OPENING ADDRESS FE Y ALEGRÍA INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS

# “Dialogue from the Margins to Transform Education”

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Dear colleagues and friends of Fe y Alegría,

I would like to begin by sharing a conviction I have often expressed over these past years: our Congresses are among the moments when Fe y Alegría most deeply expresses what it means to be a Movement. They are privileged spaces for dialogue across our Federation, where we come together to look at reality, compare experiences, question our certainties, and discern the path ahead. We are not here simply to discuss a topic, but to continue building a shared understanding of our mission.

This is particularly important today. In an increasingly fragmented world, engaging in dialogue and sharing knowledge and experiences rooted in our different contexts is one of the most necessary—and most difficult—tasks before us. At a time when artificial intelligence is rapidly advancing, we are surrounded by information, but not always by understanding. We have more opportunities than ever to communicate, yet we struggle to listen to one another, acknowledge our limitations, and engage with people who think differently. Here lies one of the most prophetic dimensions of Fe y Alegría's very existence: to listen, to engage in dialogue, to challenge one another, and to innovate.

Arturo Sosa reminded us that "dialogue is the distinctive method of our Jesuit humanistic tradition." And Pope Francis, in *Fratelli tutti*, spoke of "approaching, speaking, listening, looking at, coming to know and understand one another, and finding common ground." Dialogue is not simply about reaching agreements. It is about seeking the truth together and allowing ourselves to be transformed through encounter.

For Fe y Alegría, this conviction lies at the very heart of our identity. Paulo Freire insisted that dialogue is an existential necessity. He taught us that "without dialogue there is no communication, and without communication there can be no true education." He also understood dialogue as an essential condition for knowledge itself. From the very beginning, Father Vélaz understood that our Movement could only be built with communities and from within them, recognising their aspirations and their leading role. Our Popular Education Framework expresses this same intuition through the dialogue of knowledge: no one knows everything, and no one knows nothing. Here lies one of the greatest transformative strengths of our educational approach.

This is why we have not come merely to share experiences or draw conclusions. We have come to engage in dialogue as a Movement about Popular Education at the margins of the education system. And this dialogue does not begin today. For months, learning communities across 18 countries have reflected on those who are being left outside education, examined in depth 121 educational initiatives already being developed, and explored the paths we need to open. We bring to Lima a conversation that is already alive throughout our Federation. Our task now is to deepen it and allow what we learn to transform both the way we educate and the way we understand ourselves as Fe y Alegría.

# 1. Learning to recognise vulnerability

Pope Leo XIV has repeatedly emphasised the need to promote dialogue at every level, reminding us that "dialogue is an essential part of human life." Just two weeks ago, he affirmed that "fragility deserves special attention." This focus on vulnerability—this preferential concern for those whose rights are most at risk or who face the greatest barriers to exercising them—is essential if our dialogue as Fe y Alegría is to have real depth.

That is precisely why we are gathered at this Congress. We must ask ourselves: **what kind of school do people encounter when their lives become more fragile? What kind of Fe y Alegría do those who face the greatest difficulties in exercising their right to learn encounter?**

If the dialogue of recent months has taught us anything, it is that educational exclusion has many faces.

We see it in the young woman who leaves school to work or care for her siblings. In the mother who would like to return to education but cannot find an opportunity compatible with her daily life. In the migrant child whose educational journey is interrupted when crossing a border. In Indigenous communities whose languages and cultures barely find a place in the curriculum. In people with disabilities for whom opening the doors of a school does not necessarily mean opening the possibility of learning.

The margins are not simply geographical places or particular groups of people. They are also the result of barriers that our societies and education systems continue to create. Responding to vulnerability does not mean defining people by what they lack. It means recognising their abilities, knowledge, and dignity, and asking ourselves which barriers we must transform so that they can develop their full potential.

# 2. What we are learning from the margins

I would like to recognise the extraordinary creativity that exists within our Movement.

In Chad, rural communities are developing and sustaining their own educational responses, with the support of Fe y Alegría. In Bolivia, an initiative to include deaf students has opened pathways from special education to technical training and higher education. Here in Peru, we bring youth and adult education to workers in agro-export companies so they can continue studying without giving up their livelihoods. In Panama, we accompany children on the move so that displacement does not completely break their connection with education.

These experiences are very different, but they share an intuition that is deeply rooted in our identity: **it is not always people who must adapt to the education we offer. Very often, education itself must change to respond to people's lives.**

The conversations of recent months have highlighted three lessons that I find particularly important.

**The first is that care and holistic education are essential to our educational mission.** It is not enough to offer a flexible programme or a second chance. Education means accompanying the whole person: their learning, their relationships, their emotional well-being, their spirituality, and their search for meaning and transcendence. We need educational communities that foster trust, belonging, and hope.

**The second is that territory is not simply the place where education happens; it is also a source of knowledge.**Communities have memories, languages, cultures, knowledge, and capacities that must be part of our educational approach.

**And the third is that inclusion requires us to transform the way we educate.** We must rethink timetables, curricula, learning spaces, educational models, and approaches to accompaniment. It is not simply about opening the doors of our institutions, but about changing whatever prevents people from staying, learning, and continuing their educational journeys.

These three lessons remind us of something fundamental to our identity as a Popular Education Movement: it is not enough to bring educational opportunities to places where they do not exist. We must listen, recognise the knowledge already present, build responses together with communities, and be willing to let those encounters transform our own practices.

The margins are places Fe y Alegría must reach, but they are also places from which we have much to learn. What happens there, both inside and outside our schools, invites us to broaden our perspective: to recognise other ways of learning, other educational spaces, and new opportunities throughout life.

From this perspective, new frontiers for our mission also emerge. We can recognise new challenges, explore different forms of presence, and renew the way we educate and the way we are Fe y Alegría. **Perhaps some of the pathways towards the education we need to**

**build—and towards the Movement we are called to become—are already emerging at those margins.**

## 3. The great questions before us

From this perspective, I would like to propose four major questions to accompany us over these days.

**The first: whom are we still leaving behind?**

It is not enough to ask how many people are enrolled in school. We must ask who stays, who truly learns, and who is able to continue their education. Let us also look at our own institutions: what realities are we failing to see? Whom are we still not reaching? What barriers might we be reproducing without even realising it?

**The second: what needs to change in the way we educate?**

Many of our most innovative experiences began because someone decided to change a timetable, recognise different forms of knowledge, or accompany a learner's journey in a different way. Are we willing to review our own practices so that inclusion becomes a reality rather than simply a declaration?

**The third: how do we give real leadership to those living at the margins?**

We cannot continue speaking about excluded people without including them. How do we ensure that their voices are present not only in the design of our educational initiatives, but also in our conversations and decisions?

**And the fourth: what can we achieve together that we are not managing to achieve today?**

We have extraordinary experiences, but many remain local, little known, or dependent on temporary efforts and funding. How can we turn this richness into shared knowledge? How can we build Federation-wide capacities without making every response the same? The challenge is to ensure that the knowledge and capacities developed in our countries can circulate, be shared, and be adapted and recreated by others. That our extraordinary diversity becomes a genuine collective strength.

## 4. A Congress that transforms us

These questions point to a fundamental challenge: moving from the richness of our experiences towards a greater collective capacity for transformation.

We need to lift our gaze, understand the changes taking place in the world, and discern what kind of education we want to promote and what we can do better together. Being faithful to our identity as a Popular Education Movement does not mean endlessly repeating what we have always done. It means daring to change in response to new realities, and continually broadening the questions through which we interpret reality in order to transform it.

Speaking here in Lima in 1979, Father Pedro Arrupe called for the Society of Jesus to be continually reborn: not to live off the relics of the past or cling to rigid structures, but to be born anew each day from its charism.

May this Congress be an exercise in deep and courageous dialogue that helps Fe y Alegría to be born anew. May it bring us into a genuinely strategic mindset as we prepare for the conversations that, throughout 2027, will lead us towards a new Global Plan of Federative Priorities. May we come not simply to confirm our certainties, but to allow ourselves to be surprised, challenged, and transformed by what we hear.

Fe y Alegría was born from a simple and radical conviction: that education can transform people's lives and that communities have the capacity to build their own future.

Today, that conviction calls us to take another step forward.

**It is not enough to bring education to the margins. We must learn to see from the margins, to engage in dialogue from the margins, and to allow what we discover there to transform our way of being Fe y Alegría.**

Perhaps this is one of our most important tasks over these days: to engage in genuine dialogue that enables us to discover together what the margins are teaching us about the education we need to build, and about the Fe y Alegría we want—and need—to become.

With this hope, I officially declare our International Congress open.

Thank you very much.