

ANNEX VI

**Address by Mr P. de Meijer, President of the IBE Council,
during the award of the Comenius Medal**

Mr President,
Excellencies,
Honourable Ministers,
Distinguished Laureates,
Distinguished Delegates, Representatives and Observers,
Ladies and Gentlemen,
Dear Friends,

As President of the Council of the International Bureau of Education it is an honour and a threefold joy to address you tonight.

My first joy, which has nothing chauvinistic about it, is to be doing so as a citizen of the Netherlands, my country, which was home to Jan Amos Komensky, also known as Comenius, for the last fourteen years of his life until his death in November 1670. And it was in my home town, Amsterdam, that Comenius also published most of his works, which then spread throughout Europe and beyond.

My second joy is to be doing so at the 46th session of the International Conference on Education, during which ministers and heads of delegation, delegates, representatives and observers are considering together the best ways of achieving progress in Education for All, particularly the quality of education, with a view to “living better together”. Comenius would have felt perfectly at ease among us for, to quote Jean Piaget, “the education system proposed by Comenius is universal by its very nature; it is intended for all people irrespective of differences in social or economic status, religion, race or nationality”. And Piaget even added that “Comenius would have applauded modern campaigns against illiteracy, viewed as basic education and social reintegration campaigns”.

With regard to the 46th session of the ICE, Comenius would have found without any difficulty a key position on some of our panels.

In Workshop No. 1, for example, he would have made the point that moral education (or civics as it is now called) is functional above all and that it emphasizes his preference for real-life practice rather than verbal constraints or lessons. He would also have said no doubt, in Workshop 2 on the subject of violence, that “blows have no power to inspire love of scholastic endeavour, but they are most capable of arousing aversion and hatred”.

He would also have felt at ease in Workshop 4 on languages, as the author of the famous “*Janua linguarum reserata*” (The Gate of Tongues Unlocked), a textbook for teaching Latin which was translated into all the European languages and into Arabic. The book was composed of 100 chapters, which contained a thousand sentences compiled on a particular subject (the universe, animals, human beings, etc.). Opposite the Latin, the text was provided in the vernacular language so that it could be understood immediately. And Comenius did more than this: instead of getting lost in a large number of rules, the child was led, through language practice, in short simple sentences, to discover particular grammatical forms. Comenius also recommended that “instruction should begin in the mother tongue” and, for the purpose of language learning, encouraged people to travel to other countries.

He would also have appreciated Workshop 6 since, in his widely known book “Orbus pictus sensualis” (The Visible World in Pictures), he actually used the most modern technologies of the day to produce the first illustrated children’s book. Applying the idea that the child must have direct contact with what it is learning, Comenius linked each sentence of the text to a specific picture and the details in the pictures were numbered and cross-referenced to each of the corresponding words.

Lastly, Comenius would have been fascinated by all the themes of the ICE and by the new line of emphasis of the activities of the IBE as UNESCO’s specialized centre for educational content, structures, methods and resources. In his best known work “Didactica magna” (The Great Didactic), he was one of the first to emphasize content and to consider that education should be based on a precise method. He also pointed to the need to lighten curricula and to organize them in such a way as to avoid confusion among pupils, saying that “the art of teaching merely calls for good distribution of time and subjects”.

So, the portrait of Comenius that we have before us during this ceremony is not that of a man of the past but of a man “of all times”, an educational genius who has even been called at times “the Galileo of education”.

My third joy is derived from your presence here as laureates of the 2001 Comenius Medal, the first of the millennium. The Jury, which I had the honour to chair and whose choices have been endorsed by the Director-General of UNESCO, had a very difficult task before it. You have been selected from among more than 40 candidates from all over the world. The Jury would have liked to reward 15 or 20 candidates, but its statutes allow a maximum of only 10 awards. I shall in a moment introduce each of you briefly, but I can already say that you are all worthy spiritual heirs of Comenius and that, through your action in very different parts of the world and under very different conditions, you have done outstanding work in advancing the cause of quality education and in building a more human world. I congratulate you and thank you on behalf of all the participants in the 46th session of the ICE and all the teachers and children of the world.