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Theological Horizons for a Pedagogy of Accompaniment

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To educate, the noble task of leading the searching soul into an encounter with the wisdom that fulfills our human yearnings, exceeds the limited meaning of our words when we dare to describe it yet its character is beautifully captured when we speak of it as an *art*. Throughout the centuries, philosophers, theologians, politicians, theorists, scientists, and educators themselves, among others, have spent countless hours reflecting about what it means to educate, the content of education, the purposes of educating, and the many methodologies that one could embrace to educate women and men of all ages in the best possible way. The present essay is a reflection that hopes to contribute to such sustained effort by exploring the theological horizons of what I propose as *a pedagogy of accompaniment*. In this essay I enter in conversation primarily with Christian religious educators, my most immediate audience.

To speak of accompaniment in a religious context demands consideration of our faith traditions, sacred texts, worship moments, and the power of spirituality in our daily lives. It is this array of elements and experiences shaping our religious experience that provides the background and the language to venture into the formulation of the present pedagogy of accompaniment. We stand as religious educators in our faith communities. As such we are companions to the myriads of women and men who in one way or another heard the Word and now journey through life seeking to make sense of what they have heard. On this journey, the God of life is at the beginning (calling), comes to our encounter (accompanying), and awaits as our ultimate end (fulfilling).

In the following pages I invite the reader to explore with me what this pedagogy of accompaniment may offer to us as Christian educators. The essay is divided in three major sections in which we reflect about education as accompaniment, look at some theological principles sustaining this pedagogical proposal, and consider some scenarios where particular instances of accompaniment generate unique pedagogical categories that are rooted in the richness of the Christian experience.

Education as Accompaniment: Preliminary Observations

Contemporary public debates about general education tend to focus very much on the centrality of scores and measurable results. Funding decisions, student promotion, teacher advancement, and administrative viability often depend on such measurable results. While some sort of accountability is necessary as teachers educate the new generations to contribute to the good of society, these debates run the risk of missing a very important point: we educate human beings. We must retrieve the human and spiritual dimensions of education. Something similar

can happen in religious education processes, whether they take place in Sunday school, parish settings, primary and secondary schools, etc. Religious educators and ministers may easily be drawn into the frenzy of measurable results: increase the size of a faith community, learn the central elements of the catechism, memorize biblical passages and formulas, “readiness” to receive the sacraments, etc. While these are important outcomes to which good religious education activities contribute, we cannot reduce religious education to a mere results-based exercise. We must safeguard the human and spiritual dimensions of religious education.

Affirming the human and spiritual dimensions of education may sound redundant, yet it is an urgent reminder especially in the context of the so-called knowledge society (Cf. Hargreaves 2003). It is important that educators see ourselves and the people we engage as persons. This is perhaps the most important insight at the heart of the various works that highlight best teaching practices (Intrator 2002, Stephenson 2001, Wright 1999,). Being human here and now is a complex experience that cannot be reduced to just measurable results. To be human is to journey in search of a deeper understanding about our own selves, others, the world, and God. The search begins from the very first moments of life and extends until the time we die. If we look at our human experience as a lifelong journey, then education is an important exercise of accompaniment on that journey.

Every journey has a beginning and an end. What happens between these two frontiers defines the nature of the journey, transforms the lives of those who take part in it, and opens up possibilities that may lead sojourners in directions that they may have not initially foreseen. People of all ages participate in educational processes with the hope of achieving something. In the process of moving toward some set goals, participants bring our own questions, experiences, and desires. We bring our humanity. In the educational experience people enter into a process of becoming because our lives are always before us as projects. We are continuously searching for fullness, which ultimately means to search for the truth and the good. Authentic education could lead to nothing lesser than what is true and what is good.

On the educational journey what is true and what is good, what one may become, and what one may finally achieve are not always explicitly manifest to everyone’ awareness. Though the questions, experiences and desires that we bring with us to the educational process reveal our ability to interpret and name our reality, they also point beyond the immediacy of our certainties. This is why education ought to be understood as accompaniment. Education as a accompaniment builds on the pre-understanding that human lives are projects and that we enter the journey hoping for *more*, whether in the sense of learning something new or in that of transcending our own immediacy. On this journey educators emerge as companions. As such, educators have the advantage of knowing a little bit more about the path that we traverse with the women and men with whom we walk. This does not mean that as companions we are omniscient about the journey or that we have mechanically mapped out every single aspect of the educational experience. When educators assume our roles as companions, we do it as persons who share and participate in the experience of what it means to be human. We are also human beings who bring our own questions, experiences and desires; we hope to be transformed on the way; we search for what is true and what is good –and we do all this *with* the persons whom we accompany.

The educational path that educators and the persons whom we accompany follow ordinarily seems to be defined by external agents: an institution, society, government, church, school, etc. This is how most of the time we encounter ourselves walking alongside each other – with the possible exception of those natural contexts in which education takes place in a more informal way such as the family and communities of friendship and service. The formality of the educational path may indeed be perceived as structurally rigid, thus limiting the openness and perhaps the personal character of education. To a certain extent this may be true, yet such structural formality is what usually makes possible that education be widely available. Nevertheless, this is only one dimension of education. In the dynamic of accompaniment the educational path must be seen in intimate connection with the *horizon* toward which it points. In other words, the educational path is more than a rigid, predetermined framework. The path leads to a horizon that empowers educators and the persons we accompany to contemplate together the fact that to be human is to be open to a world of possibilities. Yet, we look at the horizon while firmly rooted in the unique, particular reality of who we are (personal dimension) and where we live (historical dimension). It is in this reality where we learn the language and the concepts that we use to interpret reality; within this reality we learn what it means to be in relationship with others, the world, and God. From a perspective of a pedagogy of accompaniment to walk the educational path is to be part of a unique opportunity in which we simultaneously affirm our lived experiences here and now and walk together with hope toward a horizon of unlimited life-giving possibilities.

Finally, our reflection on education as accompaniment requires that we look at one last element: the need for accompaniment. Education is an inherently relational experience. It happens through the interaction of people who intentionally join in a process of sharing, learning, questioning, and growing together. The social dimension of our existence is what constitutes families, groups, and societies. As members of these human associations we inherit the knowledge that has been created, interpreted and shared throughout generations by the groups to which we belong. Such knowledge shapes our worldviews allowing us to interact with the women and men around us and empowering us to eventually exert some influence in the lives of others. But we do not get to that knowledge by ourselves. We need to be accompanied by those who know the wisdom of the community, those who have the charge of entrusting the new generations with the responsibility of being more human because of the gift that they have received. Even autodidactic processes of education in which individual persons study by themselves, choose their own curriculum, and establish their own purposes for the educational exercise, are also relational. They are relational insofar as these persons enter in dialogue with the ideas and materials created by another person or community; they are relational because the new learning shapes one's interactions with those who are around us; they are relational because all educational processes need checks and balances vis-à-vis the information engaged, which can only be provided by other persons sharing similar interests.

The need for accompaniment is ultimately a two-way stream rooted in the relational nature of our human experience: on the one hand, as educators we need to accompany the women and men that we encounter to share the wisdom that we once received, to examine our own appropriations of such wisdom born out of our own experience and creative imagination, and to walk with them on a journey of mutual growth and transformation that builds lives at the personal and communal levels. On the other hand, as students/pupils people need to be

accompanied to learn the wisdom of those who have come ahead of them, to be mentored in the ways of life, to be empowered in ways that they can be authentic makers of knowledge, and to better contemplate the horizon of possibilities as they journey on their own educational paths.

Biblical and Theological Approximations to Accompaniment

Until now this reflection has addressed the idea of education as accompaniment in very general terms. Nonetheless, the language and categories proposed above, while not necessarily expressed in strict religious language, are profoundly influenced by Christian theological convictions. In this section we turn our attention to particular theological principles that sustain the pedagogy of accompaniment that is being proposed.

Before exploring some of these theological principles, it is helpful to outline the operative understanding of Christian religious education in this essay: *an intentional process of sharing the faith of the Christian community in ways that empower all Christian women and men to be fully human and fully Christian in the midst of the socio-historical-cultural contexts where we live, facilitating a transforming/salvific encounter with the God of life through Jesus Christ, and living according to God's Reign in the here and now of our existences.*

The wisdom of the Christian tradition presents us with an abundance of theological categories and insights that can truly enrich the reflection on our pedagogy of accompaniment. I propose that we focus on two such categories:

a. God with us

The God of life, revealed in many ways before the Christian covenant and more specifically through the person and mystery of Jesus Christ, is always at the beginning, sustains, and is the ultimate end of the Christian experience. God created humanity in the divine image and likeness (Gen 1:27) with the desire to know and love the life that only God can give. God comes to our encounter in the midst of our own socio-historical-cultural human experiences. God is with us where we are and is the goal of our journey in history, the fulfillment of our most intimate yearnings. Whether at the beginning of our existence, with us through our days, or as the ultimate goal to which we grace-fully aspire, God is present as the one who journeys with humanity, the one who comes to our encounter in the everyday, the one who never abandons us, and the one who better understands our human nature because we are “like” God (Cf. Psalm 8:6). Christian religious education is deeply grounded in these convictions.

The Hebrew Scriptures provide us with amazing moments in which the encounter with God is clearly framed in terms of accompaniment: after the fall God did not abandon the first human beings but provided for them with what they needed to live (Gen 3-4); the covenant with Noah was sealed with a promise to never destroy human life again (Gen 8:20-22); God leads Abraham to the Promised Land and gives him many blessings (Gen 12:1-3); God liberates Israel from slavery in Egypt and walks with them through the desert; God gives Israel the Law (Ex 20); God reigns through the wisdom of the faithful judges and kings; God listens to the prayers of Ruth; God speaks to the people of Israel, calls them to conversion, corrects their wrong ways, and gives them hope through the prophets; God promises a Messiah. Likewise, the New Testament gives us many moments that reveal God's divine accompaniment to humanity in unique ways: Jesus is the “Emmanuel, God with us” (Mt 1:23); Jesus accompanies the poor and

the suffering; Jesus forgives (Mk 2:5; Lk 23:34); Jesus gives life (John 11:43; Lk 8:54); Jesus teaches truths that give life (John 6:68); Jesus serves (John 13:5); Jesus is our redeemer (1 Cor 1:30); Jesus sends the Spirit to assist us (John 14:26); Jesus stays with us in the community of believers (Mt 18:20); the community of believers continues Jesus' ministry of accompaniment (Mt 28:20).

A general look at these biblical images indicates that the divine accompaniment is actualized in the history of humanity in various ways according to the specific circumstances in which God and human persons meet. Sometimes the divine accompaniment is expressed as loving protection, other times as forgiveness; sometimes as exhortation, others as sacramental and grace-full presence. Given the constraints of space in this essay we cannot venture into a deep analysis of each of the above biblical expressions of divine accompaniment, yet this remains a task worthy of further attention. Let us focus instead on the One who accompanies. From the above images we learn three insights about God: God wants to accompany us, God cares about us, and God fulfills us. These insights reveal something original about the divine accompaniment: first, God freely calls us into existence to share the divine life and to enter into a salvific relationship with us. Such calling not only affirms God's love for us from the very beginning of our existences, but also reveals the divine desire to be in relationship with us – despite our limitations. Second, God's accompaniment is neither distant nor unengaged but fully committed to what could be termed “the human cause.” God is always with us. Third, God is the ultimate truth and good that fully satisfies our search for transcendence and fulfillment (Augustine 2001, book 1). In God we become what we are meant to be: fully human. God calls us, remains faithful to us, and fulfills us. All three insights together are at the heart of the dynamic of divine accompaniment.

How does the conviction that *God is with us* impact our reflection on a pedagogy of accompaniment for religious education? To educate in the faith is a journey in which women and men encounter the One who encounters us in the history of our lives. Religious education moments are unique opportunities to introduce women and men of all ages into a transforming relationship with our God who cares about us with divine love. At the heart of human existence is the desire to live authentically and transcend our immediacy (Lonergan 1992), the natural drive to find meaning in our lives (Frankl 1956). Christian religious education affirms that desire and guides women and men to the realization that God is the ultimate truth and good that we hope for. As religious educators we seek to fully understand the human drive for fulfillment by entering into conversation with the insights of philosophy and the human sciences, yet we enter such conversation as women and men of faith convinced that we ultimately grasp what it means to be a Christian by being in relationship with God who is with us, particularly through the mystery of the risen Christ. To accompany in Christian religious education means to encourage and facilitate such relationship.

Christian religious educators have a special responsibility to grow in familiarity with the ways in which God becomes present in human history to accompany women and men in our search for fulfillment. From the Scripture passages cited above it is possible to identify certain patterns of that presence that point to what may be called a divine pedagogy. Such pedagogy is a good model for Christian religious educators. God, particularly in the person of Jesus Christ,

models a pedagogy of accompaniment which Christian religious educators constantly contemplate searching for insight.

b. Accompaniment as a spiritual journey

One of the common marks of education in Western societies is the learning of rational and scientific knowledge with the purpose of furthering the continuous thrust toward “progress,” whether technological or social or political. Educational performance in the processes of teaching and learning is often measured according to criteria that determine whether such progress is furthered or stalled at any given time. In this context, it is not surprising that the areas of study whose subjects and methods are easily measured in quantifiable terms receive more attention as well as resources. Conversely, the arts and the humanities are often called “soft sciences” and thus looked upon with certain condescension. Yet seemingly this last group of areas of knowledge is more likely to explore the spiritual dimensions of education. This observation then points to a painful dichotomy that affects Western education. If education is to be the driver of progress within a particular society or community as well as to remain a fully human endeavor, all educational expressions must affirm the spiritual dimensions of learning.

The above thought may not seem an explicit theological point. However, it is insofar as it seeks to establish the condition of possibility to speak of spirituality in a world where rational and scientific knowledge is overrated. Even in the context of religious education it can be tempting to limit the processes of sharing faith primarily to the achievement of measurable results or to focus theoretical reflection on religious education mostly to observable, quantifiable data that describes trends. Without a doubt this type of research provides us with helpful data but there is an urgent need to intentionally develop philosophical and theological frameworks that address the challenges and contexts where religious educators share the Christian faith. We must account for those dimensions of religious education that are not always measurable or quantifiable. Spirituality is one of them.

Human beings are spiritual beings. We are created in God’s image and likeness (Gen 1:27) and thus have a unique potential to transcend the immediacy of our own reality in a God-like way. Transcending, however, should not be understood as abandonment or rejection of our human condition. On the contrary, to transcend demands an affirmation of all dimensions of our humanity. Because we are spiritual, namely we are capable of entering into fulfilling relationships with other persons and with God, we are continuously searching for meaning as people who are rooted in the here and now of our daily experience and do so in the company of others who share the condition of being human. To be spiritual is to affirm our openness to being in relationship.

Accompaniment emerges then as one actualization of the spiritual character of our human existence. The God of Revelation, who freely and lovingly comes to the encounter of humanity in history, continuously calls women and men to be in relationship. Hence the sense of vocation that is at the heart of Christian spirituality. By entering into relationship with us –divine accompaniment –God grounds our spirituality and provides us with a model of being with one another. Christian spirituality then is sustained by the conviction that God accompanies humanity in a relationship that has profoundly transforming implications –ultimately salvation through Jesus Christ. The spiritual journey of the Christian community is marked by a relational

character that calls for continuous accompaniment according to God's own ways of being with us. Just as God walks with us so are we called to do with those whom we encounter on our human journey.

A spirituality of accompaniment provides us with great insights about the nature of sharing faith in our Christian communities. Let us highlight three. First, sharing faith in religious education is a profoundly relational activity that affirms the fullness of value of what it means to be human in all its dimensions –intellectual, emotional, bodily. It is as human beings that God enters in relationship with us. No process of religious education can be considered authentically Christian unless it affirms the fullness of who we are as women and men created in God's image and likeness. Second, the grounding experience of a spirituality of accompaniment is God's initiative to come to the encounter of humanity in history and the divine invitation to be in relationship with God and others. God models the accompaniment that must characterize the Christian experience, particularly as we share our faith with one another. Third, to accompany others in religious education is a spiritual journey that builds on the relational character of our experience. As human beings we share a common existence and find ourselves searching for shared meaning. It is in this common search that we accompany one another discovering our great potential for spiritual growth. On this journey Christian believers discover that God is the ultimate truth and the greatest good toward which we move –and religious educators the companions par excellence.

Accompaniment as a spiritual journey goes beyond the quantifiable and measurable categories that are often used in our Western societies to determine the effectiveness of educational processes. To educate Christians in faith is rather a journey filled with surprises on which discovery, amazement, and sometimes frustration reveal something novel about God's presence in history and about the women and men who live their lives as a continuous search for meaning. Religious education is an art; the art of accompanying Christians while remaining open to the mysterious newness of God's divine presence in history.

Theology, Spirituality, and Pedagogy: Emerging Categories

Our pedagogy of accompaniment becomes life in the particularity of the situations in which we encounter the people with whom we share our faith. The uniqueness of each different educational situation calls for a specific way of accompaniment which in turn yields some categories that sustain the particular actualizations of this pedagogy. In other words, the philosophical and theological building blocks of this pedagogy are not formulaic prescriptions or fixed methodological structures to be universally applied regardless of context or circumstances. Based on the reflections in the previous sections of this essay, the present pedagogy of accompaniment operates according to three general principles: 1) educators and students are companions on the educational journey, 2) education is a journey on which people embark as human beings whose personal projects yearn for fulfillment, and 3) education is a journey that leads to an encounter with what is ultimately true and good.

In this pedagogy the categories emerge in the process rather than anteceding it. This calls for religious educators to remain attentive to the theological, educational categories that come to light as we share our faith. Likewise, participants in religious educational processes must be

invited—and adequately prepared—to articulate their experience of what it means to be in relationship with God and others as they journey in search for ultimate meaning.

Let us briefly look at two instances of Christian accompaniment and some of the categories that emerge within them. Each context calls for a particular articulation of Christian religious education that must respond to the questions and expectations of the people involved in them. At the same time, each context offers unique perspectives that are helpful as we contemplate the theological horizon of Christian accompaniment as religious educators.

a. Accompaniment as strength in weakness

At the heart of the Christian message there lies a unique concern for those who in our daily experience we perceive as weak, those whose lives are marked by some sort of disadvantage that causes suffering. Matthew's gospel pleads for those who are hungry, thirsty, imprisoned, naked, homeless, etc. In them we see the face of Christ (Mt 25:31-46). Many other passages in the Scriptures remind us of the vulnerable nature of our humanity and how weakness is part of who we are. Christian tradition regularly articulates the concern for those who are weak in terms of care and solidarity and hospitality. Yet, accompaniment seems to be a category that not only encompasses the deepest meaning of all these terms but also points to the continuous embrace of others as we walk with them. From an authentic Christian perspective of accompaniment, detachment, abandonment, and withdrawal are negations of what we are called to be to those who are weak. We walk with those who experience weakness, we are their companions, and we come to the end of the way with them. Rather than momentary and random, accompaniment is permanent presence.

Human weakness is experienced in many ways and we hope that one day we become strong or that the conditions underlying our weakness disappear. Yet those who work or live with people with mental handicaps know that their condition challenges the hopes of a situation ever becoming one day "normal." Mental handicaps are among the most challenging ways of being a human being, particularly because of their irreversibility in most cases. Jean Vanier's experience of accompanying women and men who live with mental handicaps is perhaps one of the most powerful examples of Christian accompaniment. L'Arche communities around the world are oases where people with mental handicaps live with other people who walk with them and together discover new ways of being human. In these communities accompaniment is an experience that transforms companions and those whom they accompany: "[w]e may come to l'Arche to help the weak, but we soon realize that, in fact, it is they who are helping us!" (Vanier 1995, 8). Accompanying the weak redefines traditional understandings of weakness and strength: the strong recognize their weakness, the weak discover their strengths, the walls between the strong and the weak are no more (24), and both weak and strong find each other as partners on the way. It is in a context like this that the words of the Apostle Paul fully resonate: when I am weak, then I am strong (2 Cor 12:10). At the core of this communal experience, friendship among companions means to become vulnerable. It is when we are vulnerable that we better understand ourselves and others. To be vulnerable reveals the beauty of humanity (Vanier 1995, 30). The experience in the L'Arche communities calls for a unique form of accompaniment. The categories that emerge in this experience can truly enrich our own pedagogical practices as religious educators.

To befriend the weak is not easy. Weakness faces us with our own fears and our own darkness. Weakness reveals how vulnerable we are: “[t]aking care of fragile and vulnerable individuals has revealed to humans their own fragility and vulnerability,” wrote recently the French scientist Xavier Le Pichon reflecting about suffering (2009, 9). Furthermore, weakness not only reveals something about our inner selves but also points us in the direction of transcendence: “[a]s humans are confronted to suffering and death, as mirrors of their own suffering and death, they are confronted to their own fragility and vulnerability and this confrontation forces them to go beyond themselves by entering into a transcendent world that can be metaphysical, artistic and (or) poetic” (10). To be companions of the weak we need conversion that leads to appreciate the depth of our own humanity and that of the people with whom we walk.

Religious educators are often confronted with the many weaknesses of the people with whom we work –as well as ours. Sometimes these weaknesses are physical or mental. Sometimes people come to our faith communities because they are searching for something; they search for what they still do not fully possess, that which is ultimately true and good. Lacking that something could be expressed as brokenness, ignorance of the faith, inability to comprehend the basics of what it means to be Christian, rejection of values (religious and moral), painful experiences in the churches that wound people’s trust, negative images of the divine, want of a common understanding in the midst of the pluralistic and culturally diverse nature of many of our faith communities, etc. Despite these many weaknesses, women and men of all ages come to our communities to share faith and to make sense out of their lives according to the principles of the Gospel. They come with their weaknesses and religious educators are called to walk with them, to be their companions, to accompany them on the way. There may be no end to the path but there is always need for companions who are willing to walk with the weak on the journey and be transformed in the process.

b. Accompaniment as preferential option

God is for all; God’s call to salvation in Jesus Christ is for every human being. These two convictions affirm the universality of God’s love. Yet loving everyone with divine love and hoping that all women and men accept the gift of salvation does not prevent God from loving some with preferential love. God loves the poor, the weak, the dispossessed of the earth, and the oppressed with a special love. They need God’s preferential love because in the eyes of society this is all they have left. They need God’s preferential love because in their everyday they are denied the basic conditions to live to the fullness of their dignity –and this is not part of God’s plan. This is the message of the Prophets in the Hebrew Scriptures and that of gospel in the New Testament. Such love is not a love of exclusion but an affirmation of their dignity. Because God loves the poor with a preferential love, we are called to do likewise. Accompaniment then emerges as loving the poor, the weak, the dispossessed and the oppressed with preferential love. To accompany women and men whose lives are limited by these conditions requires walking the path that leads to authentic justice and true freedom.

U.S. Hispanic Catholic theologian Roberto Goizueta proposes a theology of accompaniment from the perspective of liberation. Accompaniment implies that we are part of a network of relationships with people whose lives and ours are intimately intertwined. Many of

these people are already poor (1995, 178) and their presence compels us to confront the consequences of our failure to recognize that we are related to them (182), that we have a responsibility for them and for the conditions that deny them the possibilities of living fully human. The preferential option for the poor is more than mere rationalization about poverty or consciousness that the poor exist, though at a “safe distance”: it is “the first *precondition* for authentic Christian faith” (178). To accompany the poor cannot be reduced to an abstraction or a good desire, it demands that we meet and walk with concrete, particular poor people: “one *cannot* know the poor or perceive reality from the perspective of the poor unless he or she is literally and physically walking with particular poor persons” (207). Furthermore: “[o]nly by knowing the poor can one know (theory) the poor, and only by loving particular poor persons can one love “the poor” (194).

The relational character of accompaniment as preferential option calls for particular commitments. To opt preferentially for the poor demands that we humbly accept our complicity as society and faith communities in the conditions that lead many people to live in poverty and marginalization, that we denounce sin, and that we walk *with* the poor “*where* poor persons walk” (213). Accompaniment as preferential option for the poor means to, literally, share the suffering that destroys the lives of poor women and men in our society: “[s]uffering shared is already suffering in retreat” (183). This form of accompaniment is fully expressed in the concept of friendship with the poor. To opt preferentially for the poor is to become friends with particular persons who are poor, to share in their needs: “[t]he foundation of the preferential option for the poor is the aesthetic, affective praxis of friendship with poor persons” (195). Ultimately, accompaniment as preferential option for the poor is a spiritual option (211), a path that leads to the encounter with God in history—the God of the poor—and to better understand ourselves as human beings who are *acompañados* (in the company of others) (205).

As religious educators we enter the reality of women and men of all ages in our communities through the various processes of faith formation in which we are engaged. We know firsthand the struggles and questions that particular, concrete people bring with them because most of the time they want to read these in light of the Christian message. As we embrace a pedagogy of accompaniment we discover that preferential options are necessary in our methodologies, the selection of the curriculum, and the purposes of faith formation. Often times we must educate in faith to address poverty or discrimination or violence. Sometimes we must denounce realities of structural injustice and sin. Religious education as accompaniment highlights the socio-political dimensions of the Christian faith and calls for us to walk with our people in their everyday to facilitate an encounter with the God of liberation who affirms life and loves the poor with preferential love. Through that process we have the potential to be transformed as persons who are *acompañados* as well as to transform the conditions that limit the possibilities of living fully human in our own particular contexts.

Conclusion

To educate Christians in the faith is an art deeply rooted in our relationship with the God of revelation who comes to us in history as the divine companion, particularly in Jesus Christ. In this essay we have looked at accompaniment as a category that has great potential to ground a pedagogy of Christian education. This pedagogy affirms the relational character of Christian education, draws its central insights from a spirituality nurtured by the conviction that God is

with us, and remains open to the emergence of theological categories according to the particular contexts in which it is embraced. Three principles sustain our pedagogy of accompaniment: 1) educators and students are companions on the educational journey, 2) education is a journey on which people embark as human beings whose personal projects yearn for fulfillment, and 3) education is a journey that leads to an encounter with what is ultimately true and good. Accompaniment requires awareness about the journey, in this case the educational journey that leads to deeper relationships with God and others. On the journey the God of life is at the beginning (calling), comes to our encounter (accompanying), and is the ultimate end (fulfilling).

Further reflection on accompaniment as a pedagogy for religious education must focus on the anthropological and ethical presuppositions sustaining the proposal. The present pedagogy must lead to a renewed reflection on the criteria to developing curriculum and to recasting the aims of Christian education in light of the contexts where we encounter women and men of all ages as we share faith with them. More scenarios need to be explored (e.g. cultural diversity, youth ministry, ministry in urban and suburban enclaves) to attentively identify the categories of accompaniment that emerge there. Finally, Christian educators need to explore how a pedagogy of accompaniment can contribute to educational theory beyond religious contexts and how that same educational theory can strengthen the art of educating Christians today. May these be the next steps as we continue to reflect on Christian religious education as accompaniment.

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