



The Holy See

***LETTER OF THE HOLY FATHER JOHN PAUL II
TO THE DIRECTOR GENERAL OF UNESCO
ON THE OCCASION OF THE WORLD LITERACY DAY 1982***

*To Mr Amadou-Mahtar M'Bow
Director General of UNESCO*

1. The sixteenth anniversary of the International Literacy Day, which you have invited us to celebrate on 8 September, demonstrates the perseverance with which UNESCO is working in this essential domain to promote the growth of the human person, beginning with his most basic needs. All men and their institutions must indeed take notice and contribute to this work as far as their means allow.

2. Does not the new international order which men of good will propose to institute imply that even the most disadvantaged should fully take their place in society, and no longer be treated as second-class citizens?

The illiterate are highly disadvantaged in their cultural progress, their daily relations, their different social environments, and in their potential for employment. This is a major handicap for the whole of society in those developing countries where a high percentage of the population is illiterate.- And it is a considerable problem as well for the illiterate persons themselves and their families in the more prosperous countries: having needs and abilities out of step with those of the general population, they are all the more neglected in their general development. The question on the conscience of modern man is: how to "demarginalize" the illiterate?

3. Certainly, there have been remarkable achievements in this field in the last fifteen years through the use of new materials and technical devices to make teaching more effective. And you rightly encourage, Mr. Director General, the pursuit of these methods. But must one not also insist on legal measures and on attitudes for the existence of the illiterate as a separate and disadvantaged group to be taken into account by all those responsible in the various areas?

And then there is still room for consciousness-raising initiatives - by governments, public and private institutions, and individuals - geared to serve the young, but also to serve those adults who have not had a chance to learn or need to familiarize themselves with new means of communication because they have left their native country or social group, their specialized field. Yes, adults must be given this opportunity, just as in some societies today they are offered opportunities of training for professional advancement.

4. The elimination of illiteracy thus stands more and more as a process of adaptation to the modern technical world where, in order to survive and be respected in one's rights, one must know how to read and write. The illiterate are victims of a too-wide discrepancy between their own traditions and the new institutions to which they must adapt.

But the elimination of illiteracy has an importance beyond its utilitarian and practical aspect. Literacy is the first name of education and culture. Today, it is the initial stage of the entire awakening process of man's personality in his relations with others. And it also facilitates the development of the abilities of mind and soul and the reflection each man is called on to make on the meaning of his life and on his transcendent destiny.

5. One must hope that the elimination of illiteracy be considered not only as a kind of assistance for marginals, but as a natural duty of justice. And how could those for whom religion creates this duty of solidarity with our less privileged brethren be insensitive to this primary right? God bless all those who work towards this sharing of the good of the spirit!

It is thus, Mr. Director General, that I express wishes for the full success of this sixteenth International Literacy Day, in the service of real progress of man through man and of his desire for peace in fraternity.

From the Vatican, 25 August 1982.

GIOVANNI PAOLO II

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