

Erika Schuster

Supporting and encouraging people. On the task/mission of Catholic Adult Education in Europe

In its educational activities, Catholic Adult Education in Europe attempts to include the human lifeworld together with moral-ethical dimensions. Its goal is to provide people with answers to major questions of the day, to support and encourage their development as person and to make the society more equitable. During the past two decades, the political, social, economic, religious and personal prerequisites of Catholic Adult Education in Europe have been in the process of fundamental transformation and continuous change. Contemporary diagnosticians, sociologists, social ethicists, theologians and business managers are of the virtually unanimous opinion that the morally depleted society (Johann Baptist Metz) of the 21st century must develop a "savoir-vivre" especially as response to learning how to live within and among various lifeworlds. In terms of educational policy, since the Lisbon Treaty of 2000, the European Union has reacted to these phenomena, which are perceptible in all realms of private and public life, by legislative and financial measures with invitations to tender for projects.

What can Catholic adult education contribute in a European context to support people in such a way that they can live their lives confidently and decently amidst unemployment, genocide, restricted democracy, violence, threats of terrorism, euthanasia issues, genetic engineering, exploitation of resources, natural disasters, famine ... ?

1. *Be human to people*

In their own way, all people seek happiness and a life lived to the full.

This entitlement also applies to a damaged life. There are no standard biographies, rarely life stories that are in a straight line. Multiple concepts of life, of life styles and environments also have to be taken seriously by adult education in their brokenness and critical ability and be made communicable.

2. *An invitation to hospitality*

Feelings of homesickness leave their mark on the life of asylum seekers, migrants, on all those who are mentally and physically underway, as well as on the life of the indigenous population and those who settled in the region. Every departure, every challenge, every life crisis, every trip, every confrontation with something new leads people to tension between feeling tied to one's home or not feeling tied to one's home. Adult education must offer venues in which people can relax and recharge their energy, where they can find themselves and find their way to others and somewhere they can leave with new insight and understanding.

3. *Meeting on equal footing to share closeness and strangeness and develop an identity*

Learning how to understand culture requires adult education to facilitate an increasingly colourful social exchange process and community experiences and to encourage facing conflicts instead of just encourage them to flee. Through learning processes based on partnership, participation in a wealth of culture, tradition and faith can be achieved and one can countersteer against isolation, particularism, racism and fanaticism.

4. *Gain reach and a future from personal and community roots*

The tremendous speed of economic and technological developments is felt by many people as alienation. They feel lost in the global connections of money and power. Biographical intake to individual and group history stabilises individuals and counteracts history falling into oblivion and being forgotten. Europe's future depends on how deliberately local and regional identities are reflected. Every attempt to create a European identity fails on unresolved and undealt with personal and local background history.

5. *Consistently speak out in favour of justice in an increasingly more colourful society*
In the complex structure of our society, individuals often feel excluded. It's precisely the socially vulnerable who are the most cut off from the flow of information because they cannot afford newspapers, magazines or internet, but also because they can't use them due to poor reading skills. Many are uninformed about their rights or are unable to speak well enough to communicate their request in public. Within the scope of adult education, people can learn to intervene in an organised manner individually and together in the political and social processes, to show solidarity with the poor, the vulnerable and foreigners and encourage them to help themselves. Justice and peace, democracy, the shaping of society and European unification are only obtainable through the participation of responsible citizens.
6. *Support and sustainably maintain the natural habitat*
Environmental thinking is connected thinking; it takes the relationship between people, nature, objects and structures seriously. Environmental thinking assumes meticulous perception and sensitive partnership-based dealing with nature and also requires behaving with humility. With a view to current and future generations, through information, explanation and practice, adult education must sustainably combat global exploitation of people and natural resources.
7. *Assist and support each and every one in his/her/their very own questions*
Adult education institutions should be venues in which a lot is asked and less is answered, a place where people learn to tolerate open/unanswered questions. In times of drastic questions put to mankind through bioethics, human medicine, presumed shortage of resources... people should be able to make decisions, be aware of various alternatives to finding a solution and learn how to choose between the perspectives offered and the ones that are suitable and right for them. Inquiring people take critical examination, evaluation and choice for granted.
8. *Learn to live with parting*
In an era of ever faster processes of change, letting in and letting go are increasingly more difficult. Anyone who has experienced how transient relationships can be may be afraid of being hurt again and prefers to keep a distance. Aging, illness, dying, transience and death-the process of change, separation and the ultimate end need their rightful place in the educational process and are not topics for soothing souls in turmoil.
9. *Finding one's own unmistakable form of expression*
If it's true that language borders are also the borders of the world that is open to a person, then adult education must make every effort to go there to encourage people to find their own form of expression for their observations, their feelings and their thoughts. That is a gauge of the authenticity in vocal confusion of empty words and clichés in public rhetoric.
10. *Understand art and culture as key to creative shaping of the world*
Literature, fine arts, music, dance, film... often open up a far reaching view in a disturbing manner. They reflect people's hardships and let us see counter-images in which there is and was suffering, maturing but also destruction. They often occupy a seismographic and prophetic role in our era and in our society. Art and culture liberate energy by illustrating alternative life designs, nourish the sense of opportunity and sharpen critical observation, the gift of being able to distinguish between appearance and design.
11. *Provide a fixed venue for people's countless lifeworlds and perceptions of reality*
The virtuality of the media surmounts the limits of time and space, changes the concepts of private and public, dominates many lifeworlds of people, influences communication behaviour on the train, in the street, at work, in the partnership and often creates images of a make-believe world. The social learning moulds of adult education offer the opportunity for actual encounters, for a new location and a

new way to deal with time.

12. *Console those who are broken and those who failed*

Brokenness, sorrow, pain and longing for healing come over people of all generations, lifeworlds and educational qualifications. In struggling for a standard of living that stands the test, that takes truth seriously and is not evasive, people need supportive thoughts and discussions.

Many adult education locations can become healing and comforting venues through a varied course offering.

13. *Hitch the carts to a star*

To recognise the harsh reality, the legitimacy of human life and social existence and feel committed to the latest insights from society, industry and commerce and science; is the one thing. The desire to create and promote cross-border developments, try them out, to discover interfaces between religion, church and the most varied everyday experiences, to dream about the future; is the other thing.

However the attitude of earth-bound practicality in connection with an uplifting vision is essential for enabling individuals, groups and institutions to shape their future.

14. *Be a venue in the presence of the Holy Spirit/God*

Catholic adult education must keep alive in people their longing for the unobtainable, something that appears infeasible and that they find beyond them. Its reference to God's ultimate purpose can, without need for it to be pronounced, be reflected in all its measures, whether they deal with religion, theology or church or with women's rights, catastrophic famines, violence in the classroom, addiction prevention or communication training.

Despite many fixed locations, Catholic Adult Education works as a supportive itinerant, nomadic service; the educational activities occur on the road across time. The enzyme and sourdough of society shall be Catholic adult education, a rising agent and taste improvement agent such as used for the starch bread people eat.

The Catholic Adult Education in Europe (Katholische Erwachsenenbildung in Europa) is represented in the European Federation for Catholic Adult Education (FEECA), which has 11 member organisations and was founded in 1963. As largest member in Germany, there are 750 educational institutions under Catholic sponsorship. Erika Schuster is president of the FEECA.