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Towards Religious Education in the Family in the 21st Century

In the 21st century there is a widespread belief that Christians should follow religion only in their private lives. In public life, religion should be rejected, especially as far as cultural, political and economic aspects are concerned. Some representatives of liberalism even claim that religious matters should not be discussed publicly, in the name of world-view neutrality. Unfortunately, some Christians also gradually separate a public sphere from a private one, thinking that religious

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aspects should belong to the latter. This phenomenon has also been observed by Pope Francis. When trying to find the reasons why religious and moral aspects are moved to a private sphere, he says: “The process of secularization is going towards causing religion and Church to belong to a private and internal sphere. Moreover, by denying transcendence, this process has led to the growing ethical deformation, weakening a sense of personal and social sin and a gradual rise in relativism, which causes general disorientation, especially during maturation and adolescence, which are extremely exposed to hurt because of changes”¹.

The views about moving religious aspects to a private sphere are more and more visible in the way children are raised. When some parents see dramatic political, social, economic, cultural and education changes happening in Poland, they come to conclusion that the principles of the Gospel are too radical, and not in accordance with social and career expectations of a “worker with a neutral world-view” and may make a child’s life more difficult in the future. Therefore, parents do not give their children religious upbringing, but only prepare them to function successfully in social and working lives. However, it is impossible to rear a child without acknowledging the truth about reality, the human person and God, without a transcendental dimension of life, or filling all aspects of human life with Christian principles. Mature Christianity needs a holistic reformation and a life lived according to the Gospel². Therefore, the aim of this article is to discuss the problem of religious upbringing in the family in the 21st century. First, the author presents the changes in the social and cultural context, which make religious upbringing difficult to undertake in a family. Next, educational solutions are proposed, the aim of which is to sensitize a child to the existence of God and make him/her interested in religious matters. The last part of the article shows basic family experiences which form foundations for a child’s religious education.

1. Changes in the Social and Cultural Context

The strong influences of naturalistic and liberal pedagogy cause parents to concentrate on familiarizing a child with the social and economic order. Parents think that children must know how to survive, compete in a free market economy and be able to present themselves well. However, if parents or guardians understand

¹ *Evangelii Gaudium* 64.

² Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1888.

the need for a child's full, all-round and integral upbringing, they will start to consider taking spiritual and religious spheres into consideration. As a result of social, economic and cultural changes in Poland, a family has less support in this matter, in a specializing society. Media, school, associations or organisations prefer political correctness. The social context, which made it possible for a family to fulfil a religious function based on a tradition, has been lost³.

Parents in Poland are seeking the support of religious professionals and priests because it is difficult for them to start religious discussions in a family, which is the result not only of a lack of theological knowledge, but, primarily, the inability to use simple religious language and to adapt the message to the developmental level of a child. The findings of research on religious education in Polish families, which has been conducted in recent years, show that mothers and fathers understand their responsibility for prayer in a child's life. Parents teach children prayers, encourage them to pray and practise family prayers. However, they pay too much attention to children's correct posture during prayers and remembering words of a prayer, instead of presenting it as a warm contact with God. In Poland, there is a tradition that Sundays and feasts are celebrated in families by relaxing, saying prayers and attending Mass. Recently, other forms of spending free time, e.g. going for walks, recreation, watching TV or family trips, have gained in popularity to the disadvantage of religious practices. The religious development of a child depends on the whole family life, mainly on the parents' example. Polish parents try to set an example to their children mainly by praying and attending Mass. They also try to create a Christian atmosphere at home by the existence of religious symbols and practices, especially prayers and celebrating feasts and religious festivals together, but only a small percentage of parents try to combine everyday family events with the reality of faith⁴.

³ Cf. E. Osewska, J. Stala, *Éducation religieuse et morale dans une école polonaise dans le contexte des transformations politiques*, "Studia Pastoralne" (2012) nr 8, p. 141–148; E. Osewska, *The Current Situation of Education and Continuing Professional Development of RE Teachers in Poland in the Context of the Social Challenges*, "The Person and the Challenges" 2 (2012) nr 2, p. 123–131.

⁴ Cf. *Nauki o rodzinie w służbie rodziny*, ed. J. Stala, Kraków 2014; J. Stala, *W kierunku integralnej edukacji religijnej w rodzinie. Próba refleksji nad nauczaniem Jana Pawła II w kontekście polskich uwarunkowań*, Tarnów 2010; *Religious Education / Catechesis in the Family. A European Perspective*, ed. E. Osewska, J. Stala, Warszawa 2010; J. Stala, *Katecheza rodzinna w nauczaniu Kościoła od Soboru Watykańskiego II*, Tarnów 2009; *W poszukiwaniu katechezy rodziców. Studium teoretyczno-empiryczne*, ed. J. Stala, E. Osewska, Tarnów 2007; J. Stala, *Familienkatechese in Polen um die Jahrhundertwende*.

Because of the changes in the social and cultural context, the contemporary Polish family does not pass Christian traditions, norms and values in a simple way. The family, which is often isolated and at a loss, needs the support of the ecclesial community, which must not consider ways of gaining a family for the good of the parish, but must effectively accompany a family through the Word of God, sacraments, and practical pastoral actions (support groups, communities, family movements, various ways of catechism for parents, family counselling services, etc.). Religious education of a child is aimed at meeting God personally, expressing oneself before Him, listening to Him, and reacting to His appeals. Each Christian family, when having an everyday dialogue with God, can develop its own style of conversation, prayer and religious practices, which will be adjusted to the abilities of all family members⁵. In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis makes an analysis of the contemporary family and indicates that the “Family experiences a serious cultural crisis, similarly to all communities and social bonds. In the case of a family, the fragility of relations becomes really serious because it is the family that is the basic social unit, a place where people learn to coexist in diversity and affiliation and where parents pass on the faith to their children”⁶.

2. Beginnings of Religious Education in the Family

According to the research conducted by the European Values Study, the number of people regarding themselves as religious is decreasing, especially in the northern and western parts of Europe. 27.9% of Europeans do not attend religious ceremonies, although it is important for them to participate in ceremonies which mark important events in their lives such as a birth of a child (71.3%), wedding, (73.2%), death of a family member (81.9%)⁷. A “Pick and choose” attitude is becoming more and more common, which means that Europeans are more eclectic and choose religion,

Probleme und Herausforderungen, Tarnów 2008; *Dzisiejsze aspiracje katechezy rodzinnej. Problemy i wyzwania*, ed. J. Stala, Kielce 2005; *Rodzina. Bezczenny dar i zadanie*, ed. J. Stala, E. Osewska, Radom 2006.

⁵ Cf. D. Ratcliff, *Parenting and Religious Education*, in: *Handbook of Family Religious Education*, ed. B. Neff, D. Ratcliff, Birmingham 1995, p. 82.

⁶ *Evangelii Gaudium* 66.

⁷ Cf. *Atlas of European Values: Trends and Traditions at the Turn of the Century*, ed. L. Halman, I. Sieben, M. van Zundert, Leiden 2011.

religious traditions and practices following their individual choices rather than the principles of the particular Church. Consequently, there are more and more adults who abandon moral rules and the doctrine of the Church for individualized and eclectic religiosity. As a result of migration, young Poles follow similar behaviour patterns and choose elements from various religious traditions, but they maintain relations with their native country and want to raise their children to be religious.

In the situation of religious pluralism, it is worth beginning religious education by sensitising a child to the existence of God and seeking the signs of His existence in the world. In religious education it is worth showing a child a God, who is present, close, takes care of people and is full of love for them. A child needs to discover God's love in his/her contacts with relatives: parents, guardians, grandparents, siblings. The process of child's education about the mystery of God and the nature of His love can begin only after a child receives love from the close family. God loves everyone, but at the same time He makes demands according to each person's religious development. A child needs to know that God loves him/her all the time and unconditionally, also when a child makes mistakes and commits sins. When receiving God's love, a child develops, becomes a better person and learns that God lavishes love on him/her in the same way as parents or guardians do⁸. The development of a child begins and continues in the family, and what happens at the beginning of a person's life influences his/her future. Both the parents and the family have impact on a child. What is really significant for a child's personal and religious development is his/her acceptance as a person to love. The family is based on love, which is its real power, and the internal principle, without which it is impossible for a family to improve⁹. A child's experience of love means full acceptance of the person with his/her abilities and limitations.

3. Religious Education Based on Family Experiences

Psychologists, school counsellors, and catechists emphasize the importance of the relationship between a child's first experiences and his/her religious development. A child is not able to discover God on his/her own, but must be taught about Him by being shown His actions. What becomes significant is the people who

⁸ Cf. J. Stala, E. Osewska, *Anders erziehen in Polen. Der Erziehungs- und Bildungsbegriff im Kontext eines sich ständig verändernden Europas des XXI. Jahrhunderts*, Tarnów 2009.

⁹ Cf. *Redemptor Hominis* 18; *Familiaris Consortio* 18.

are important to a child, their views and lifestyles¹⁰. A child's attitude towards God develops only in an indirect way through his/her contacts with the mother, father, grandparents and close relatives¹¹. God is not only a term, but, first of all, a real experience. Everything that a child experiences becomes "empirical material that is used for developing the idea of God by analogy and abstraction. It can be said that the process of learning about God begins by creating parental symbols. Parents should be aware that the positive or negative experience that a child gains through contact with the closest/nuclear family will form the parental symbols, either the supporting or "harmful" symbols, which will be used for creating the picture of God¹².

Another important condition in the process of a child's religious education is developing primal trust, which is an ability to trust people, experience dependence on others, and a feeling of being accepted and respected¹³. Trust in God greatly depends on the quality of the relationship between a child and the people who are important emotionally (parents, guardians, grandparents, siblings) and the atmosphere of the family home¹⁴.

What is also crucial for the religious education of a child is the positive atmosphere at home, which includes warmth, care, protection, kindness, respect, safety, and,

¹⁰ Cf. J. Stala, *Grundlagen der Religionserziehung in der Familie im Kontext zu den Gegebenheiten der heutigen Zeit*, "Studia Teologiczno-Historyczne Śląska Opolskiego" (2010) nr 30, p. 263–272; J. Stala, *Pädagogisch-katechetische Implikationen aus den Anregungen Johannes Pauls II. für die sakramentale Bildung. Zehn Jahre Gymnasialreform in Polen*, "Studia Bobolanum" (2010) nr 4, p. 155–167.

¹¹ Cf. J. Stala, *Die Transzendenz als bestimmendes Merkmal der Person in der Anthropologie und der Pädagogik Johannes Pauls II.*, "The Person and the Challenges" 2 (2012) nr 1, p. 61–75; J. Stala, *Der Mensch als Person: Die bestimmende Grundlage für Johannes Paul II. in seinem Bild von der Familie*, "The Person and the Challenges" 2 (2012) nr 2, p. 41–59; E. Osewska, J. Stala, *Założenia i uwarunkowania wychowania religijnego podejmowanego w środowisku rodzinnym*, in: *Wychowanie do wartości w świecie cyberkultury*, ed. B. Bilicka, Toruń 2012, p. 183–214.

¹² Cf. E. Osewska, J. Stala, *W kierunku katechezy rodzinnej*, Kielce 2003, p. 186–187.

¹³ Cf. Ch. Brusselmans, A. *Parents' Guide: Religion for Little Children*, Huntington 1984, p. 32–38; Ch. Gallagher, P. C. Davis, *How to Bring up Children Today*, Dublin 1982, p. 6–8; J. Wilk, *Pedagogika rodziny*, Lublin 2002, p. 127.

¹⁴ Cf. E. Osewska, *Religious Education from the Perspective of Central and Eastern Europe*, in: *Toward Mutual Ground. Pluralism, Religious Education and Diversity in Irish Schools*, ed. G. Byrne, P. Kieran, Dublin 2013, p. 133–143; E. Osewska, *Education and Internet Challenges*, in: *Education and Creativity*, ed. E. Osewska, Warszawa 2014, p. 43–56.

at the same time, steadiness, order and harmony. These factors help a child to build trust in parents and other people, the world and God. There are some other factors which play an equally important role, such as fairness, goodness, and the ability to forgive, to control anger and to create an atmosphere of calmness, joy and freedom. A second condition for a good atmosphere in a Christian family is to fill it with religious content, according to family life. Events, words, gestures which are naturally included in everyday life and remind of the existence of God are indispensable. What is important is that these cannot be meaningless words, gestures or decorative religious objects without acquainting oneself with the mystery of God. Janusz Tarnowski, an educator, thinks that in a Polish family, religious education involves external adjustment, moralizing or even becomes a sort of training but lacks depth. This means that religious education becomes apparent, short-lived and leads to an internal change of a person only to a limited extent. Recognising the fact that a personal meeting and relation with God is a cooperation between God and man, parents cannot impose or force a child to believe, but they can prepare him/her for faith. Even in case of weakening religious practices, what counts more is the parents' openness, love, positive life experience, seeking meaning of life, self-assurance and acceptance of others, rather than a drill in order to keep up appearances, or indifference to everything that refers to transcendence.

It is really essential for a child's religious education to combine a positive picture of God created by the close family, an atmosphere of trust, love and care, an experience of being accepted, and, finally, an ability to experience life and the world as valuable, with pro-social references. Only then is it possible to establish a relation between the child and God, who can be trusted fully and unconditionally, who deserves admiration and love, and who makes full acceptance of the commandment of love. A child receives love from God in everyday life, explains his/her experiences in the light of faith, discovers the beauty of nature and the surrounding world, experiences God as the Giver and also discovers who God is, and thus builds His true picture.

A Child's experiences need to be complemented by the 'word'. If possible, the verbalisation should occur in close time connection with the experience¹⁵. When referring to a child's particular experience, it is worth showing the beauty of nature as a gift from the good God. Similarly, it is essential to interpret all positive experiences in relations with siblings, parents or friends. If the natural and home environments are such significant gifts from God, the next step is to thank God and worship Him. A child develops talents and undertakes intellectual activities

¹⁵ Cf. R. Guardini, *Znaki święte*, Wrocław 1982, p. 59–60.

necessary in everyday life, and furthers religious education by learning first religious concepts and forming the mentality of a person trusting God. A child's upbringing should occur in a spirit of truth and authenticity. All events in a family should happen in a natural and usual way and by following an everyday routine. Prayer, Mass, liturgical celebration cannot be add-ons, something extra added to family events from time to time, but should be included in an everyday life as something essential and valuable, but also natural and indispensable¹⁶.

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The family remains the community of upbringing: the one which is intended and planned, as well as the natural one happening when going about life activities. Everyday situations and family members' activities connected with hygiene, health care, nutrition, care, maintenance of the surroundings, the organisation of free time and leisure enable a child not only to acquire particular abilities, but they are also an upbringing process. 'Unintentional' child-rearing is complementary to the reflective, intentional and planned one and they both constitute a whole. Despite enormous social and religious changes in the Polish family, it seems that religious upbringing may produce intended results if it is incorporated into education activities which are based on love and supported by well thought-out pastoral work of the Church.

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¹⁶ Cf. J. Stala, *Richtungsweisende Merkmale zur religiösen Erziehung und Bildung im Lehrwerk von Papst Johannes Paul II.*, "Bogosłowska Smotra" (2014) nr 1, p. 137–148; J. Stala, *Der gesellschaftlich-kulturelle Kontext der aktuellen Gefährdungen für die religiöse Erziehung und Bildung in der Familie*, "The Person and the Challenges" 3 (2013) nr 1, p. 251–266; J. Stala, *Implikationen für Pädagogik und Katechese im Hinblick auf die Unterstützung christlicher Eltern bei der Erfüllung ihrer Aufgaben im Kontext der aktuellen Bedrohungen und Herausforderungen der Familie*, "Theologica" 48 (2013) 1, p. 129–142.

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