls it the “society of the slipper,” directed at preserving our young people from any sort of effort.

I am struck by the accord with what Fr. Giussani said in 1992, in an interview for *Corriere della Sera*: “Italy [...] frightens me. [...] It is a societal situation where there is no adequate ideal, where there is nothing that goes beyond the utilitarian aspect. A utilitarianism that is pursued without any ideal horizon. This cannot last. The fear is that endless conflicts will be unleashed. [...] *Why did all of this happen? You have seen many generations grow up. What was the triggering factor of a fall, a worsening, like this?* Nothing was proposed to all of these generations of people. Except one thing: the utilitarian apprehension of their fathers. *Are you talking about the ‘god’ of money?* The ‘god’ of money or the security of an easy life, a life without risks. And made up entirely of things, without any risk. [...] Who knows, maybe this desire to make our children’s lives, or the lives of a given group of people, less difficult will someday break through the horizon. That is, if those who have this desire understand that, in order to accomplish it, they need an ideal, a hope.”<sup>1</sup>

The fathers thought that, by sparing them the effort and protecting them from need, they were doing what was good for their children; in reality, what they were doing for them was paving the road to nothingness.

When this mentality dominates, the result is what Pietro Citati discussed in an article that appeared some years ago in *La Repubblica*, dedicated to today’s generation of young people and entitled “The Eternal Adolescents,” in which he painted an almost cruel picture of the result produced by the victory of this mentality. As Citati wrote, “At one time, people became adults very early on. Today there is a continual race toward immaturity. At one time, [...] a boy became *mature* at all costs. [...] Achieving maturity was a sacrifice [...]. [Today, young people] don’t know who they are. Maybe they don’t want to know: they always ask themselves which is their “I,” [...] they love [...] indecision! Don’t ever say *yes* or *no*: always stand in front of a threshold that will perhaps never open. [...] They have no will, no desire to act [...]. They prefer to remain passive. [...] They live wrapped up in a mysterious torpor. They don’t love time. Their only time is a series of instants, which are not linked in a chain or organized in a history.”<sup>2</sup>

Eugenio Scalfari responded to Citati’s article, maintaining that, “The wound [in these young people] was the loss of their identity and memory,” perhaps because someone took it away from them. It’s peculiar: first, the adults do all that they can to make them lose their identity, and then they complain about the fact that they’ve lost it. “The wound was the silence of fathers who were too busy winning success and power. [...] The wound was the boredom, the insurmountable boredom, the existential boredom that killed time and history, passions and hopes. [...] I don’t see in them the profound melancholy that is in the young faces from the Renaissance painted by Lotto and Tiziano. [...] I see eyes that are dazed, ecstatic, stunned, fugitive, greedy but without desire, solitary in the midst of the crowd that contains them. I see desperate eyes. [...] Eternal children. [...] Their salvation lies only in their hearts. All we can do is look at them with love and trepidation.”<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> L. Giussani, «Don Giussani: il potere egoista odia il popolo» [“Fr. Giussani: The Egotistical Power Hates the People”], interview ed. by Gianluigi Da Rold, *Corriere della Sera*, October 18, 1992; now in: L. Giussani, *L’io, il potere, le opere* [The “I,” Power, Works], Marietti, Genoa 2000, pp. 214-219.

<sup>2</sup> P. Citati, «Gli eterni adolescenti» [“The Eternal Adolescents”], *La Repubblica*, August 2, 1999, p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> E. Scalfari, «Quel vuoto di plastica che soffoca i giovani» [“That Plastic Void that Suffocates the Young People”], *La Repubblica*, August 5, 1999, p. 1.

Today, we are facing a profound human crisis, which we can sum up in this mysterious torpor, this insurmountable boredom, this lack of humanity in which we often find ourselves when the mentality denounced in the book is victorious.

This profound human crisis is documented in the passivity of many young people, who seem almost incapable of getting interested in something truly meaningful, or in the skepticism of many adults, who do not show them anything for which it would be worthwhile to work toward getting out of this situation. It's as if they didn't find interests that were worth fully involving their humanity. It seems like nothing is able to interest young people to the point of putting them in motion, and thus "the commitment toward studying becomes minimal, and the boredom maximal."<sup>4</sup>

But in doing this, parents have committed an enormous error. Where was, and is, this error? In the confusion regarding the nature of the human heart. We think that we will resolve our children's problems, instead of challenging them in their nature—that original nature, which Leopardi describes in an unparalleled way:

"Our inability to be satisfied by any earthly thing or even by the entire earth; to consider the inestimable breadth of space, the number and marvelous size of worlds, and find that all is modest and small compared to the capacity of one's own soul; to imagine the infinite number of worlds and the infinite universe and feel that our minds and desires would still be greater than such a universe; always to accuse things of insufficiency and nothingness and to suffer the want and the void—this seems to me the best proof of the grandeur and nobility of human nature."<sup>5</sup>

To this human nature—which is the nature of our young people, and our own—we cannot just respond with a simplistic proposal that is unable to interest and reawaken the entire capacity of the "I."

2) This brings us to the second error denounced by Antonio Polito, who thus managed to identify the other root of the educative strategy that he criticizes in his book, and on this point I am very much in agreement: the origin of the problem is, above all, cultural. And what is the error?

That which "has made us terrible parents is 20<sup>th</sup>-century thought, whose great discovery was the identification of superhuman forces—be they psychological, social, or biological—capable of removing from man's shoulders the burden of responsibility for his actions. Great consolatory philosophies. Like the system of thought that originated from Freud, in which the rational and conscious ego, the seat of individual responsibility, becomes a poor wretch at the mercy of forces greater than he is, [laying] 'the foundations for a reduction of ethics to psychology' (Valeria Egidi Morpurgo). [...] Or philosophies like Marxism, which transport the same mechanism for zero responsibility onto the social plane. Do you remember one of its most famous assumptions? That it is the social being who determines conscience, not the other way around. Therefore, our conscience is just a servant, who goes where class conflict takes it. And the liberation of man cannot be anything but the result of a collective process that unfolds over us [...]. All individual responsibility is finished, everything is transferred to processes and collective movements. As the anthropologist Robert Ardrey wrote in *The Social Contract*, 'A philosophy which for decades has induced us to believe that human fault must rest always on somebody else's shoulders; that responsibility for behavior damaging to society must invariably be attributed to society itself; that human beings are born not only perfectible but identical, so that any unpleasant divergences must be the product of unpleasant environments...' [...] And finally Darwinism, [...] which explains all human behaviors as inevitable consequences of the evolutionary history of the species, and not as conscious (to varying degrees) choices made by individuals. Fear and courage, selfishness and altruism, laziness and industriousness: nothing that we are can be attributed to the education that we have received, to the example that was offered to us, to the culture in which we have lived. No, everything is Nature,

<sup>4</sup> M. Borghesi, *Il soggetto assente. Educazione e scuola tra memoria e nichilismo* [*The Absent Subject: Education and School Between Memory and Nihilism*], Itaca, Castel Bolognese 2005, p. 8.

<sup>5</sup> G. Leopardi, «Pensieri» LXVIII, *Poesie e prose*, Mondadori, Milan 1980, vol. 2, p. 321. Partial trans. in D.S. Carne-Ross, *Instaurations*, University of California Press 1979, p. 188.

everything descends to us from our ancestors and from the instincts that developed in the struggle for the survival of the fittest” (pp. 26-28).

I’m not sure that we understand the significance of this error: the human being, reduced to his biological and sociological antecedents, becomes a puppet, a marionette in the hands of “superhuman forces.” And thus there is no more “I;” the “I” is like a stone that is swept away by the current of these forces. The “I” as a personal, autonomous reality, with a capacity for freedom, able to act as a subject in history and circumstances, is no more, because everything is unloaded on antecedents of every type: psychological, social, or biological. Polito calls it the opiate of de-responsibilization. Without the “I,” without freedom—because everything is determined by these factors—what responsibility is possible in the face of challenges?

The consequence of this mentality is a particular conception of the human being: “Rousseau defined the baby ‘a perfect idiot.’ And in 1890, William James described the mental life of a newborn as ‘one great blooming, buzzing confusion.’ It is because of this presumption that, convinced of being in the presence of likable ‘idiots,’ we speak and act in front of them as if we were not listened to, understood, and judged. I don’t know about you, but I was never able to be in a room with one of my children after the age of seven or eight months without noticing that his five senses were thrown wide open in my direction, without feeling the unsettling sensation that inside those bodies, not yet capable of moving on their own or feeding themselves with their own strength, hummed perfectly oiled brains, already functional” (p. 67). So, despite all of the achievements of 20<sup>th</sup>-century thought, the elementary experience of the relationship with our children still impedes this reduction. It’s as if we tangibly perceive that we cannot reduce them to what we usually reduce them to—that is, our thoughts.

Polito continues, “You understand well that if it were like this, then our behavior as parents would be radically mistaken, and we would have to radically change [because if the kids have functioning brains, something has to change]. No more ‘poor baby, he’s too small to understand’ [...]. The baby understands, he comprehends that there’s something right and something wrong” (p. 68). Try to commit an injustice toward him, and you will see that he understands! A far cry from reduced to antecedent factors of the biological or psychological type, etc.! If, instead of this recognition of their originality, of the fact that they have functioning brains, the domination of this mentality—this destruction of the “I”—prevails, then we give free range to those whom Polito calls the “bad teachers,” who thus find no resistance. “There are adults around who do more than minor damages as fathers, in the sense that they inflict them on an entire generation of children. They are the bad teachers, understood in the literal, not the metaphorical, sense of the term: people, that is, that teach badly—erroneous things, sloppy methods, dangerous ideas. It is the dense group of those veterans of the turmoil of the ‘60s and ‘70s who, instead of going into politics or business, obtained their success in academia or communications, and who today, from TV screens, newsstands, or bookstores, sketch the world as it is and as it will be in front of the eyes of our young people. It is through their words and their images that our children learn to hope or to despair. Thus the role of these father-gurus could be even more important than that of biological fathers” (pp. 131-133).

Antonio reaches a bitter conclusion. “We are the first generation of fathers in history to have elaborated a complex and highly selfish strategy of survival through the *captatio benevolentiae* (trying to get on the good side) of our children. We pretend to do it for their good, but in reality we do it for our own” (pp. 142-143). And he adds, “Our society has therefore grown old before its time in its hopes and expectations” (p. 144).

By reducing the human being to his biological, psychological, or sociological antecedents, we have taken away his dignity, the dignity of our children. And we express this in the way that we look at them; they read this judgment in the way in which we treat them, much more so than we realize. But it only takes a minimal relationship with them to discover that the “I” is there. And that there is something in the “I” that is irreducible to these factors: Fr. Giussani called it “elementary experience,” a need for truth, beauty, justice, happiness, fullness, that is the core of the “I.” And because of this, the young people understand, they understand very well, they don’t have to take a

course to see when a way of treating them is unjust or when we don't love them or when we don't give them time. To take away the criterion of judgment from them is to take away their dignity, because it's like saying, "You are stupid; I will explain to you how things are!" But they understand very well that it's not like this, precisely because they have inside themselves an elementary experience, which expresses itself as need for truth, beauty, justice—so they don't have to go to Harvard and take a course in justice to understand when they are treated unjustly! Try it! Because our children are ruthless on this point. We are amateurs with respect to the clarity of judgment that they have about things. But we think that they are stupid. Instead, what a difference, what diversity when we treat them like what they are! But, as the Pope says, a "strange obscuring of thought"<sup>6</sup> has happened [in many very able people], and we no longer see what is elementary. And with this obscuring of thought, we reduce their dignity, their capacity for being, their "I" with all of its possibility to evolve, and at the same time, we restrict our concept of love, which is not just courtesy and kindness, but love in truth.

If this is the situation, from where can we start again? From "the hot point [of the mind], the locus of all my consciousness"<sup>7</sup> of which Cesare Pavese spoke. From those functioning brains, from that heart that cannot be reduced to antecedent factors, the heart with its needs and its expectations. It is this expectation of the heart that must find an adequate response. It is around this "hot point" that a proposal that truly corresponds to the human can revolve. But this point (as we have seen on many occasions) is buried under a torpor, a boredom: without finding someone who challenges young people with a relationship at the level of their needs (which we often try to cover with many distractions), the point remains buried.

The question, then, is who is able to reawaken the "hot point," the "I" of young people—and adults, as well. This is the challenge that we all have before us, our generation and the institutions: school, family, the Church, political parties, entrepreneurs, everyone.

In order to reawaken the "I" from its torpor, from this seemingly insurmountable boredom, a lesson or an ethical reminder (though helpful) or a homily will not be enough; what is needed is an adult who, with his life, is able to interest the young person in his own existence, his destiny. But it's difficult to find adults who are not skeptical; how many times, instead, have I found myself talking with university students whose parents respond to their ideal enthusiasm by saying, "No, life will slowly straighten you out."

It is because of this that only a witness (Paul VI said that we need witnesses more than we need teachers), whose appeal is such that those who meet him cannot avoid it, cannot avoid the challenge that his presence introduces into life, can reawaken this "hot point," this hidden need. One who incarnates a way of living that is capable of attracting the heart, challenging reason, setting freedom in motion. In short, what is necessary is a living proposal.

A witness or, to use a word that today is not politically correct—but, when emptied of the connotations with which we sometimes perceive it and used in its original sense, proves decisive—an authority, that is, someone who makes me grow, who generates me with his presence. What is needed is an authority, a presence that challenges the "hot point" in order to launch me toward that "unreachable goal" to which I am called by my human structure.

Fr. Giussani wrote, "We experience authority when we meet someone who possesses a full awareness of reality, who imposes on us a recognition and arouses surprise, novelty, and respect. There is an inevitable attraction within authority and an inexorable suggestion within us, since the experience of authority reminds one more or less clearly of one's poverty and limitations. For this reason, we tend to follow him and becomes his 'disciples.' [...] Even a clear presentation of the meaning of things and the real, intense authority of the educator is insufficient to meet the needs

---

<sup>6</sup> Benedict XVI, *Light of the World: The Pope, the Church, and the Signs of the Times. A Conversation with Peter Seewald*, Ignatius, San Francisco 2010.

<sup>7</sup> C. Pavese, «A Rosa Calzecchi Onesti», 14 giugno [1949], *Lettere 1926-1950*, Einaudi, Turin 1968, vol. 2, p. 655; qtd. in L. Giussani, *The Religious Sense*, McGill-Queen's 1997, p. 56.

[which today we must face] of the adolescent. He must instead [at the same time] be stimulated to *personally confront his own origin* [himself, because without this he will not be himself; and because of this, the effort cannot be spared him]. This means that the student must verify the traditional contents being offered to him, which can be done only if he himself *takes the initiative*: no one else can do it for him. [We must propose a hypothesis of meaning, submit it to our children so that they can verify its pertinence to life, its capacity to respond to the challenges of life. Without this education to the verification of a proposal, it will never become theirs, and therefore they will run the risk of getting lost]. True education must be an *education in criticism*.” Criticism is the comparison of what is proposed to us with the desires of our heart. “The final standard of judgment must be found inside of us, for otherwise we are alienated. The ultimate, inner standard of judgment is identical for all of us: it is a need for the true, the beautiful, and the good. [...] In the past, people have been too afraid of criticism,”<sup>8</sup> of this verification; we have not risked in order to be able to generate an autonomous subject.

Fr. Giussani continued, “The purpose of education is to fashion a new human being; for this reason, the active factors of the educational process must guide the pupil to act with increasing independence and to face the world around him [circumstances] on his own. To do this, we must increasingly expose him to all the elements of his environment, while also gradually allowing him more responsibility for his choices. This is in agreement with the outlines of an evolutionary path according to which the pupil must, at some point, be able to ‘do it himself’ in every circumstance.

The teenager must be guided gradually as he matures toward a personal and independent encounter with the reality that surrounds him [otherwise, the result will be that he doesn’t grow]. It is here that the educator’s stability becomes important, for the increasing autonomy of the student is a ‘risk’ for the teacher’s intelligence and heart, and even for his pride. Then again, it is precisely the risk of confrontation that helps create the pupil’s personality in his relationship to all things; it is here that he develops his *freedom*. [...] It is the student who must undertake the task, because only thus can his freedom truly develop. This love of freedom that leads us to accept the risk inherent in the process must be a constant guideline for educators. [...]

[A]n educational method that watchfully accepts the risk of the teenager’s freedom is really a source of deliberate faithfulness and devotion to the worldview that is being offered and to those who offer it. Precisely because of his discretion and respect for the student, in a certain sense the role of the educator is to step back behind the overshadowing figure of the one Truth by which he is inspired. The teacher has become a living witness, and his teaching and leadership elicit a deep, sincere fondness in the student and become engraved in his memory. Even more, this fondness does not depend on the qualities of the teacher. The outcome is a lasting sense of gratitude and a bond with the teacher, and a conviction which is independent of him.”<sup>9</sup>

The goal of the educative process is not to “convince” the other of what we believe—that would be coercion—because at its center are two freedoms in relationship with each other. Freedom is put in motion by the attraction of reality, because the human heart is thirsty for truth; each person seeks that which corresponds to his original needs for good, beauty, truth, justice, and happiness, which are awakened by everything that happens. Education is, therefore, an invitation to man’s freedom, to begin a journey to discover the truth of things. If this doesn’t happen, then fondness, which may even have been awakened, sooner or later fades away, and boredom wins. Only the truth has the strength to endure in time. The dynamic of freedom is not arbitrary, it’s not doing whatever you want, because a person is truly free when he recognizes and adheres to the meaning of reality; without a meaning, in fact, there would be no adequate reason to live.

Education is a great challenge for the human heart; without it, the development of the person as reason and freedom is impossible. When young people are challenged in their reason and freedom,

<sup>8</sup> L. Giussani, *The Risk of Education*, Crossroad, New York 2001, pp. 64, 67, 9-10.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 80-81, 83.

they prove to be enthusiastic participants in this adventure; the problem is that, unfortunately, they do not find many adults who challenge them, and thus they degenerate.

I would like to end with a text by Rabindranath Tagore, which speaks of all the love that a father must have; when this love is there, the person recognizes it because it leaves him the room to grow: “By all means they try to hold me secure who love me in this world. But it is otherwise with thy love which is greater than theirs, and thou keepest me free.”<sup>10</sup>

Only love makes us free and gives freedom the room to grow. This is the challenge that we adults have the task of accepting with regard to our young people.

Thank you.

---

<sup>10</sup> R. Tagore, *Gitanjali*, Digireads.com 2005, p. 33.