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SOCIAL PERSPECTIVES OF YOUNG STUDENTS ON THE
CHURCH AND RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

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Abstract

In today's European social context, freedom of opinion and expression, the social problem of religious education in Romania is widely debated, not only in social and political environments, but also in academic ones. The many pro and against attitudes highlight the importance of this issue, both for the Romanian society in general, and for the Church and the School in particular. The two institutions, the Church and the School, are active in the social, cultural and educational space of Romania. On one hand, through the multitude of joint programs, which are carried out at the level of the two institutions, and in which young people are involved; and on the other hand, through the presence of a qualified and active teaching staff in the field of religious education. Being aware that educational institutions have a conservative side, attached to the past, but also an innovative side, anchored in the present, we present this exploratory study that highlights the different social perspectives young students have on religious education, the presence of the Church in their lives, and the ways in which these perspectives can improve the religious educational approach, the relationship between the youth, the School and the Church, and the ways in which they can all benefit in their social life.

Keywords: social perspectives; religious education; church; school;

1. INTRODUCTION

The social space of young people is invaded by educational perspectives coming from not only from the institutions in charge, but also from the formal and informal leaders in the field of education. Among these educational perspectives, we also find the religious ones.

Every generation is in an identity crisis, and this includes the younger generation. To find themselves in their own affirmations, the younger people are seeking landmarks, reference points, to use in building their identity.

These reference points can be found by young people within the school or the Church.

School is an educational institution with which young people have been interacting since childhood, but this interaction is an obligatory one. The compulsory nature of attending school, and implicitly of acquiring knowledge, attitudes and skills, can lead to reactions of acceptance, refusal or

indifference. The free spirit of the human being is modeled according to certain norms and educational criteria, established at national level, which are in line with those at the European level, adapted to each particular context. Reactions of acceptance, refusal, or indifference are found in every social actor involved in the educational process, with varying degrees and intensities, both among pupils and teachers.

The school being an educational institution is strongly anchored in the Romanian society; the school has strong organizational characteristics regarding the hierarchy, on the professional level of those involved in the teaching process (student, teacher, director, school inspector, general school inspector, secretary of state, minister). On top of that, there is also the organizational structure of institutions involved in education (school unit, school inspectorate, ministry of education).

This organizational structure creates, on the one hand, an educational pathway with very firm boundaries that are very difficult to overcome, and on the other hand, a certain inertia in the decision-making that can improve the educational process, provoking, quite often, negative reactions on the part of those involved, students and teachers, who are at the heart of the organizational pyramid of education.

As a result, students' views or perspectives are only accepted if they are within these boundaries. Everything that is beyond educational boundaries can be categorized as riot or dissatisfaction.

Throughout the educational process, young people undergo a whole process of adaptation. In other words, the school, as an educational institution in the Romanian socio-cultural space, produces pro and con reactions among young people.

In the Romanian society, along with the school, the Church is also as an institution with a deep religious and educational character, and it has almost the same organizational characteristics.

Throughout the religious education present in the schools, the Church is part of the educational institutions that benefit the young people from the present Romanian society.

This exploratory study seeks to highlight the different social perspectives young people have towards religious education in the Romanian schools, perspectives that bring positive, negative or indifferent reactions to the involvement of the Church in the educational process in our country, as well as the ways in which these perspectives can improve the religious educational approach, the relationship between the youth, the School and the Church, as well as the ways in which all these can bring benefits in their social life.

Reactions of acceptance, refusal or indifference regarding the educational role of the institutions are perfectly normal in an open society, such as the Romanian society, and overcoming of all barriers that block this educational approach should be conducted only through regular dialogue and consultations.

2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

We present the legislative framework at European level on religious education. The European Convention on Human Rights in the Protocol to the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms in Article 2 of the Convention specifies the following: No person shall be denied the right to education. In the exercise of any functions which it assumes in relation to education and to teaching, the State shall respect the right of parents to ensure such education and teaching in conformity with their own religious and philosophical convictions (Protocol to the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, Paris, 1952).

On the other hand, sociological research analyses the social changes taking place when it comes to religiosity, how it changes the social system of a group or organizations, which can also be found within the educational space present in the school.

It is particularly important to define the direction of change, for example, in the case of religious people, their attitudes, their degree of conformity according to the accepted model as the reference system (Korzeniowski, 2017).

The article Continuity and change of religiosity. Selected results of sociological research on religious attitudes, written by Korzeniowski M., discusses the issues of continuity and change of religiosity, which can be also observed in our study.

Thus, perspectives on religious education and the involvement of the Church in this educational act can be viewed, as Marek Korzeniowski points out, also from the point of view of modern processes of secularization and pluralism (Korzeniowski, 2017).

In this context, the younger generation believes that alongside religion, religious beliefs are part of a multitude of life-giving sources to solve everyday problems. Thus, non-religious sources, family, work, interpersonal relationships may be alternative or compatible with religion (Korzeniowski, 2017). Religious education is analyzed by Radomir Marinovic from the perspective of tradition and secularization. In the article *Religious Education in Serbia: Between Traditionalism and Secularism*, the author states that the return to religious education has prompted a heated debate in the public sphere, where many contradictory opinions have been heard, from the view that religious education in school is unconstitutional, to the one that religious education should be compulsory.

However, Religion teachers are among the preferred teachers of the students. The Christian religion promoted in the school and wishing to be an alternative to life in secular society must be authentic, motivating and stimulating (Marinovic, 2017).

The crisis of educational models in the Eastern European region has often produced failures or disappointments. After the fall of Communist regimes in the Eastern European countries, there was a tendency to replace educational paradigms from those periods with new ones in Western European spaces or old educational paradigms from the interwar period. The Church is also not exempt from such experiences.

If we implement today a certain model, no matter how good it has been in the past, without taking into account the specifications of the new environment, we are likely to be disappointed. Forced models may create the opposite effect to the intended one. The language of the Church must be a call and not a constraint. The transmission and understanding of Christian values must be dynamic, attractive to the modern man so that they can be applied. Today, Christianity has not affirmed its usefulness sufficiently, because it does not explain to modern man the connection between the Gospel and everyday life. The language must be contemporary, and the main purpose of religious education is to attract the student to the Church (Marinovic, 2017).

In Bulgaria, the issue of the presence of religious education in public schools is similar to that of Serbia and Romania. And here are pro and counter voices. The arguments of religious education advocates are strong, but there are also opponents who claim that religious education is a waste of time in the age of technological development (Gheorghieva, 2017).

The socialist struggle against religion has led to the inability to understand the importance of religious education in society and the emergence of religious illiteracy. The state is called upon to ensure the religious literacy of adolescents, which is independent of the religious institutions, without being in conflict with them, but in agreement with them (Gheorghieva, 2017).

Religious education in Bulgaria has focused on two directions. The first is that religious education has a non-confessional character, where students are familiar with the moral messages of Christianity, Islam and Judaism. The second conception proposed by the Holy Synod of the Bulgarian Church claims that the study of Religion should follow the confessional principle (Gheorghieva, 2017). These two issues were also debated in the Romanian educational space.

The family has an important role in shaping the religious-moral position of the child. The religious development of students must not remain an illusory goal, but should become a necessity and a mission of the whole society. This requires a lot of love, understanding and dedication (Gheorghieva, 2017).

In Poland, during the post-war period, Religion was present in schools. Until 1956, Religion was a compulsory discipline in Primary and Secondary Schools; between 1957 and 1961, Religion was taught as an extra-curricular subject, and after 1961 it was taught in authorized religious education centers. After 1990 Religion was reintroduced into primary and secondary school (Doroszkiwicz, 2017).

Of particular importance in education of young generations, in Poland, are Fraternities and Church Organizations. Thus, the Orthodox Fraternity of Saints Cyril and Methodius aims at familiarizing the society with the teachings and tradition of the Orthodox Church, as well as their promotion through cultural and educational activities (Doroszkiwicz, 2017).

Religious education in Romanian schools is presented from a positive perspective by Mihăilescu J. The author states that one of the victories of Christianity over atheist communism in Romania was the introduction of Religious classes in schools in 1990 (Mihăilescu, 2017). The author's speech is brave and unequivocal.

Religious education benefits the culture of the soul that is so necessary in the present society, and Religion must be known by the students. Religious education invites you to know yourself. Religious values bring people together, create lasting ties and manifest through love, dedication and understanding (Mihăilescu, 2017).

Our study is addressed to teenagers from the Romanian school. The teenagers become critical observers and find that in some situations they experience anxiety or exaggerated euphoria. The young adults struggle to reinvent themselves and tend to leave behind the investment made by parents in their cultural and spiritual preparation. On the other hand, denigration and wandering, the limitation of freedom, the imposition of old rules will cause the adolescents to struggle with the new challenges of their life and even to depart from God. It is good to withdraw discreetly and let God protect them and give them the wisdom they need to mature (Benga, 2017).

The study proposed by us brings new information about the social perspectives that young students have on religious education and the Church. If most studies addressing the presence of Religious education and the Church in School in Eastern Europe reveal the minimization of Religion or even its absence from the School, this study highlights the students' desire to study Religion in the School; but this study of Religion should be done with a new method and language, not to miss the true involvement of the Church in the social life of young people. Such discrepancies arise because they do not take into account the specific environment in which young people work; educational models are forced, and language is not a contemporary one (Marincovic, 2017).

Proof that the Church is interested in young people and how they interact with School, Church, and Family is the large number of programs and activities with young people taking place in the Lower Danube Archdiocese. In this respect, in 2016, a compendium entitled: "Young People in the Church. Testimonies. Challenges Answers" was published, containing testimonies offered by students, young people and Religion teachers over the years in the Lower Danube Diocese either on the occasion of spiritual-cultural events or in the dialogue on the theme of Religion or the themes contemporary challenges in the Christian education work, in the Family, in the School, in the Church (Crăciun, 2016).

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This exploratory study aims to identify the social perspectives that students have on religious education in school, as well as the presence of the Church in their lives.

The main questions that lead this research are:

- What are the problems and actions present in the social perspectives proposed by young people?
- What is the impact of these perspectives on the social behavior of young people?

Answers to these questions will help improve the religious educational approach and the relationship between the youth, the School and the Church, and the ways in which all these answers can bring benefits to the social life of young students.

4. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The perspectives of this study can be of use to government commissions designated to analyze and review the school curricula of Religion classes.

This study can be used in pedagogical circles to improve the teaching methods of Religion, using new, flexible and modern approaches, approaches coming from the beneficiaries of the education.

The results of the study can be implemented by associations and religious foundations that have partnerships with state schools to carry out inter-institutional programs: School-Church-Family.

Study approaches are useful to inspectorates and school units in order to harness the impact of Religion at the level of youth training and education.

5. RESEARCH METHODS

This exploratory study took place in the school year 2016-2017, on a number of 36 pupils, from two terminal classes (12th grade), within a high school in Braila. The students were asked to write an essay on the theme: What do young people expect from the Church? What does the Church expect from young people? The essay analysis of young students does not want to impose recipes, prescriptions nor action plans. It is not about imposing opinions, but about discussing an issues. There will be no rushed conclusions that could give rise to certain convictions.. The analysis of these essays is a confrontation with new points of view, which may have some chances to evoke new ways of looking at education and training (Monteil, 1989).

We begin our study with the opinion of a young woman about the place and role of the Church in the life of young people:

"Young people expect from the Church something completely different than what it is offering now, and that is support. Today we rarely see young people interested in what the Church and its Sacraments are.

The support that the Church should give to young people is first and foremost a spiritual one, because in everything they do, a better future is expected for both them and the society they live in.

Secondly, there should be material support, especially for students who want to study and have no possibilities to do so.

But nowadays what is promoted and sustained in the Church's environment are the elders because they are present every Sunday in the church, and unfortunately, the young people live with the impression that they do not have a place among the crowd elderly people who apparently take on the term of the Church.

The Church expects, however, to attract as many Christians as possible to guide the faith. It expects young people to listen to parents, grandparents and teachings, these being the only guidelines suggested by the people of the Church. Although the Church waits for them and receives them with open arms, they are not satisfied with the beautiful words. They need guidance both towards the holy and towards their path in life.

In conclusion, the Church and the young people do not have a close relationship due to the indifference that comes from both sides, but this has not always been so and can be changed when someone does something in this regard, not just superficially " (M.V.).

The opinion of this 18-year-old from a high school in the city of Braila highlights the relationship between the Church, School and Society in Eastern Europe. In this statement, the social, educational and moral role of the Church is not denied, but rather the lack of real and active involvement of those who manage the programs and projects common to the two institutions.

In other words, this characterization of the Church's involvement in the social life can extend to any other institution with a social and educational role in our country.

There are many steps to be taken for the institutional reconstruction and social involvement to be real and credible. They did not go beyond, albeit to a small extent, the "beautiful words" stage, as the young woman mentioned above.

On the other hand, there is also a negative trend regarding the activity of the fundamental institutions of a society, as they would no longer do their duty or would be outdated morally and socially.

We are presenting this time the perspective of another young student, who highlights the inability of young people to get involved in the life of the Church:

"Today, young people have no expectations from the Church, especially because they do not realize what role the Church really has. For most young people, the Church is not important, so they do not pay attention to it ... they are not interested in anything concerned with Church or Faith, often trying to avoid everything connected with the Church. There is no communication between the young and the grown-ups present in the Church. There are value judgments on both sides. Young people judge the Church too harshly and do not see the good deeds it does. The Church has great expectations from young people "(A.L.).

This time, we see the intergenerational conflict, which is felt between young people and the Church. There is no doubt that this intergenerational conflict arises due to the lack of real communication as well as the rigid language used by the mature generation, a generation that is found among the clergy in the Church as well as the teachers in the School.

Young people expect from the church a sincere and real communication. From the essay of another young woman, we learn the following:

"First of all, the young people expect to be understood, to be listened to by the people in the Church. They, whenever they have a problem, even of a spiritual nature, feel the need to talk with somebody, with the priest. Thus, they expect the Church, the people who are part of it, to understand and not judge them for their deeds. Young people also expect moral advice, words that will spiritually reassure them and help them overcome the problems they have. By confessing, the young people will feel free, and in hearing the good words spoken by the priest, they will find spiritual peace "(P.A.).

From the teen's words, her desire to communicate with the grown-ups, to receive advice that can help her overcome the problems of everyday life, is noticed. Sincere communication and beyond the strictly educational barrier leads to an improvement in the overall education. A Religion teacher who approaches pupils, understanding their wishes and sufferings, communicating with them honestly and directly, will increase the chances of having an hour of Religion in which the educational goals are met.

Continuing with the presentation of P.A. she states that: "The Church also has great expectations from young people. She wants them to be wise, to live their lives in harmony, setting a goal for them to fight for. It wants the young people to be respected by those around them ... Every time they feel the need to get away, they should not hesitate to come to the Church to confess their problems of everyday life. To do this if they feel like it, not out of obligation "(P.A.).

This is, for this young woman, the non-formal educational perspective. In relation to the Family, School, or Church, young people want to approach it without being forced to do so, but by their sincere desire to receive the help they need.

The essay of a young man, O.C., points out that "the Church is part of the country's cultural patrimony," and "the Church expects the young men to be humble, beautiful, intelligent, and full of the Holy Spirit." It is a spiritual-cultural perspective that is not lacking in the School. Along with the Church, School also has a sacred character in the students' souls. The knowledge of sacredness can make pupils better.

The young student D.E. sees in the space of the Church holiness and warmth: "When I think of the Church, I think of a sacred, holy and warm place. I do not think all young people go to the Church, but there are still plenty of people going and expecting to be welcomed with open arms and good advice".

The young people want the same thing from the School - to be a warm place and be welcomed with open arms. The lack of youth in the church space can be compared to school absenteeism, which, unfortunately, has been at odds with normality lately.

This young woman continues: "In the world of the Internet, when all the problems are solved with the help of the electronics, it is hard to bring the young people to the Church, especially because this custom also needs to be encouraged by the family." Family involvement in the spiritual-cultural educational act is fundamental to the success of the young person in life.

Student C.C.A. sees the Church as a space of that defines one's personality: "In the vision of young people, the church should shape itself as a source of knowledge that would shape their personality. A young man is eager to learn the guidance that the Church offers, in order to stand out from others, building a positive mentality. "

Young people's expectations for the Church could be positively, negatively and indifferently. Most expectations of young people are positive. This perspective, by analyzing the essays of young people, can be easily transferred to both school and family. There are few essays that support the involvement of School and Family, so that the relationship between the young and the Church is a positive one.

Even if some young people are not declarative in supporting faith or membership in a particular Church, "Church and Faith are part of our lives, even if we do not show it" (P.A.G.).

Young people expect the Church to "understand, educate and forgive" (B.A.), and the Church expects young people to "not forget to be human" (G.S.D).

An honest response that comes in comparison with social networks is given by the young H.V. "I believe that young people wait for the Church to come to them and be able to give them a mathematical answer to all their problems and questions. They do not know that God is not like the Internet, which is helping them for the moment".

"The Church is the second pillar in the formation of young people. It is relieving and hopeful for students to see that in the church where they go with their parents there are other young people of similar ages who live by the same principles as them "(C.R.). In this statement of a young woman, one can see the unity that she desires to exist between the Church, the School, and the Family. "Through young people, the Church is always renewed, as they are the ones starting to know God ... That is how the foundations of a family are formed ... Just like Home, the Church and those inside it become a family, confessing and praying together. For the majority of young people, the Church can also be called the dictionary of life, where they can get important information about their lives, especially during adolescence."

Quiet, peace and harmony are the expectations of young people not from the Church only, but also from the Family and School.

6. FINDINGS

Analyzing the relationship of the youth with the Church, from the social and educational perspective, we find that young people see the Church a holy and living institution, which also has an important role in educating and training young people for life.

In the Family, Church, and School, young people want to find holiness, harmony, quiet, peace, understanding, education, and last but not least, forgiveness.

Young students are aware of the fact that they need the education, moral, and understanding, which they wish want to find in the three institutions mentioned above.

7. CONCLUSION

Following the essay analysis of young students, answers to the research questions were found. The problems and actions present in the social perspectives proposed by young people, as well as their impact on social behavior, can be summarized as follows: young people have questions, they have problems that they find hard to answer, and these problems are daily. Social networks do not make young people happy completely. Young people need sincere communication. They want to talk face to face, daily, to find solutions, to improve, to become better and more understanding with others. Unfortunately, the mature generation does not find the time and necessary mood to talk to young people. Young people need spiritual warmth, parents, teachers and clergy.

After all, the teacher, cleric and the parent are one and the same person, one that pupil sees as helping him to overcome daily challenges and to shape his personality.

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