

FAITH IN GOD – AN ESSENTIAL COMPONENT OF TODAY’S YOUTH EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

In contemporary society marked by secularized tendencies, sometimes aggressive towards the universe of religious faith, a mentality is taking shape according to which religious education must be separated from formal education in school and reduced to the Church, thus depriving today's young people of the knowledge of an authentic, spiritual experience. Religious education is not in conflict with science and scientific knowledge, but responds to the inner needs of young people, which are particularly concerned with the heavenly and eternal dimension. From the moment of creation, man has always longed for eternity, and a Christian education from childhood helps him to fulfil this longing. An authentic and permanent Christian education offers children and young people the prospect of a Christian life, the power to fulfil the evangelical moral precepts which lead to fulfilment.

Keywords: youth; education; Jesus Christ; family; Church; school; God;

INTRODUCTION

The Holy Gospel of Matthew gives us the example of a rich young man who humbly approaches the Saviour Christ with the desire for eternity in his soul; thus, the young man asks the One whom he considers a good Teacher: "Good Master, what good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life?" (Matthew 19:16). The Saviour, looking at him with love (Mark 10:21), shows him the way to eternal life, namely, by fulfilling the commandments and following him, abandoning all that keeps him dependent on the material, temporal world. We see in this young man a state of sincere searching, springing from the image of God that seals his soul. From the moment of conception, God instils within us the orientation towards eternity that we gain only in communion with Him, with the Good Creator. The Holy Spirit Himself, present in our hearts, cries out, "Abba, Father!" (Galatians 4:6). God calls us, therefore, to a tacit and personal communion with Himself, and our soul is constantly seeking this in order to find its perfection.

1. THE YOUNG MAN'S QUESTS POINT HIM TOWARDS ETERNITY

Youth is marked by searching, by restlessness, by adventures, by the desire for self-fulfilment. If a child is dependent on his parents, being characterised by innocence, simplicity, kindness, cleanliness, the young person breaks away from the circle of the family, entering into a relationship with others and begins the process of maturation, which has within it autonomy, unattachment, the potential to create¹. In the course of the child's

¹ Simeon Kraiopoulos, *Adolescență, feciorie, căsătorie*, trad. Garoafa Coman, Editura Bizantină, București, 2010, p. 28.

psycho-somatic development, special emphasis should be placed on care for the soul, through the cultivation of virtues and the knowledge of God.

Saint Paul warns of the importance of educating children: "But if any provide not for his own, and specially for those of his own house, he hath denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel" (1 Timothy 5:8). This special care, which must be shown towards the members of the family takes shape first of all through religious education, as that through which the child is guided towards his ultimate goal: likeness to God.

Saint John Chrysostom states that "not caring for children is a sin that surpasses all others and even goes to the height of wickedness. [...] If all your deeds were well ordered with regard to our souls, but we do not care for the salvation of our children, we will be punished with the great punishment"². One's own salvation also depends on the extent to which we make family members partakers of the faith and good living.

Education meets the needs and curiosities of the young person. It must not be limited to the transmission of information and the creation of moral prestige, but must be directed towards eternity, towards the discovery of the divine image within the human being and its transformation into the likeness of God.

In order to fulfil its purpose, religious education depends on the young person's response to the inner call that God has planted in him and on the extent to which he accepts to make the effort towards salvation³. God Himself, as the perfect teacher, establishes a dialogue with man in order to reveal to him His intention, to educate him, to make him wise and perfect, but at the same time He leaves him free to assume the responsibility of spiritual growth, of detachment from the world's temporal things. Through the Incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Christian discovers his true vocation, which rises beyond the materiality of the world, relating to the eternal heavenly homeland, as saint John Chrysostom shows us: "Our zeal is for a heavenly life. Our way is the way of the powers of the bodiless. Earth and ashes yearn to equal those who dwell in heaven. The wretchedness competes with the un-wickedness."⁴.

The earthly pedagogue, represented by the family-Church-school triad, has the role of setting the young person on the path to eternity, while avoiding rigour and coercion, but based on love. The more religious values are associated with authoritarian expressions, denying them the freedom to think, to judge for themselves the values they might assume, the more young people will reject the sphere of spirituality and religious life. Unfortunately, teenagers with too little culture and religious life see religion as a system of rules and regulations to be rejected, unlike others who understand and experience religious life as a personal relationship with God. This is also why some psychologists say that religion will not be intrinsically accepted by young people until they experience it as an experience that brings true joy and meaning to their lives⁵.

2. THE CHALLENGES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

Today's young people are subject to many external pressures that determine their later life course. The contemporary challenges of young people take the place of the training

² Ioan Gură de Aur, *Despre feciorie. Apologia vieții monahale. Despre creșterea copiilor*, Editura Institutul Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 2007, pp. 246-247.

³ André de Peretti, Jean-André Legrand, Jean Boniface, *Tehnici de comunicare*, trad. Gabriela Sandu, Editura Polirom, Iași, 2001, pp. 7-10.

⁴ Ioan Gură de Aur, *Despre feciorie...*, p. 43.

⁵ Ilie Rusu, *Psihologia religioasă în dialog cu morală creștină*, Editura Arhiepiscopiei Sucevei și Rădăuților, Câmpulung Moldovenesc, 1998, p. 32.

that society and the family should provide. The age of adolescence is characterised by fragility, a lack of maturity in defining values, aspirations and interests, making young people vulnerable to the negative effects of globalised society. In this regard, the Church, in cooperation with the school, must bring young people to the centre of its concerns, so as to bring them closer to spiritual values, as those that lead them towards deity. If the young person lacks religious education within the family, the school and the Church must try to fill these gaps, taking into account the needs of the young person, his openness to receive and take on the teachings of God, without coercion, but giving love⁶.

Today's technological society has also brought about changes in the way young people are today. Christianity does not reject the idea of technology and its progress, but draws attention to the negative consequences it can have on the person without proper use. The indiscriminate use of media tools, so present among people, turns the young person into a victim of a system that cultivates arrogance, self-sufficiency, individualistic spirit and the prospect of a purely horizontal existence, without its articulation in a living relationship with God. Communication is also seriously distorted, losing its interpersonal dimension. When modern sources of communication are not used rationally and purely instrumentally, they become idols that attack human freedom itself, leading to serious disturbances at the inner level of the human person: selfishness, confiscation of personal space, invasion of sexuality, exacerbation of lust, breaking away from reality and placing oneself in illusory worlds, diminishing of responsibility by creating false identities, shaping of personality according to the personalities of modern showbiz, disinterest in one's own vocation, dedication, dialogue⁷.

Young people are also affected by the outlook of a society marked by economic and social crises, creating a series of imbalances within them. In this context, young people take refuge in compensatory realities to escape from everyday problems: drugs, alcohol, sexual pleasures.

Religious education, carried out within the family-school-Church triad, must identify the real problems and impasses of young people and find the best actions to respond to these problems, but also to provide them with new points of reference to anchor them on the path to holiness and perfection. In order to succeed in its educational and pastoral work, the Church must offer young people alternatives where needed, critically analysing the problems they face in the light of the Gospel. In this way, the young person must rediscover in the midst of the Church the life of communion, as opposed to isolation and self-isolation; living in the Christian spirit and practising the virtues as an alternative to ephemeral pleasures. At the same time, by living in the communion of the Church, the young person will be able to become aware of the value and uniqueness of the human person, which has a very well-defined purpose that goes beyond the material world and is aimed at the state of the perfect man, shown through Jesus Christ.

The being of the contemporary young man does not differ from that of the young man presented in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark; both are in search of eternity, for it is planted in their souls at creation by God. The influences that fall upon the young man of today, the spiritual shortcomings he has from his family, the inner turmoil caused by the hormonal changes of puberty, distract him from fulfilling his Christic destiny, and the spiritual void he feels is illusively filled by ephemeral substitutes such as vices, sexuality,

⁶ Constantin Cucoș, *Pedagogie. Reconsiderări, evaluări, interpretări*, Editura Universității „A.I. Cuza”, Iași, 1995, pp. 20-35.

⁷ Gheorghe Holbea, „Pastorația tinerilor în contextul actual al globalizării” (Youth ministry in the current context of globalisation) în *Ortodoxia*, seria a II-a, nr. IV, București, 2015, p. 54.

and others. Through Christian education, the young person has at his disposal the ladder of ascent to God, the very source of perfection and perfection itself. Christian education aims at the kingdom of heaven and eternal life⁸.

The success of Christian education is made possible through the active involvement of young people in the pastoral and philanthropic activities of the Church, as well as through cultural and catechetical programmes. Young people should be used in youth ministry, facilitating communication, personal openness, motivation, the creation of new friendships, the sharing of similar concerns. This can be seen at the level of youth associations, parish or national (e.g. ASCOR, LTCOR), where young people rediscover the meaning of the human person in relation to the Holy Trinity and in relation to their fellow human beings, as well as true living in communion with God.

3. THE IMPORTANCE OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

Saint John Chrysostom considers education to be a great art of ennobling the soul of a young man: "And there is no greater art than this. What art can equal the art of educating the soul of the child, of forming the mind of the young man? He who practises this art must be more skilful and talented than a painter and a sculptor"⁹. The educator therefore has a very great responsibility to form, in the Christian spirit, the child and the young person as those who bear the image of God within themselves, having the vocation of likeness to Him.

Through a good Christian education, Christian virtues such as patience, generosity, gentleness, respect, altruism and love are cultivated in the souls of young people, giving society persons capable of giving themselves for others. The anthropocentrism of today's world reduces man to the horizontal dimension, leading him to a deep collapse, whereas, growing up in the light of evangelical teachings, he becomes a dialogue partner of his Creator, Who accompanies him in his effort of spiritual ascent.

Continuing the analogy between the act of educating children and young people and the work of painters and sculptors, saint John Chrysostom exhorts educators "to do their utmost to complete these paintings, these wonderful icons of God. Painters, every day, put before them the painting and give it the necessary colours, sculptors do the same: they take away what is superfluous and add what is necessary. In the same way you, like sculptors, use all your free time to sculpt wonderful statues of God; take away what is superfluous, add what is necessary, and look carefully at them every day: what is the natural gift of children, to develop it, what is the defect, to remove it"¹⁰. The role of the educator is to guide the young person towards the heavenly life, towards the Kingdom of Heaven, helping him to develop those characteristics that will bring him closer to the heavenly coordinates.

Further, saint John Chrysostom sees the child's soul as a city in need of laws, to fight against the sinful urges that are directed against tender souls. The educator is the emperor of this city, who must oversee the building of this wonderful spiritual city, the soul of the child: "Imagine yourself an emperor who has a city under his rule: the soul of the child. [...] Give laws to this city, fearful and harsh laws. Take good care of them. Our laws are for the good of the whole world. Today we build a city. Let the four senses be the city's ramparts and gates, and let the whole body be a wall. Its gates are eyes, tongue, hearing, smell and, if you

⁸ Ioan G. Coman, *Frumusețea iubirii de oameni în spiritualitatea patristică*, Editura Mitropoliei Banatului, Timișoara, 1988, p. 87.

⁹ Ioan Gură de Aur, *Omilia la Matei*. Omilia LXI, trad., de D. Fecioru, PSB 23, Editura Institutul Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1994, p. 695.

¹⁰ Ioan Gură de Aur, *Despre feciorie...*, p. 401.

will, touch. Through these gates the citizens of this city enter and leave, in other words, through these gates, thoughts corrupt or unravel the soul of the child. [...] Above all else, let us make doors and gates, not of wood, nor of iron, but of gold. For truly golden is the city we build. And when this city is finished being built, not one man shall dwell in it, but the King of all. [...] Let the cross of the Lord, made entirely of precious stones, be the doorpost of these gates, set in the middle of the doors"¹¹.

Through Christian education an effort is made to make the soul of the young person the dwelling place where Jesus Christ Himself will dwell. The educator's effort must be accompanied by love and patience, so that the final result may be the one desired¹².

Moreover, religious education must emphasise the sacrificial love of Jesus Christ, the One who embraces the cross for the uplifting of man. The young person must also understand the importance of the cross and of taking up the cross in order to be exalted in the heavenly kingdom. Jesus Christ asks the rich young man to sell his wealth, share it with the poor, and, taking up his cross, follow him (Mark 10:21). Taking up the cross and following Jesus Christ leads the young man to eternal life.

Today, highly mediatised voices dismiss the importance of religious education, bringing a range of arguments and options to remove it from formal education. The Church has an obligation to bring its message to the centre of pedagogical attention, a message based on God's revelation and on Holy Tradition, which responds to the needs of today. The religious message must be familiar to the spirituality of today's young people in order to be understood and internalised¹³. Bringing the Gospel teaching and the teachings of the Holy Fathers up to date, but without compromises and minimisations, can be a priority of religious education in order to succeed in its eschatological aim. On the other hand, contemporary secularised society must understand that Christian pedagogy is not about indoctrination and the transmission of knowledge, but rather about proposing to young people the way of being that is in keeping with our human nature, as built from the beginning by God. Religious education shows the young person the virtues that are good in a world where sin is confused with virtue. To the extent that the young person understands and applies the effort of the virtues, he will move up the spiritual ladder to meet the One who called him before.

CONCLUSION

Today's young person wanders chaotically in a world where temptations, challenges and temptations seek to rob him. Through a Christian education, he rediscovers the gift of freedom in Jesus Christ, as the Apostle Peter urges in his first epistle: "Live as free men, and not using your liberty for a cloke of maliciousness, but as the servants of God." (1 Peter 2:16). True freedom, as opposed to the libertinism promoted by secularized society, is lived by bearing the cross and following Jesus Christ.

The act of religious education becomes a constant effort that the family and the school, supported by the Church, must make to offer young people all that is valuable, authentic and edifying. The dangers that assail the young generation can be overcome by a moral life, and more than that, by a state of communion with the One who holds all things together, with the true God.

¹¹ Ioan Gură de Aur, *Despre feciorie...*, pp. 401-403.

¹² J.J. van Guldenburg, O. Scholten, G.W. Noomen, *Știința comunicării*, trad. Tudor Olteanu, Editura Humanitas, București, 2000, pp. 28-30.

¹³ Dorin Opriș, Monica Opriș, *Religia și educația de mâine. Cercetări pedagogice*, Editura Eikon, Cluj-Napoca, 2013, p. 142.

The exhortation of saint John Chrysostom concerning the education of children and young people must continually echo in the consciousness of educators, as those who have the responsibility of leading the young to eternal life and the knowledge of God:

"Educate your children Christianly. This is your duty. If you are careless, you will go to hell, even if you have other virtues. Teach them the Mysteries of the Church, justice, wisdom, courage of spirit. Help them to know themselves, for through self-knowledge they will be led to the knowledge of God. If they do not know God, what good will all else be? Do you not hear the Lord, who says in the Holy Gospel that if man gained the whole world but lost his own soul, it would profit him nothing? Therefore, educate your children spiritually. Educate yourselves too. In this way you will be saved and enter the Kingdom of Heaven with the grace of Christ."¹⁴

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¹⁴ Ioan Gură de Aur, *Problemele vieții*, trad. Cristian Spătărelu și Daniela Filioreanu, Editura Egumenița, p. 130.