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## Family Education – a Natural Environment for Theologizing About Love

### 1. Introduction

In terms of its genesis, the family is a community *sui generis* – i.e. a community of people, loving each other, and thus potentially the most suitable place for safe and effective communication for its members about all dimensions of love, from everyday life issues to deep sighs for love of their souls. If parents want to talk to their children about the importance of love, their conscious communication goes hand in hand with their own loving or unloving behaviour, and thus with their positive or negative, often subconscious, patterns. The mutual situations that the family experiences create a steady stream of holistic education opportunities – developing cognitive skills, emotional relationships, and decision-making capabilities of the young offspring.

Observing children's behaviour and communication expressing their needs for love, R. Coles, A. Freud and other psychologists and psychoanalysts<sup>1</sup> found out that, whether raised in a religious or a-religious family, children do have deep existential questions and quest for love.

The aim of this paper is to present the results of our search for how children could be led to love by theologizing in families. Specifically, we try to find out which situations in families lead to discussions containing theologizing elements, as well as which methods of theologizing are used in families.

During our literary analysis, we found a substantial lack of resources dealing with research on theologizing aimed specifically at love for God and our neighbour (Gospel of Mark 12,33). There are some studies on these topics but they are only marginally related to love for God and our neighbour (a biblical term for 'other people'), e.g. Petermann<sup>2</sup> in his analysis addresses suffering, theodicy and the issue of loving God. In their study, H. Roose and CH. Butt<sup>3</sup> examine the opinions of children on forgiving God and humans, which closely affect the love of God and one's neighbour. J. Iprgrave<sup>4</sup> searched the theology of children in the context of plurality, which resulted in different view of insights into the issue of loving one's neighbour. In a certain way, the research of children's theology by F. Kraft<sup>5</sup> in "Discovering Children's Christologies: An Introduction to the Practical Experience of Children Theology" also contributes to the analysis and evaluation of theologizing about the love of God.

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<sup>1</sup> Conversation between R. Coles and A. Freud in: Cf. R. Coles, *The Spiritual Life of Children*, Wilmington 1991.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. H. B. Petermann, *Opportunities for Theologising and Philosophising with Children*, Hovering over the face of the deep, Munster 2009, pp. 129–145.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. H. Roose & Ch. Butt, "God cannot always forgive." *Reading Mt 18:21–35 with Children*, Munster 2009, pp. 37–51.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. J. Iprgrave, "My God and other people's gods." *Children Theology in a Context of Pluralit*, Munster 2009, pp. 53–69.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. F. Kraft, *Discovering Children's Christologies: An Introduction to the Practical Experience of Children's Theology*. Munster 2009, pp. 215–224.

## 2. The idea of theologizing with children about love

Theologizing with children is a didactic approach used especially in religious education and cognitive skills training, which – similarly to philosophizing with children – uses the child’s higher thinking skills, such as reasoning, reflection or contemplation instead of mere memorization of doctrines. In family upbringing practice, this means that parents or older family members use the cognitive and affective capabilities of children to engage them in a conversation that leads to emerging theological statements and verbalization of their spiritual concepts.

There are a number of topics that theologizing with children in families can focus on, e.g. theologizing about specific religious rituals in families (regular Bible reading and prayer), or theological interpretation of crisis situations (death of a family member), or various biblical themes and doctrines (The Ten Commandments, Theology of Creation and Death).

We considered it important to focus on such topics that are important from the point of view of family upbringing and church catechetical education, but at the same time belong to important and discussed topics, which the families naturally encounter in everyday life. At the same time, they should be topics that the child can grasp theologically – with respect to his/her age and that are adequate to his/her own ontogenetic development. So finally, we decided to analyse situations enabling theologizing with children in the families associated with the greatest commandment – love. Love is the prior goal of all upbringing and education in families, denominational schools and churches: “You shall *love* the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength. And Love your neighbor as yourself” (Gospel of Mark 12:30–31).

For the purpose of the research presented in this study, it was necessary for us to focus our attention to a limited number of specific dimensions of love. Our goal was to identify ways of theologizing that were present in average Christian families, and to construct an outline of theologizing in families based on observations.

The commandment of love has been the goal of Christian education across the entire history of Christianity. It has often been used as a key or an essential description of Christian life. The ancient text *Didaché*<sup>6</sup>, dated

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. *Didaché*, Spisy apoštolských otců, Praha 2004, p. 15.

by some experts to the first century AD, on the foundations of the Christian formation begins with words about two ways, highlighting the way of loving God and one's neighbour. Moreover, Augustine, in his writing – which is supposed to describe the foundations of Christianity “About Christian Doctrine” – states: “The chief purpose of all that we have been saying in our discussion of things is to make it understood that the fulfillment and end of the law and all the divine scriptures is to love the thing which must be enjoyed and the thing which together with us can enjoy that thing (since there is no need for a commandment to love oneself).”<sup>7</sup>

In the pre-reformation literature, J. Hus<sup>8</sup> emphasized these aims of the Christian formation in his book “Daughter”, which is again ended by the challenge of loving God and one's neighbor. Also, the authority of contemporary catechetics or pedagogy, M. Montessori<sup>9</sup>, mentions, as a substantial formation, the formation for loving one's neighbor which follows one's love for God. Similarly, the Czech religious pedagogue L. Muchová<sup>10</sup> says that in Christian education from the person of Jesus Christ it is visible that God and man are inseparably linked. If speaking of God, it also speaks about man. Similarly, the love of God and the love of neighbor is inextricably linked. In his analysis of the content of Jesus's andragogy, yet another theologian I. Peres<sup>11</sup> lists four most dominant motives of human behavior, the first is the motif of God's love.

Since love of God and one's neighbor is considered to be the final goal of Christian education, in our research we assumed that we would identify it in theologizing situations in many families. We expected a Christian family with its natural relationships and its significant influence on the formation of the child's faith to be a natural environment for shaping the child's love for God and his/her neighbor.

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Augustinus, *De Doctrina Christiana*, Oxford 1995, p. 45.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. J. Hus, *Dcerka*, Praha 1995, p. 65.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. H. Helmingová, *Pedagogika M. Montessorieovej*, Bratislava 1996, p. 144.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. L. Muchová, *Úvod do náboženskej pedagogiky*, Olomouc 1994, p. 18.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. I. Peres, *Aspekty výchovy a vzdelávania v antike a v spisoch Nového zákona*, Bratislava 2001, p. 154.

### 3. Research of theologizing with children about love

The main goal of our research was to identify and analyze examples of theologizing with children as a natural method of talking to children in the context of Christian families. Theologizing in families was centered on situations and ways that might encourage the development of children's love for God and their neighbor. This research resulted in the creation of a methodology of theologizing with children in families.

In the first phase, we carried out a New Testament exegesis of the biblical texts examining the Greek concept *agapé* for love towards God and other people, and thus we identified the New Testament emphasis on love. *Agapé* as a sacrificial love is able to give and does not wait to get something back. It is focused on the needs of others and not only egoistically on one's own. This love was robustly described both by the Apostle Paul (e.g. in the 1 Corinthians 13) and the Apostle John (e.g. in his 1John), and, of course, predominantly through the life of Jesus, by the authors of the Gospels. It is necessary to mention also exegesis of the other Greek term *stergein* for practicing love between children and parents. M. J. Anthony et al<sup>12</sup> note that this love “means sacrifice and deliberate action for the benefit of the other.”

In the second phase, we conducted empirical research through semi-structured interviews with adults who grew up in Christian families. Through interviews with these respondents, we investigated whether in their families there were some signs of theologizing about various aspects of the New Testament's love. It might have been talks about practical love for other people – in the family predominantly, but also love for people in the church community, how to treat enemies, observance of the Decalogue in practical life, service to others, respect for the weak, proclamation of the gospel, and willingness to give up property for the sake of others. The aim of the interviews was to get the respondents' retrospective testimonies on the use of sub-elements of the theologizing method in their childhood in their families, focused on love. Afterwards, the specific aspects of theologizing that the adults experienced in their families during their childhood were analyzed.

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. M. J. Anthony, W. S. Benson, D. Eldridge, J. Gorman, *Evangelical Dictionary of Christian Education*. Grand Rapids 2001, p. 438.

We tried to explore how the concept of love was taught, applied, commented on and reflected in the Christian families as well as in the wider community of Christians in terms of the New Covenant, and also what situations led to deeper theologizing about various manifestations of love in families.

**The first phase: Research of New Testament texts on love**

*From a historical point of view, we could see the fulfillment of the Torah by Jesus in the given situation, when He fulfills the law in loving God and neighbor.*<sup>13</sup> But this happens under dramatic circumstances when Judas (John's Gospel 13:31) becomes the representative of the Jews' incorrect expectations of the Messiah, and Jesus fulfills the Torah in proving love for the "evil generation" by giving his own life for them. This contrast is emphasized by John when he puts the call for mutual love in the immediate context of Jesus's death – in tensions with Judas' actions and in the context of the Last Supper.

In the Gospel of John 13:34–35, Jesus commands His followers to love one another. He himself sets an example of this love for them. This mutual love is to be the basic distinguishing feature of the disciples of Jesus Christ. In this Gospel 15:12,17, Jesus repeats this command, and in verse 13 he expresses that the greatest manifestation of love for one's neighbors is to sacrifice oneself for them, indicating his sacrificial death.

In other writings of the New Testament we find acceptance and development of *agapé* in relation to the community of believers. Jesus's commandment recorded in John 13: 34–35 is also repeated in John's epistles (1 John 3:23; 2 John 5), this time already addressed directly to the church. The Apostle Paul emphasizes, in the Letter to the Ephesians, that we should be true in love and thus grow into Christ, who is the head of the church (Ephesians 4:15–16)<sup>14</sup>. On the basis of love, he, along with Peter, calls forgiveness among the brothers and sisters in the church (Ephesians 4:32; 1 Peter 4: 8).

In the Epistle to the Thessalonians he also mentions *agapé* as the essence of the Christian community, complemented by the fact that God himself leads to it (1 Thessalonians 4: 9). Love is also offered as the basic way of life by which a disciple of Christ can improve in the following of

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. J. Calvin, *Commentary on John*, Vol. 2, Jn 13,34.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. R. Schnacenburg, *The Epistle to the Ephesians*, Edinburgh 1991, p. 188.

Christ (Colossians 3:14; 1 John 4:11), and which includes a very important willingness to give up the benefits of life for the benefit of brothers and sisters in Christ (1 Corinthians 13: 1–8, 1 John 3: 14–16). Paul's other important words of encouragement are found in Ephesians 5:25, where Christ's death for the Church is explained directly as a manifestation of love (this example is to be followed by husbands loving their wives). Members of the church community are also encouraged to this mutual love (by mutually giving attention ... Hebrews 10:24). Thus, the authenticity of mutual love of Christians is one of its essential characteristics (Romans 12: 9–10). Its direct consequence is humility, which gives space to mutual respect.<sup>15</sup> This connotation is expressed also in a negative way (1 John 2:11). In 1 Peter 1:22 there is a clear call for love, which is manifested in the community of believers. Interestingly, this challenge is justified by "accepting the truth and purifying the soul".

The Christian family is supposed to form loving relationships that manifest themselves in the gentle attitude of the spouses, submission and obedience, in mutual respect (Colossians 3: 18–21). Paul, Peter and John write these things as basic instructions for relatively young church communities. Directing to love for brothers and sisters in Christ is a guideline for potential mutual conflict situations, for dealing with the remnants of syncretism (meaning "what is essential") or Jewish faith, as well as instructions for the relationships in the believer's family and for directing spiritual growth of all its members.

Thus, within the historical context of these writings, we find a specific implementation of *agapé*. Within the ecclesial community, this love is a complete foundation for a relationship with brothers and sisters in Christ.<sup>16</sup>

With such an attitude, Christ is revealed to us when he literally dies for his friends (Gospel of John 15:13, 15). By maintaining this attitude in the willingness to suffer and receive imperfection, we grow into the image of Christ. This attitude continued to allow forgiveness within the church, to cope with conflicts. It was the fundamental effort of any Christian community that was present not only in overcoming problems, but, at the

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. J. Calvin, *Commentary on Romans*, Rom 12:10.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. P. R. Martin, P. H. Davids, *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and its Developments*, Downers Grove 1997, p. 697.

same time, thanks to this effort the Christian community grew to perfection in Christ.<sup>17</sup>

The command to love God and one's neighbor should be reflected in the Christian family via the fact that:

- a) The Christian family is consciously part of the imperfect community of Christians – people chosen and sanctified by God himself, who are able to bear the weaknesses of others with sincere love;
- b) At the same time, everybody is safe to reveal his/her own weaknesses and struggles, and
- c) it is, also, such a community where forgiveness is part of a real conflict resolution. This struggle for love in Scripture, and hence in the Christian family, is not seen as a loss of time and power, but as a conscious fulfillment of the most important ambition – ingrowing into Christ's image.

**The second phase: Families theologizing with children, teaching them to love**

Time for family conversations, meditations and common family worship creates a wide scope of natural opportunities for moments of theologizing with children about love. Under the gracious influence of the Holy Spirit, they allow the use of methods such as Godly Play, various tools of philosophizing, and guided conversation that facilitate children to come to the theological conclusions using their own constructive thinking. Gangel<sup>18</sup> uses historical examples from the Puritans families as a positive example how to conduct family devotions. The parents used to emphasize that family devotions were not a means of “memorizing but understanding.” Family worship has the potential to have a significant impact on the spiritual development and children practicing love. Family worship can be an essential source of love for the Church. Family quiet time with God can have a significant impact on how family members perceive the sensitiveness of loving relationships towards Christians and other people. In a Christian family, the context of teaching to love is created by situations of reading Scriptures, singing hymns, common prayers, or other manifestations of spirituality that can

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. D. Jackman, *The Message of John's letters*, Downers Grove 1988, p. 101.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. K. Gangel et al, *The Christian Education's Handbook on Spiritual Formation*, Michigan 1998, p. 54.



build on everyday events in the family.<sup>19</sup> Jones in “The Faith of our Children” also points out that to be protect the child against religious prejudices is the precondition for nurturing the child’s positive relationship with the Church.<sup>20</sup> Throughout his study, the importance of the family in the religious, moral and spiritual formation of children is emphasized.<sup>21</sup>

In our research, we were interested in positive examples of family worship, during which children were able to think and theologize about the church. We asked our respondents whether, in their childhood, there was room for discussion with their parents about the Bible, whether their parents asked them questions that prompted their thinking and led them to make their own theological conclusions. We were also interested in how they influenced their understanding of the church and whether they led the children to perceive their family as a part of the wider church community.

According to some studies, the love of the child towards other family members, Christians and the church as a whole is first prompted when the child experienced acceptance and love from a particular person from the Christian community. Then the child is open to reflect it. This experience is gradually transformed into love for the church, which he/she regularly visits as part of his/her family practice or tradition. From the point of view of religious development of the youngest children, the family environment has the adequate tools to theologize about the concept of church through experiencing, observing, accepting and reflexing love as it is spread towards them by concrete members of the church (e.g. by Sunday school teachers). Thus, we examined whether the respondents had a love for a particular member of a church to which the family belonged, and whether the family was able to lead the child to interpret that relationship with the individual as a relationship of love for the church.

It is interesting to see how parents from various Christian denominations confronted their children with the fact that there are different denominations, and how they helped them cope with it. In particular, it is interesting to find out whether they have justified this division with the sinfulness of people, whether they have acknowledged the imperfection of their own denomination and whether they have built respect for others. Facing the

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<sup>19</sup> Cf. K. Gangel et al, *The Christian Education’s Handbook on Spiritual Formation*, Michigan 1998, p. 55.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. M. Jones, *The Faith of Our Children*, New York, 1929, p. 140.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. M. Jones, *The Faith of Our Children*, New York, 1929, p. 141.

complexity of interdenominational relations is very crucial for the children especially if they live in confessional mixed families, which are often present in the Slovak environment. We focused on exploring how the family develops the child's love for the neighbor within the church and to which extent this was accomplished via theologizing with children. In this context, the theologizing incentives included the following areas:

- *Questions about family worship:* Did you used to have a family worship time? What was it like? Was there room for your questions?
- *Questions about theologizing about love towards God's church:* Did it help you to influence your attitude towards the church? Did you have a person in your church fellowship by whom you felt accepted and loved (in the biblical sense of love)? Did you also love that person? Did your parents help you perceive this relationship in its broader context as the love of the church to you and your love for your church? Did your parents talk to you about the existence of different denominations? Did they lead you to acceptance and respect towards them?
- *Questions about prayer as the expression of love to God and people:* Did you pray with your parents? Did you have a mutual family prayer time? Did you talk/theologize with parents about prayer topics, about what to pray for - in daily life or emergent situations? Did you connect answer to prayers with the perception of love?

#### **Some of the findings**

Common family worship time was present in families of 55% respondents; elements of theologizing during family worship were found in 40% families. Only 3 out of 40 respondents said that they felt that the family time with God influenced their positive attitude towards their church.

In case of families that decided to carry out mutual family worship meetings it was a rather frequent event, although the respondents mentioned a variety of frequencies. In some cases, they were held regularly, in others only occasionally (for example, "I read my Bible while she was ironing."). Regardless of the frequency of the common family worship, several parents used elements of theologizing during this time. Therefore, it is possible to denote family worship time as one of the situations allowing theologizing with children. Although later on they were perceived as a positive influence, in their childhood the respondents did not "like" them, which is

contradictory to a joyful, creative chance of theologizing with children. So it is necessary to lead parents to find adequate forms of worship for children.

Up to 60% of the respondents felt the Christ-like love and acceptance of a particular person in the church, which they responded to. Parents helped to interpret this relationship as a relationship adequate to the church fellowship to 27% respondents.

The most natural personal relationships of the children towards their church community were developed via time spent in their peer group. Part of the respondents also had positive memories of older church members and church leaders who paid attention to the children. An expanding experience in this regard was, for example, when parents and children went to visit or even help elderly people from the church. Another way of developing love towards church members were various informal meetings of the people in the community or cooperating in some ministry projects with these people. In some cases, such an experience stirred up a situation leading to theological conversations with children, especially when the parents desired to build up a consciousness of love by and for their church based on loving relationships.

Although all of our respondents had experience within their family with the existence of different denominations, the development of positive, inclusive experiences of children with other denominations was rather a rare phenomenon. The actively positive attitude of parents to other denominations was seen in about 40% of respondents' families, e.g. by way of example, when parents expressed respect for other denominations and even cooperated with them in some way. The interpretation of the existence of different denominations via the theological dialogue occurred only exceptionally.

For the children the most influential incentive to the relationship to people inside their church and towards other churches was observing their parents' comments and watching their ecclesiological conversations. In particular, the content of these talks was the understanding of the Gospel, the definition of denominational differences, a better understanding of one's own beliefs in confrontation with the differences, a conversation about the experience of common worship or about some misconduct and various failures in the church community. Several critical comments on the ecclesiological differences were presented too.

*Elements of theology during family worship.* We have noted above that home worship has the potential for theologizing with children and we have researched that some children did not like them because of disproportionate forms. In some cases, it has been possible to develop elements of theology – a space for children’s questions and their explanation, discussion associated with discussions, interviews and follow-up prayers.

Prayer plays a very important role in family worship. It is also a very specific topic in connection with theologizing with children. Prayer is the subject of catechesis, teaching and practice of the church. In the New Covenant, we find several key teachings about prayer and prayer records. For example, Paul’s prayer from Ephesians 1:15–19. Paul, in his typical way, shares his prayer for the church in Ephesus with Christians in Ephesus. He expresses his gratitude for this church (1:15) and supplications for them (1:17–18), and also shares his own hope (1:19). He thus gives space to the Ephesians to observe his faith, expressing his attitude of love for them and to God. For theologizing, it can be inferred that prayer is also a tool for sharing love and hope, communicating, and building beliefs.

From this reason, it is natural that we also present here theologizing about prayer as the communication with the loving God. The elements of theologizing about prayer were found not only in the context of prayer in families, but also in the very act of prayer. In the interviews with respondents, we identified prayer as an important part of teaching about faith in different life situations. One of them was the possibility of a parent praying with the child right after hearing the Gospel message about Jesus Christ. Prayer was offered to the child as an opportunity to identify with this message. Another impetus towards nurturing love in the family was about praying for the needs of the family, which in turn led the children to take note of these needs and to think about them, as well as to seek motivation to get involved. An important impetus is given by prayer after reading biblical texts, as an expression of one’s own thoughts about the text. Furthermore, there was room for identification with God’s promises of prayer. Great importance was in situations of emergency (disease, theft), where prayer was primarily a possibility of turning to God, but it served as a tool for sharing hope in the family. It was generally important for children to observe their parents in prayer, through which they also got to know the parents’ motivation (in

prayer for the needy), their fear of God. Overall, these incentives occurred in over 50% respondents' answers.

H. Vierling<sup>22</sup> has published an inspirational study where she puts prayers into connection with theologizing. First, she describes how prayer shapes the relationship of children to God and neighbor:

- Child's prayers allow the first expectations of God and convey the experience that God is listening to them.
- Children's prayer books build community with others. They convey the experience that other people, children and adults, have similar wishes, fears, or difficulties as ourselves.
- The common prayer changes relationship with parents. In the common prayer the needs of parents and children are met. Thus, prayer is necessary and indispensable. Because parents are aware of the limitations of their boundless love when they are tired and fail, they ask God to love their children. Children want to be loved by God so that they can tell him everything. Together under the same conditions, they pray to God.
- Children also get to know themselves through prayer.

Then Vierling mentions several possibilities of theologizing with children in relation to prayer. Based on our experience, we have added some more ways of using her suggestions.

- Prayer books for children.
- A prayer cube – a tool that can be created with the help of children. On the sides it can have inscriptions (food, sleep, celebration and others) or drawn symbols (sun, candle, people and others). These words or symbols may serve as prayer topics, inspiring children to theologize about prayer as the expression of love towards God and people, and to pray.
- A prayer workbook – parents can create a prayer book with their children (children who cannot write can draw what they pray for). This creative activity may help the family to reflect on their previous prayers and their results; and to consider prayer to be not only a kind of spiritual discipline, but as a privilege and expression of human love towards God, and in case of intercessory prayers as the expression of

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<sup>22</sup> Cf. H. Vierling-Ihrig, *Beten lernen mit Kleinst- und Kindergartenkindern durch Begegnen und Erleben, Gewöhnen und Einüben*, Stuttgart 2008, p. 139.

love and care towards humans. In case of frustrations from the past events, theologizing about prayers from the perspective of love might help children to perceive God's actions with love.

- A sung prayer – creating own lyrics for a melody or a whole song that is a prayer. It makes it easier to remember the words by the child. Before this creative activity, it would be appropriate to tune the children to the spiritual perception of God's love – either to read children a Bible story about God's love or to theologize about something (e.g. that God gives us forgiveness, nature, food – depending on the age of the children).
- Colored stones set in a row – each symbolizes a particular prayer item (either parts of the Lord's prayer, or different praying dimensions – asking, thanking, praising God). Again, in this way children may get an insight into prayer as a positive activity, reflecting their love towards God and others.
- A prayer calendar – in which parents and children can note when to pray for somebody whom they love (similar principle to the prayer book, but simpler).

From the point of theologizing associated with prayer, we can see that caring mutual preparation of family prayer time might be the right key to bringing together prayer and theologizing that leads to love for God and neighbor. We consider prayer calendars / workbooks in conjunction with the common preparation of prayer subjects to be a very practical tool of theologizing about prayer, feasible within the family environment. It enables us to perceive the individual needs and events in the family surroundings and interpret them in relation to God.

It also teaches the children to formulate their loving relationship directly towards God. It is also important that when praying together not only parents can pray for their children but also children have space to pray for their parents and for each other on the basis of the prayers given in the Scriptures (the Apostle Paul's prayers e.g. in Ephesians 1 and others). These suggestions do not directly relate to exceptional emergent situations in which common prayer is particularly important. However, this recommendation of building a positive relation to prayers through theologizing about them is a good preparation for the difficult situations, as it enriches family relationships with the possibility of sharing their feelings and needs in mutual prayers.

The interviews with most of the respondents showed that they received basic information on God and Christian faith through the family Bible story reading times. In this way, 33% of respondents found out about Jesus' love and his sacrifice on the cross; 25% of them learnt about God's commandments and were motivated to obey God via Bible story reading. Up to 22% respondents said that reading the Scriptures strongly shaped their attitude towards Christian authorities. Furthermore, biblical knowledge helped respondents to reflect their parents' behavior: 47% of them compared their parents' behavior with biblical instructions. This has not only led to confrontation, but also to positive outcomes such as the common search for God's will. In approximately 45% of cases Children's Bibles and Christian books had an impact on the distinction between good and evil and the decision-making of the children. Playing various games using Bible stories and verses with children had a similar effect. Also, the biblical teaching within the church was an incentive for theological talks in families. From all this, we can see the strength and extent of the impact of working with the biblical text on the child's love for God and neighbor.

In most cases, reading Biblical stories was followed by the possibility to ask questions, and children were encouraged to reflect on the reading. It is the possibility of reflection and questioning that creates an environment with elements of theologizing. Targeted mutual interpretation of texts is important in this respect too.

For theologizing about love, it is interesting to note, for example, the narrative way in which Jesus taught people about love for their neighbor. The parable of the good Samaritan (Gospel of Luke 10: 25–37) is a response to the theological discourse on the essence of the law. Jesus responds to the question "Who is my neighbor?" via the parable of the merciful Samaritan. After his conclusion, he asks, "Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" The respondents identified similar use of the reading of the Scriptures in their families. Natural family situations have raised questions that could be answered by reading from the Bible. The final interpretation could remain the role of the child, who can create a theological solution based on the situation and the biblical text heard. Such an approach carries a few signs of theologizing – at least the follow-up to questions and creating a space for the child to form their own conclusions.

As part of the interviews with respondents, it emerged that situations suitable for conducting interviews with the theologizing elements may emerge during the standard reading of biblical texts in the context of home worship time, and in relation to the text heard while participating in the church service. In this case, various methods can be used, but in particular “What was before” or “presentation strategy” that will allow for more interactive work with the biblical text and will lead to a more comprehensive understanding and identification with the message.

The Biblical text was also used in families in the event of occurrence of various unexpected situations. In such cases, the text assisted the child to understand the motives of his/her parents (Do they love me?). Based on the Bible text the child was able to perceive the actions of his/her parents (e.g. the role of punishment in upbringing). Alternatively, the text was used for the formation of mutual loving relationships within the family or even a proper relationship with the authorities. Methodological approaches such as “Think how the story continued” and “structured narration” are particularly useful for this purpose because they allow the interpretation of particular family situations through the biblical text. As an example, we can mention the Gospel of Matthew 25: 31-46, a text suitable for a family discussion about needy people, or the Gospel of Luke 8: 40-56 - a text that allows hope to be deepened at the time of loss.

## 5. Conclusion

Based on our observations and research results, we can say that theologizing with children is present in Christian families, although most of the times subconsciously. In our contribution, we showed several signs of evidence of its importance for building a loving relationship between children and God and other people.

That is why we wholeheartedly recommend using the existing family situations for “theologizing” about various topics with the children, respecting and exploiting the natural possibilities that parents have. Theologizing about love in families may have a particularly strong influence on real relationships in families as well as against the outside world – relationships



with the church/churches, teaching and other authorities, foreigners and others.

Of course, although family situations and family time is the first, and so the most fertile, environment for teaching love via theologizing with children, especially very young children, we do not underestimate the importance of theologizing with children in other contexts, e.g. in school religious education, or in church catechesis.

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