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**WHAT IS THE SOLUTION TO DELINQUENCY
IN THE YOUNG ?**

by

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Overview

In the face of an increasing number of serious offences among young people, traditional solutions seem to be more and more ineffective. Jean-Marie Petitclerc, a former student at the *Ecole Polytechnique*, as well as a priest and youth worker, analyses the different forms of violence and their meanings, and suggests applying specific solutions. According to him, what is natural is violence, and what is unnatural and therefore the result of education, is the ability to establish a respectful relationship with someone. The adult world should relearn how to educate young people in a coherent, social way. This should be carried out in places where young people spend time or where the violence takes place, such as in the family, in schools, in the street, and now even in companies.

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TALK : Jean-Marie PETITCLERC

I have been a prison youth worker for twenty-five years. Having formed and managed a group specialising in delinquency prevention at Chanteloup-les-Vignes, I then managed an educational hostel for teenagers for ten years near Caen. After this period, Pierre Cardo asked me to come back to Chanteloup-les-Vignes in the Spring of 1991. This coincided with the urban riots in the Parisian suburbs. In working with a dozen or so of the older teenagers I had met when I had first worked there, I developed a model of social intervention based on mediation. Today I run a delinquency prevention association called *Le Valdocco* in a sensitive area of the town of Argenteuil, twenty kilometres from Paris.

The incomprehensible adult world

Teenagers develop every day within three different environments : the family, the school and the street. The difference between a young person who is well integrated into society and one who is in the process of being marginalised on the edge of society can be measured by the length of time he or she spends on the street. In the first instance, the street is merely a place where there is traffic going from A to B. However, for the young person who is marginalised, the street is a stagnant place : he is not at ease at home or in school, and the street represents a place where he is free.

Each of these environments is strongly influenced by its own culture : the family culture is based on the country of origin ; the Republican culture of the school ; or the culture of the street which has a certain code of honour, and also a communication code based on gangs and influenced by the media. The tragedy of these young people is that adults who appear to be reference points in each of these areas (whether it be parents at home, teachers at school, or elders in the street) spend most of their time discrediting the other two environments.

Teachers complain about parents who abdicate their responsibilities, and about the unhealthy influence of the street. Parents do not understand that teachers, who claim to be educational professionals, are incapable of guaranteeing the discipline and the shaping of their children. Teachers also condemn the influence of the street. The elders in the street say that, in any case, parents belong to a different generation and do not understand anything, and that there is no point in going to a secondary school which they consider offers no future. The system by which children attend the state-run school which is nearest to where they live was an excellent measure, during a time when there was a social mix throughout the country, but this is a useless measure now, since there is no longer a social mix and social 'ghettos' have sprung up.

It is therefore understandable that, confronted with the incomprehensibility of the adult world, young people either go mad or become violent. Becoming violent seems to me to be healthy ! Above all, it is a plea for adults to be understanding.

What *Le Valdocco* does

At *Le Valdocco*, we try to put into practice a global approach with regards to the child. The same educational team accompanies the child in his activities which are organised around the three areas which I have already mentioned : working in the street with groups of teenagers ; helping with school studies and acting as a mediator between the family and the school ; and finally, acting as a network for parents and negotiating with the family.

Mediation is in fact the maxim for our work. Links have to be created between the different adults who accompany the child as he is growing up. *Le Valdocco* runs a professional training institute for mediation. It has a department for initial training so that the older teenagers from these urban areas become local mediation workers. It also has a department for continuing adult education, which welcomes staff from state education, youth workers, and increasingly

executives from companies as well as supervisors who find themselves unprepared for the behaviour of young workers today.

The new crimes of young people

Juvenile delinquency is not a new phenomenon in itself, but it has recently undergone quantitative and qualitative changes which seem worrying.

The figures

Juvenile delinquency has doubled in ten years, with about eighty-five thousand delinquency offences committed by minors each year at the beginning of the 1990s, compared with more than one hundred and eighty thousand today. Furthermore, these figures fall short of the true picture : for every offence spotted by the police, there are several others which are not recorded because the police were not present at the right time or the victim did not dare lodge a complaint for fear of reprisals. Therefore, it can sometimes be curiously comforting that the figures are on the increase since it simply means that the police are doing a better job. The only way to find out the real delinquency figures would be to carry out studies using representative samples of the population to discover who had been a victim, as is done in other European countries.

The first victims : young people

Another important characteristic of delinquency is that 80 % of the violent acts committed by minors are perpetrated on other minors. This means that young people are exposed four times more than adults to juvenile delinquency. As a youth worker attached to prisons, I am confronted with verbal violence regularly and with physical violence from time to time. But the kids I meet are confronted with verbal violence all the time and physical violence every single day !

The tolerance threshold with regards to violence which takes place between young people is much higher than when adults are the target. A student who seriously insults a teacher may be given a month's suspended prison sentence, yet for a violent act between young people to be considered serious requires one of the two participants to be hospitalised.

A never-ending Guerre des boutons

The fact that a group of teenagers takes it out on another group solely because the other group is not from the same area is not at all new : the film *Guerre des boutons* tells how groups of teenagers in the French countryside set about stirring up ill-feeling in parties organised by young people in the neighbouring village.

The most worrying thing is that this violence has no obvious limits. In 1999, a sixteen-year-old teenager from Argenteuil was stabbed to death by a fourteen-year-old because a jacket had been lent and was given back dirty. Such stupid actions which start fights have always existed. However, that this should result in a killing is proof that these young people have not learned to control their aggression.

Gratuitous violence

Another difference is that in the 1980s, 80 % of offences committed by young people were related to theft. It was a 'practical' form of delinquency. Today, alongside the delinquency of black economy networks, one can see that gratuitous violence such as burning a bus shelter, assaulting a member of the civil service, or setting fire to a car have developed which in themselves serve no practical purpose.

The powerlessness of adults

Another worrying characteristic lies in the difficulty adults have in controlling this violence. In the era of *La Guerre des boutons*, an adult suddenly appeared and the kids stopped hitting each other. Today, adults have a tendency to turn a blind eye and continue on their way. Yet, their mere intervention might control the violence. As Comte-Sponville wrote, « *la violence est la manière naturelle de régler le conflit* » (« *violence is the natural way to settle conflict* »). What is unnatural, but the result of education, is the ability to create a relationship based on mutual respect.

In other words, the problem of juvenile violence is primarily a lack of education. Don Bosco, the well known educationalist of the 19th century, who was already aware of violence between young people in the working-class areas of Turin, wrote in 1883 : « *Start looking after the young people straight away ; if you don't, they'll soon be looking after you* ». Babies born in the 20th century are no more violent than those born a century earlier. The question one has to ask is why have adults become less capable of teaching children and teenagers how to control their aggression so that it does not escalate into violence. This powerlessness seems to me to be linked to three key areas, the credibility of authority, socialisation and forecasting the future.

The problem of the credibility of authority

I would like to make a distinction between authority and power. Power is given by an institution, whereas authority is received by the person who then uses this authority on others. The major change which May 1968 brought about in our country is that a position of power no longer automatically generates a position of authority. Two teachers who both have the same power within the same secondary school will not necessarily have the same authority. The level of authority will depend on their personal credibility.

Of the three key areas which make adults powerless with regards to the education of their children, the area of credibility of those who embody authority has an effect on the three areas of education, namely the family, the school and the housing estate.

Parents who have abrogated their parental functions

Many parents accused of abrogating their role as parents suffer a loss of credibility in the eyes of their own children, which in itself undermines their ability to exercise their parental authority.

Among the reasons for this, the most important is undoubtedly the increase in the number of divorces, which are a terrible source of disappointment for children.

The next most important is social exclusion. One evening, an eleven-year-old child, whose father would not allow him to go out to the housing estate because it was obviously dangerous, said to him : « *Listen, I work all day at school, I have every right to relax. You do damn all, and you're not going to stop me from going* ». The father, shocked by the pain of this remark, did nothing, and furthermore will be singled out as being negligent ! As the sociologist Adil Jazouli wrote, it is more accurate to talk about parents who abrogate their parental functions rather than about negligent parents.

Another factor is linked to the speed of technological change. Forty years ago, when a teenager from a working-class background started to become interested in electricity, his father could give him some advice. Today, young people are fascinated by the technologies of multimedia, and most parents are completely overwhelmed. Therefore, the parents no longer have this advantage in terms of experience and know-how, something which was formerly one of the ways in which they were able to establish their authority.

Hypocrisy of the school system

The school system has also lost its credibility with a vast hypocrisy associated with the so-called "single secondary school" (a principle established in 1975 whereby in a single secondary school all children from 11-13 years old should be taught according to the same general syllabus in order to democratise access to learning. This principle of equality presupposes that each child should be endowed with a common culture provided by the state school). As Alain Minc wrote : « *Quand un système fonctionne à l'idéologie égalitaire, il produit les conduites les plus inégalitaires qui soient* » (« *When a system functions as a democracy, it produces the most undemocratic behaviour imaginable*»). As soon as children begin to develop their individuality, in an attempt to safeguard equal opportunities, different teaching methods need to be applied.

In our school system, young teenagers are only allowed to touch a piece of wood or an engine in the context of a career guidance course in woodwork or mechanics. It is as if one only allows them access to a computer in a careers guidance course in computer science. And yet, everyone knows that the computer can be useful in French, Geography, Mathematics etc. I know children who need to touch a piece of wood in order to understand Geometry and others who need to touch an engine to understand Physics ! But our system is not made for people who need tangible objects in order to understand abstract notions.

The problem of credibility on the housing estates

It is hardly surprising that it is increasingly difficult to educate the younger generation to respect the law when television shows us the people who make laws, the MPs, hurling abuse at each other across the benches of the House of Commons ; when those who are supposed to apply the law break it ; and when a former Justice minister insults the police officers who have arrested him for driving in a bus lane while talking on his mobile telephone.

We should also recognise that we tend to trivialise resorting to violence, showing leniency where adults are involved, but condemning juvenile violence. In 1999, at Conflans railway station, one hundred and fifty young people vandalised a first class train carriage, causing sixty thousand Francs' worth of damage. This made front page news and three juveniles from Chanteloup were put in prison. Two weeks later, angry Brittany farmers caused two and a half millions Francs' worth of damage to railway facilities in Brittany, and nobody batted an eyelid !

The problem of socialisation

The second reason which helps to explain the powerlessness of adults is the failure to teach their children to adopt normal patterns of social behaviour. This is true in the family, the school and the housing estates.

Avoiding family conflicts

In the context of this society which we know to be insecure and competitive, the family unit can be increasingly viewed as an emotional island, where one can be at ease and everything is done to avoid conflict.

However, learning to socialise can only be achieved by managing conflicts. Twenty-five years ago, when there was no school on Thursdays, in a family of seven children with just one television set there was inevitably an element of social conflict and negotiation every Wednesday night : one child wanted to watch football, another the documentary, and another the soap opera, and the parents had to act as referees. Today, in some families, each child has a television in his own room : this is clearly more comfortable but there is no process of learning to live together.

The indifference of passers-by

There has been an important change in housing estates : a young person can do whatever he wants there and the passer-by will not say a word. « *It's not my kid, it's not my problem* », the passer-by will say. This change has had a particularly serious impact on teenagers whose parents emigrated from Africa and especially from North Africa, since in their traditional educational model, a young boy's education until puberty takes place in the home under the aegis of his mother. After puberty, he comes under the responsibility of the male adult community, who support the father and act collectively with regard to the father.

The same educational pattern, transposed in a new environment which has lost its function of educating children in the role of citizenship, no longer works. This is why there is an overrepresentation of North African and African inmates in prisons in the area around Paris. There is no doubt about the ability of parents to instil values in their children : I know many such families and I have been touched by their warm welcome and their politeness, and the respect which they have for our rules as well as their desire to integrate themselves into our society.

The same educational pattern also existed once in France. I remember the first time my mother let me go to school by myself. Before I left, she said to me : « *I trust you, but watch out : I don't want the grocer telling me later that she saw you trying to be smart in the street !* ». Today, when we see a child doing something stupid, we laugh if it is young ; if it is older, we worry. No matter which, we do not intervene. The entire community of citizens has to become aware of its educational role with regards to young people when they take their first steps towards being autonomous. We have to pull ourselves together as a group !

The lack of educational training for teachers

The school, therefore, remains the only place where one can learn to live together, and it is this that has radically changed the teaching profession. Thirty years ago, teachers rightly assumed that students knew how to behave themselves in groups before they entered secondary school, but today this is no longer the case. When teachers complain about the behaviour of their students, I ask them : « *But where else can they learn this, if it isn't at school ?* ».

The problem is that the teachers are not trained for this and feel totally helpless when violence erupts.

The problem of forecasting the future

There is a great deal of talk about young people not knowing what making an effort really means ; but effort for effort's sake is not a value in itself. What is important, is the effort we make to achieve an objective that we have fixed for ourselves. For that, one has to be able to forecast or project oneself in a positive manner into the future. However, we tend to paint a very black picture of the future for our children. In a survey conducted with children aged between ten and twelve, they were asked how they saw the future. The three most popular answers given were fear of pollution, unemployment and terrorism.

It is obviously much more difficult to grow up in a society which projects such negative images of the future. This pushes our teenagers to generalise their behaviour for a given moment in time, in other words, they want "everything, straightaway".

Cause or pretext ?

Talking about the causes of violence, as I have just done, one runs the risk of taking away the responsibility of the young people in question. For twenty years, I have been among the first to say that if young people are violent it is the fault of society, of unemployment, of social exclusion and so on. This analysis is perfectly valid from a sociologist's point of view : it is

obvious that one is much more likely to become delinquent at Chanteloup-les-Vignes than in the 16th *arrondissement* of Paris. However, this sort of talk is disastrous from an educational point of view, because it seems to take away all responsibility from young people.

One day, I asked some children who had set some cars alight, why they had done it. One of them answered « *My father is unemployed, my brother is in prison, so I set cars alight* ». I asked him what his father's unemployment and his brother imprisonment had to do with him striking a match that he had in his hand at a given moment in time.

Today, we are beginning to discover the effects of these attempts to explain the causes of violence, which young people have assimilated by listening to television. There are no longer any limits to the extent of their violence, since it is not their fault but society's. This is why the philosopher Guy Coq suggests that it is always better to talk about the *pretexts* of violence rather than the *causes* of violence.

Three types of violence

Before attempting to provide solutions for stopping violence, one should distinguish between three types of violence, which call for very different solutions.

Imagine one morning your boss asks to see you, and he says something disagreeable. You find yourself suddenly consumed by a surge of violence. Why ?

Perhaps it is because you have just damaged your lovely car and you are stressed. This violence is linked to the level of your blood pressure. I call it *violence as an expression of one's malaise*.

It may be that because you have been "had" so often by your boss, this time you have well and truly decided that he is going to listen to you. Your violence is intended to show that you exist and that he has to take notice of you. I call this violence, *violence as a result of provocation*.

Finally it is because you knowingly use violence in order to put pressure on the course of events. It is a strategy which I call *violence as a method of action*.

Violence as an expression of one's malaise

This form of violence is common in young people. It occurs in teenagers who live in urban areas with a high level of insecurity. These teenagers also have limited means at their disposal to express their suffering and the malaise which they feel. A recent study carried out in the prisons of the *Île-de-France* region (area around Paris) show that the majority of minors imprisoned have only, on average, four hundred words in their vocabulary. Since they lack words to express what they feel, they use their bodies and therefore they use violence.

Violence as a result of provocation

The second type of violence is a way of showing that one exists : « *I am here, you have no choice but to notice me !* », and one has to admit that it works very well. When I was director of the centre, if a young person in my office left to go and sulk in his room and slammed the door shut, that was the end of it. On the other hand, if having slammed the door, he started to use the fire extinguisher, break the tiles and burst the tyres of the youth workers' cars, it is obvious that I would most probably walk out of my office to see what was going on, and this was indeed the desired effect !

This type of violence expresses the fundamental paradox of teenagers, namely that they still need adults but at the same time they want to be independent. In other words, they need the people by whom they feel threatened. From this point of view, there is paradoxically

something reassuring by seeing so much violence in secondary schools. This proves the importance which teenagers attach to adults whom they meet there !

Violence as a method of action

The third type of violence is very different. It is a strategy aimed at obtaining what one cannot get by any other means.

This is where television and its responsibility in the rise of delinquency comes into the debate. We cannot blame television for showing violence, since after all, our grand mother's tales about the little girl in bed with a wolf, or a little boy in danger of being eaten up by an ogre, were also very violent. The difference is that these tales deliberately demonstrated the separation between the imaginary and the real world and thus, contemplating violence could play a very positive role, since it enabled one to exorcise it.

Television soap operas do not highlight the difference between the imaginary and the real world at all - quite the opposite. The director's imagination is difficult to separate from reality. In the minds of children who are not trained to decipher images because they are always alone in front of the television, this can be the start of some confusion between the virtual image and reality.

However, the big difference between the virtual image and reality, is that in the image, and especially in extremely violent television series, the suffering of victims and their family and friends appears very minor or negligible, and as a result, teenagers often have no idea of the weight of suffering which their acts may cause. They say to themselves : « *I need one hundred Euros to go to the night club. There are one hundred Euros in this old lady's bag. I'll steal her bag* », without realising that the lady may fall, break her hip, spend weeks in hospital as a result. It is because of this ignorance of suffering that television adds to the violence of young people.

Three different answers

These three types of violence require different answers.

Listening, sympathising, allowing young people to express themselves

To anticipate violence as an expression of one's malaise, the first thing to do is to develop a sense of listening, but not in the way in which these educational institutions ask 'professional' listeners to have office hours every Monday from 1pm to 1.50pm and are surprised to see that no-one turns up. What we need, is to create a real atmosphere for listening between adults and young people.

In housing estates, it is the same thing. Frequently, the flare-ups of violence which rock sensitive areas are caused by the death of a young person in the area. The reaction of institutions is often something like « *if he hadn't stolen motorbikes, and a van to transport them, and then broke through the police roadblock, then this wouldn't have happened* ». This sort of talk which one can have after the event is unbearable for those who have lost their friend or their neighbour, especially if the period of mourning is not yet over. The only suitable words are those which show compassion : « *Can you believe it ? It's terrible ! He was only twenty !* ».

When I worked at Chanteloup with Pierre Cardo, we had to manage five very tense situations following the tragic death of a young person in a housing estate. On each occasion we were able to avoid any excessive reaction because we forbade the sort of journalistic or institutional speech such as « *if only he hadn't done this or that* », and we centred our own view on compassion : « *It's unbelievable : a young person from Chanteloup is dead ! We're in a state of shock, it's a tragedy* ». We were also in charge of organising the wake with his friends, and we contributed towards the cost of the funeral.

An additional form of prevention consists of giving young people new means of expression. Each time that we allow them to put sounds, colours, musical notes, and actions into expressing what they feel, we make violence recede. This is why the prevention of this type of violence should depend on...the Ministry of Culture !

Reacting along different lines

Faced with violence as a result of provocation, there are two negative responses. One is to either react along the same lines because one puts oneself in a position which can escalate ; the other is to not react at all. One day, a trainee youth worker whom I had just welcomed, was leaving my office when he was taken to task by a group of young people. « *Are you the new youth worker ? Fight to prove you're a man !* ». He came back to ask me what he should do : « *If I have to fight, I will ; I'm not frightened !* ». I told him that it was up to him to find the solution, but in any case, there were two things which he should not do : fight with them, or do nothing.

If he fought with them, that would be proof that he was incapable of distancing himself from them (which is the basis of this profession), and also incapable of understanding that insults were addressed to the function of the job, and not to the person. If he had left the office acting as if nothing had happened, the group would probably have gone even further in their provocation.

Very often, a sense of humour can help things. Humour should be distinguished from irony. Irony is when one makes fun of the other person, whereas humour is when one makes fun of the situation. If a young person comes into my office shouting obscenities, following the unsatisfactory resolution of a conflict by a youth worker, I say to him : « *You can see my office is not a bedroom : there is no bed so we are going to leave sexual language for the bedroom and we are going to talk here in an office* ».

Often, confronted with violence as a result of provocation, the solution consists of going from a one-to-one relationship, which is potentially dangerous because it is a case of « *either you or me*», to a relationship between three people. The intervention of a mediator prevents the conflict between 'you' and 'me' and enables one to refocus on the subject of the conflict.

Sanctioning from the very first offence

On the other hand, confronted with violence as a method of action, I do not know of any other means of anticipating it than forbidding it and no other means of regulating it than by imposing sanctions when it takes place. I deliberately use the term *sanction* and not *punishment*, since one punishes a person, whereas one imposes sanctions for an action. The sanction enables the child to realise the consequences of his actions, which signifies that he is considered capable of answering for them.

What is necessary, is to impose sanctions from the very first time a violent act is committed. All parents know that if they do not impose sanctions from the first time they are defied, they will lose credibility from that moment. The main reason for failure of the judicial system of intervention in delinquency among minors lies in the maxim which has never been put into words but is ingrained in practice, that « *the first time doesn't matter* ». I have heard prosecutors announce solemnly : « *I only sue on the fifth time that the crime is committed !* » Yet all the minors I know who constantly commit offences believe that the first offence was not important and that no-one condemned it.

This is why I tend to favour the notion of “ zero tolerance ”, stating what I understand by this term since it seems to be the source of some confusion. If we talk about tolerance towards *people*, I think tolerance is a fundamental value. But frequently, we digress from this idea of a notion of tolerance towards people to that of tolerance with regards to *behaviour*. Yet, as a

youth worker I demand the right to be intolerant regarding forms of behaviour which seem to me to threaten social ties and the person himself.

One day, I surprised a North African child who was in the act of siphoning off petrol from my car. I told him off and he turned around and called me a racist. I replied that if he were green with red spots, I would still tell him off, and that this was my petrol, paid for with my money, and that he would have to find another solution for his moped ! It is dreadful the way in which young people take advantage of the vagueness which we have allowed to develop around the notion of tolerance.

In order for sanctions to be educational, there has to be a relationship between the nature of the sanction and the nature of the offence. Putting someone in prison only makes sense if the person is dangerous to other people : I have yet to be convinced that a twelve-year-old child who siphons petrol from a car is dangerous. What is essential is that he has to atone for his wrong-doing and that we give him some points of reference.

Conclusion

To conclude, I would firstly like to temper my analysis. Reality is always more complex than what is said and very often the three forms of violence become confused. When a young person headbutts a bus-driver, it is both an expression of his malaise, a form of provocation, and perhaps a deliberate attempt to take over the bus. One should therefore structure the responses. In order to do this, one must find a solution other than the very French alternative of prevention and imposing sanctions. One must structure prevention, mediation and sanction.

To do this, one has to distance oneself from a system where the professionals involved in the field of prevention are not concerned with the imposition of sanctions, and where the professionals who are involved in sanctions do not feel at all concerned about education. It is important to develop an atmosphere in prisons where people can talk freely and be listened to, so that they can remain sane. There should also be a method for applying the acceptable rules for conduct more firmly in the structures of prevention !

I will end with a conclusion which is more philosophical. René Girard talks about the link between the ability of a society to regulate within itself the violence of its members, and the relationship which society has with the sacrosanct, I use this term in its broadest sense, in other words *that which man does not have the right to touch*. Recently, I carried out a survey using students from the *grandes écoles* (higher education institutions with a competitive entrance examination) regarding the values which they prize most. The most important values were family and professional success and a long way behind, with less than 5 % of votes, values linked to thinking about the sense of life or spirituality. If our elite feels so little concerned by these questions, one should not be surprised that in housing estates a teenager may think that the life of the baker's wife is worth less than what is in her till !

The only thing which prohibits my use of violence when I am in conflict with another person, is the firm belief that whatever happens I should not make an attempt on his life, because life is sacred. If no-one reminds people forcefully of this essential value, we should not be surprised that our young people can put their own lives or those of others at stake for trivial reasons. Therefore, there is necessarily a spiritual dimension to the struggle against violence and juvenile delinquency.

DISCUSSION

Where is God in all this ?

Question : *We are the first civilisation in the World to have banned religion from its means of regulation and this seems to me a frightening situation. In these times of tyrannical rule of secularism, rationality, and numbers, it seems shameful not to recognise the role which religion could play. Additionally, I noticed that not once in your talk did you say that you were a priest.*

Jean-Marie Petitlerc : When I talk to young people, I never portray myself as a priest, but as a youth worker. They find that out later, and they are not too surprised since I think they understand the relationship between my faith and my work. Religion allows me to see my professional work in the light of the Gospel, but above all I want to be a competent professional. I imagine that this may be interpreted as a lack of courage on my part, but for me, it conveys above all my ambition to be able to communicate with everyone. I know that if I were to present myself as a priest this might constitute a barrier to such communication.

Q. : *As far as I am concerned, I am rather shocked that you spoke about the dimension of being “necessarily spiritual” in the struggle against violence and juvenile delinquency. Do you not think that the French Republic can also have its own sacred things, independent of all divine attributes, as for example is expressed in the declaration of Human Right ?*

J.-M. P. : It is exactly in this sense that I used the term ‘sacred’, in its broadest sense of “that which one cannot touch”. I think in fact that there is some sacredness in our Republic, and this is why I think that the line I adopt can be accepted both by atheist republicans as well as by Christians or Muslims.

Using religion as an instrument ?

Q. : *Of course, it is understandable that you hope to avoid people thinking that you are trying to convert them, but why, in your latest work, do you not emphasise the role that religion can play as a regulator, regardless of which religion ? For example, we have heard in this talk the director of a hostel in the 14th arrondissement of Paris explain that he encouraged young people to practise Islam.*

J.-M. P. : Personally, I am not among those who think this should be encouraged. Twenty-five years ago, young Arabs who were non-believers did not practise a religion. Today, even those who are not believers practise one. Yet as much as the practice of believers seems eminently positive, it nevertheless seems to me that we have to be careful with a practice which is out of touch with a faith. This seems even more important to me since Islam is not only a religion but also a political project, as has been Christianity at certain times in its past before the process of secularisation.

More generally speaking, I am not in favour of using the priest for social or political ends. I am a priest who is deeply anticlerical and very much a lay priest. I am very happy about the separation between the Church and State which for me is an extraordinary opportunity. Furthermore, this separation seems to me to be directly inspired by the Gospel. The Church took twenty centuries to understand the meaning of the phrase « *Render, therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's ; and unto God the things that are God's* »...

The community model

Q. : *Without highlighting a particular religion, why on the other hand, do you not make use of traditional community structures ? Some years ago, the mayor of Choisy-le-Roi, although he was a Communist, was regularly re-elected with a huge majority because he had discovered how to bring back order to the immigrant African areas. He reconstituted tribal life around a patriarch who was the sole representative recognised by the inhabitants, and he made him his spokesman.*

J.-M. P. : I am not in favour of the community model as in Anglo-Saxon countries any more so than an integrated French model when it is applied in an absolute way. In some English areas, it is an imam who is in charge of the Job Centre for his community. This does not correspond to the French model which tends to create a multiethnic society, where each person can enrich himself by the variety found in others, while at the same time having access to the same republican institutions.

From another point of view, the purely integrated model also seems bound to fail. I think it is normal that people can come together in like communities : this is even more so since the beginning of massive unemployment where the company, which represented a place of social mix and diversity, is no longer present. When one chooses one's friends, they tend to be chosen from the cultural world to which one belongs and with which one is familiar. I admit that when I am abroad, I am very happy when I stumble across French people and I can talk with them. A group of fifteen teenage North Africans should not be systematically excluded because of their refusal to integrate themselves into our country. On the other hand, we should safeguard republican institutions which are identical for everyone and which allow people to mix and to get to know each other.

Let me give you a final example concerning handicapped children. To the parents of a handicapped child, I say the following : *« If you decide to opt for educational integration during the school year, then please let your child go to a camp in the summer holidays where he can meet other handicapped children so that he can be reassured by meeting other children who have the same handicap that he has. But if you decide to put him in a special school, please send him on holiday with children who have no handicaps so that he can see that he is treated in exactly the same way as the others ».*

The art of tightrope walking

Q. : *Do you not think that juvenile delinquency has greatly increased due to the practice adopted after May 1968 of never saying 'no' to children ?*

J.-M. P. : It is true that from 1968 onwards, there was a lot of talk that one should avoid frustrating children since this could curb their development. The parents who avoided frustrating their children thought that they were acting correctly. Today, we do things differently, since we know that never saying 'no' to one's child makes him think that he is very powerful. Moreover, it is more reassuring to be able to postpone the moment that the child desires something with regard to the moment when it arrives. Therefore, one should know how to frustrate a child, for example, with respect to what he eats or his social activities. On the other hand, one should never frustrate him as far as his emotions are concerned, since that may have dramatic consequences on his development.

At table, when I was young, there was one golden rule : one could not start the main course until one's soup was finished. My grandmother often reminded me of this rule, but always with the following very affectionate words : *« My darling sweetheart, you have to finish your soup first, before you can have some of the main course ».* One has to know how to say 'no' to children, but always by showing them a great deal of affection and respect. If one does not, emotional frustration can build up and may result in violence.

Don Bosco, who was considered exemplary in terms of education, is often depicted as a tightrope walker. This was because when he was a child he liked to walk the tightrope to amuse his friends, but also because education is like the art of tightrope walking. One has to know when to say 'yes' and when to say 'no'. It is more of an art than a science !

Parents who abdicate their parental functions or parents who are snowed under ?

Q. : *When Pierre Cardo made proposals and even suggested the withdrawal of family allowance in cases where the parents do not look after their children or their children's education sufficiently, this caused a national outcry. What do you think about this ?*

J.-M. P. : I distinguish between parents in difficulties, and a small minority of parents who abdicate their parental responsibility. For example, when they refuse to reply to a court

summons from the judge responsible for minors which might result in their teenager being put into care, or, worse still, when they are party to receiving stolen goods and part of the family income comes from the black market, then they are clearly giving up on their role as parents, and sanctions are justified. But how can the withdrawal of the family allowance, which is allocated across the board to parents in serious financial difficulty and who already lack credibility in the eyes of their children, possibly improve the situation ?

Are teachers youth workers ?

Q. : *Despite the nice name of state “education”, many teachers refuse to see themselves as youth workers. It would be easier to train teachers to be good youth workers rather than to intervene in families.*

J.-M. P. : There are indeed teachers who call themselves *teachers* and not *youth workers*. I think that education is like politics : by not doing anything, you are already doing something ! From the moment that an adult is face to face with young people, whether he likes it or not, he is in the position of an educator. Not giving a child an education, is in itself a way of educating. Students will listen in the Maths or Geography lesson, but they will also see the way in which their teacher sorts out conflicts in the classroom, or how he interacts with other teachers. All of these factors will have an influence on the students.

Conversely, other teachers say to me : « *Do you realise that today we have to do everything ourselves : we have to be teacher, marriage guidance councillor, social worker, psychologist...* ». I think they are quite right to be unhappy. I think it is annoying that some teachers play at being the social worker between 5pm and 7pm while those in charge of social services organise sessions to provide extra help for schoolwork in the social services centre. The contrast is like the police organising a football match for the local teenagers whereas the local shopkeeper’s association organise themselves as a vigilante group.

On the other hand, we have to be youth workers together, each one taking on his role. I do not understand how one can teach in a secondary school, like in Argenteuil, without personally knowing the youth worker, the social worker, the judge, the police superintendent and so on. It is not a case of doing somebody’s else’s job for him, but being able to know him in order to be able to hand the work over to him. When there is a child who has been sexually abused, the simplest thing is for him to go and talk to the psychologist in the secondary school. However, usually he prefers to go to an adult he knows well and this might be his Maths teacher, for example. From the moment that this teacher has been informed by the child, it is up to him to pass on the case to the appropriate professional.

Youth workers and the police

Q. : *You have said that one should develop a policy of sanctions with a policy of prevention, but if a youth worker works in tandem with the police, he loses credibility with young people !*

J.-M. P. : Various people can take preventive action. These include the police who act to prevent events in a dissuasive manner and youth workers who try to take preventive action in a persuasive way. Imagine a four-year-old child who wants to put his fingers into an electric plug. Dissuasive prevention consists of saying to him : « *If I see you putting your fingers in the plug hole, you’ll get a hiding* ». You try to persuade him to make the right decision out of fear of what will happen to him if he makes the wrong decision. The other possible line is : « *Do you remember how it hurt when you put your fingers on the stove ? I bet that if you put your fingers in the plug it’ll hurt even more than that* ». This is a case of persuasive prevention : the child opts for the correct choice because he has understood it is in his interest.

Every time we can, we should favour persuasive dissuasion. If we do not, the day that the child is alone at home, he will carry out dangerous experiments. If he understands the reasons why he should not do something, he will not do it. In my opinion, one of the reasons for the failure of the French national road safety organisation is that we depended on people being scared of being stopped by the police, rather than making people realise that it is extremely dangerous to drive fast.

That said, it is true that I ask my youth workers not to have any direct contact with the police : young people would not understand if they saw their youth workers greeting and chatting with police officers. On the other hand, as I am one of people in charge, it is my duty to be in regular contact with the commander in charge of the branch of the French police force which deals with political security, as well as the police superintendent and the director of Security, in order to co-ordinate our forces in terms of a policy of prevention in a given region.

How to gain a following

Q. : *You seem to have analysed perfectly the causes of juvenile violence and identified the right solutions. Why is your example not followed ?*

J.-M. P. : Despite everything, my ideas have been heard by a certain number of people. The recent Perben Law, for example, includes the lowering of the age of educational sanction to ten years. This is a measure which Pierre Cardo and I had been seeking for a long time. From the moment that children begin to move about by themselves in towns, it seems appropriate to make provisions for a specific legislation for them.

Unfortunately, the media have hardly mentioned this reform which I thought was excellent, and have instead turned their attention to the well-known reformatory centres for minors which I think are idiotic.

These centres were closed in 1970 because we were not capable of regulating the violence that occurred inside them. Now they are going to be re-opened, in spite of the fact that everyone agrees that young people are more violent than before ! In addition, the law on the reduction of the working week to thirty-five-hours means that a total of twenty-seven adults look after only eight young people and yet these are young people who suffer greatly from a lack of reference points and continuity between different adults in their entourage ! Another nonsense is that if it is completed, the programme will cover about one hundred centres each of which has a maximum capacity of ten beds, which represents one young person for every one of the thousand sensitive urban trouble spots in France. Who really believes that by putting one young person into prison for every trouble spot identified will change anything ? I haven't even mentioned the financial aspect of this operation, which will cost seven hundred Euros per minor per day. The annual budget of an association like *Le Valdocco* is less than it would cost two young people to be placed in a reformatory centre.

I think that there is an urgent need to develop new methods for fighting the delinquency of minors. For example, we could envisage giving the mayor the power of the police as far as small offences – which need an immediate response – are concerned. In a secondary school, it is normal when a student breaks a window for the headmaster to ask to see the parents and to see how the damage will be repaired. Why should it be any different when a young person damages a bus shelter for the mayor to call the parents and to organise the means for repairing the damage ? This proposition caused an outcry from the judiciary, which prefers that there should not be a response, or only after the fifth time in a row, rather than see institutions other than itself deal with the problem.

Another innovation which Pierre Cardo and I have been suggesting for the past ten years concerns placing problem children in centres which are at a certain distance from their homes. Currently, when a child presents with too many problems, we place him in a *UER (Unité d'éducation renforcée : reinforced educational unit)*, for three months, costing four hundred Euros per day. We have no idea what goes on there, but it is true that when he comes back, his behaviour has generally changed a little. The problem is that having been back for two weeks, the child is taken back into his network and his old habits before we have time to work on what he did during his stay since we do not know what happened during his stay. Without any kind of educational continuity, this type of operation is practically useless. It is why we have proposed a scheme in which the same educational team would operate both a long-distance centre and a local centre where the young people are welcomed on their return.

Another change would be to admit that in order to look after children who constantly take risks, one has to know and be able to take risks oneself. Personally, as a sailor and a native of Normandy, I regularly organise cruises on a sailing boat, and the magistrates congratulate me. But if, by chance, there was an accident because one of the young people refused to attach

himself to the boat, everybody would condemn me. This is why there are fewer and fewer youth workers who are ready to take risks. And yet, it is not by suggesting that these teenagers line up in twos for a walk on tarmac roads with one group leader in front and one behind, that we will manage to pull them out of their difficulties.

Companies faced with delinquency

Q. : *In companies, we increasingly come across problems with young people whom we recruit, in particular in their relationship with their immediate hierarchy. What should one do ?*

J.-M. P. : I campaign for companies to find the educational role that they had in our country until the 1970s like the Simca school. In other words, schools which were directly managed by companies and had training programmes. Today, companies only want to recruit people who are already trained.

Furthermore, when young people got their first job at the age of twenty they were considered young adults ; today even at the age of twenty-five, often they are still big teenagers. The biggest social change in the last thirty years is undoubtedly the doubling of the length of the recognised period of adolescence : puberty starts on average at eleven for girls and twelve for boys, and the average age of the so-called 'beginning of adult life' (judged by the age at which one leaves one's parents' home) is twenty-five to twenty-six.

This is why when a company employs a twenty-year-old, there is a high likelihood that the employee is still trying to cope with the problems teenagers have with authority. In other words, he sees the person in charge not as the person who is the guardian of the rules and ensures that his employees are well looked after, but as the troublemaker who takes it out on him *personally*.

The director of a Peugeot plant said to me recently « *Today, we are capable of building an attractive product, the Peugeot 206, but the real challenge we have, is to know if we will be capable of supervising young workers who will produce it in ten years' time* ». It is true that Peugeot, which had stopped all recruitment for ten years, has just started recruiting temps on a massive scale, who are likely to produce an unsettled atmosphere. For example, if one of them has an argument with the foreman, he will not think twice about setting fire to the foreman's car in the car park, and if he is dismissed, he will not leave without scratching all the cars which come off the finishing line with his pocket knife ! In the Val d'Oise *département*, following a badly managed conflict between a supervisor and a young worker, the latter let off a fire extinguisher in the most high-performance digital machine the factory owned, causing more than one million Euros' worth of damage...

Today, the reason the Peugeot management has decided to offer its supervisors a training programme based on conflict management, is not because Peugeot has a keen interest in carrying out good works, but quite simply to ensure that their factories can continue to function. In turn, the company sees itself recruited, alongside the school, the family and the citizens, in this huge mobilisation aimed at educating our young people.

Presentation of the speaker :

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