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Original paper

UNDERSTANDING FAITH AND THE IMAGE OF GOD AMONG A YOUNG BELIEVERS TODAY PRESENTATION OF THE SURVEY RESULTS ON THE ATTITUDES AND OPINIONS OF YOUNG PEOPLE ABOUT UNDERSTANDING FAITH AND THE IMAGE OF GOD IN CROATIA

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Abstract

Young people are often the object of reflection of the *adults*. They are often subject to their analysis, reflection, and teaching. We believe that any constructive criticism aimed at teaching young people based on analysis and reflection should necessarily be preceded by what Pope Francis calls us to in his pontificate – listening. Thus, this article went in the same direction – to listen and observe the voice and the word of young people, all with the aim of serving them in a correct and holistic way, i.e., so that their faith, as St. Paul says in the Epistle to the Ephesians, may grow to the knowledge of the Son of God, and that they grow to the measure of the full stature of Christ (cf. Eph 4: 13–14). Through these words, the Church seeks her way to meet young people and serve the Good News as the main task entrusted to her by the Risen Christ. The article presents a part of the survey results, using the Google Forms platform, conducted on a self – selected sample of students and working youth (aged 18–35) in Croatia. The research was conducted on a sample of 727 members of the reference population, and it is a convenience type of non-probabilistic sampling. The aim was to observe, based on the research results, which attitudes and faith emerge from the image of God that young people have.

Keywords: faith, image of God, youth, sacramental life, Croatia

Introduction

The act of faith arises from the very creation of man because he was created in the image of God. He was inscribed with an inseparable connection with his Creator. Faith arises from the very relatedness of creation to the Creator, therefore even when a man does not acknowledge his Creator, he believes. Indeed, he believes in some earthly things, because without faith, that is, trust, life would be unthinkable. The act of faith does not represent the capitulation of reason but illuminates and raises the power in an undeserved and unimagined way.¹ The gift of knowledge helps the believer to avoid the vicious circle of subjectivity that introduces disorder into human notions pertaining to truths about the living God. Pope Francis also wrote strongly about this in his encyclical *Lumen Fidei*, pointing out the autonomy of reason, or reason emancipated from the gift of faith, with reference to the view of the future.² What remains crucial with respect to faith understood as light is the ability to see, recognize and value the reality that surrounds us and that forms an integral part of human life. This gift offers us a solution because it brings together different truths reached by faith into one single vision of God's action in the world. The primary attitude of the believer's mind toward the Word of God should be an attitude of humility, gratitude, and active openness.³ Hence we can reflect on the thoughts from the book of Wisdom, »For all people who were ignorant of God were foolish by nature; and they were unable from the good things that are seen to know the one who exists, nor did they recognize the artisan while paying heed to his works; but they supposed that either fire or wind or swift air, or the circle of the stars, or turbulent water, or the luminaries of heaven were the gods that rule the world. If through delight in the beauty of these things people assumed them to be gods, let them know how much better than these is their Lord, for the author of beauty created them. And if people were amazed at their power and working, let them perceive from them how much more powerful is the one who formed them. For from the greatness and beauty of created things comes a corresponding perception of their Creator.« (Wisdom 13: 1–5). »Everything that a man has in life in the realm of cognition, everything that he calls his mental property, he has acquired through knowledge or belief.«⁴ In the Christian sense, faith can be lived in different ways. One

¹ Cf. Bernhard HÄRING, *Kristov Zakon*, II, Zagreb, 1980, 40.

² Cf. Papa FRANJO, *Lumen fidei – Svjetlo vjere*, Zagreb, 2013, no. 3.

³ Cf. Bernhard HÄRING, *Kristov Zakon*, II, 40.

⁴ Andrija ŽIVKOVIĆ, *Kršćanske kreposti*, II, Zagreb, 1942, 78.

who believes holds true what God has revealed, thus faith turns to reason that seeks truth. However, faith is not the effect of persuasion based on rational evidence, but it is grace that illuminates and encourages it. The image of God we have adopted during our lives plays an important role on the disposition of faith. It can sometimes remain at the level of a child, and we can presume that it developed and matured during the lifetime, just as a man grows and matures as a person. Maturing in faith requires gradualness in a person.

The main goal of the research was to examine the attitudes and opinions of young people with respect to faith and the image of God in the Republic of Croatia.⁵ Based on the main goal and sub-goals of the research, the following hypotheses have been formulated:

H1: Women are more likely to attend religious services and receive the sacraments, while men are less likely to attend religious services and receive the sacraments.

The first hypothesis is potentially explainable by the traditional, popular attitudes that men have more serious and important work than attending the Eucharist and participating in the rosary or devotions, while women have always been able to find the time for church and worship, despite their child care and housekeeping duties.

H2: The image of God that young people have today was influenced the most by their parents and to a lesser extent other actors.

The second hypothesis is potentially explainable by the traditional value system of our society, which is still a family-based community, where family is an incubator in which religious feelings and religious affiliation develop.

H3: Young people in the Republic of Croatia see God to a greater extent as a merciful saviour and a righteous judge, and to a lesser extent as one who punishes sinners.

⁵ The main goal produced the following sub-goals: determining the frequency of attendance of religious services and receiving the sacraments of Confession and Eucharist, determining the concept of faith, determining the dominant image of God, determining the influence of certain scandalous and immoral behaviours of some Church officials on faith in God and the image of God. Given the limited scope of work, here we present the research results related to observing the sacraments and the image of God among young people. The results were presented at the international scientific conference »What kind of God do or do not people believe in today«, at the Catholic Faculty of Theology in Đakovo, Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek, on 15 October 2021.

We have selected the young population as a sample to obtain empirical data that provide us with an objective insight into the social situation with respect to faith and the image of God. Young people are a mirror of our future and the foundation of its building. In this article, we shall present the results of research we have conducted among young people to determine what kind of image of God they have adopted and what kind of faith emerges from that image. Before presenting the results, we shall outline the research methodology in order to clarify the content. We have divided the article into three parts. In the first chapter we shall present the research methodology and in the second chapter the research data on the image of God among young people and the faith that emerges from that image. In the third chapter, based on the presented research data, we shall carry out an analysis in light of the biblical-theological meaning of faith.

1. Research methodology

Empirical data analysed in this article were collected during May 2021.⁶ Data collection was carried out by the method of a written survey in the electronic form, using CASI survey technique (CASI – Computer-Assisted Self-interviewing), i.e., a technique where respondents take a written personal survey with the help of computers, using Google Forms platform.⁷ The invitation to participate in the research and the link to the survey questionnaire were

⁶ Data were collected in the period from 10 – 18 May 2021.

⁷ Google Forms platform is an integral part of Google Drive which allows users to create and post online surveys, questionnaires, or quizzes for free. The application of such survey procedures through online platforms has certain advantages (such as a quick and financially cost-effective way of collecting data, eliminating the influence of interviewers on respondents' answers, and automatic assurance of the logical quality of collected data, since online platforms/programs for surveys automatically follow the logic of set jumps and filters in the survey questionnaire) and certain disadvantages. On the one hand, such data collection procedures narrow the scope of potential respondents, the obtained sample includes only Internet users (members of the »online« population) and reduces the ability to control the procedure and the course of the survey, that is, it is impossible to control whether respondents understood survey questions, it is impossible to intervene in order to minimize the number of missing answers, meaning that trained interviewers cannot use neutral techniques to encourage respondents to answer the question without impacting the answer, and it is impossible to determine whether respondents were distracted during the survey and whether there were potential unusual difficulties or events during the completion of the survey questionnaire that could have affected the data collection process.

posted on the websites of certain institutions⁸ and were shared through social networks, such as Facebook and Instagram. Upon respondents' consent to participate in the research, they⁹ were briefly introduced to the topic of the survey and explained the purpose of the research, they were guaranteed anonymity of data and confidentiality of their responses, after which respondents filled out the questionnaire. Participation in the research was voluntary and the respondents were able to terminate their participation at any time without explanation, while the research results are anonymous and confidential, that is, the collected data were used exclusively for the purpose of this article and were not made available to other individuals or institutions. The answers of the respondents were analysed collectively, i.e., at the level of the total sample, using an anonymized database, where the obtained research results cannot be linked to the identity of the respondents. As regards the described methodological framework of the research and the data processing method, this is a quantitative empirical survey research. The target population to which the obtained research results are generalized includes students and working youth, that is, persons between the ages of 18 and 35, with residence or domicile in the Republic of Croatia. The research was conducted on a sample of 727 members of the reference population. It involved non-probability sampling using a convenience sampling method.

For the purpose of collecting relevant data, and in accordance with the set research objectives and postulated hypotheses, a survey questionnaire was designed and created. The constructed survey questionnaire consisted of 18 questions/statements and included a total of 25 variables. In terms of the structure of the survey questions, there were 17 closed-ended questions and one open-ended question. Among the closed-ended questions, 15 questions (objects of measurement) were measured by simple indicators (single-item measuring instruments) and two questions (objects of measurement) were measured by multi-item measuring instruments. All closed-ended questions were in the form of a unique response, where the respondents were able to choose only one of the offered responses from a different number of offered responses. Closed-ended questions and statements included nominal scales

⁸ The invitation to participate in the research and the link to the questionnaire were posted on Facebook pages of some university Student Councils in Croatia, Facebook pages of youth communities such as *Hrvatsko nadzemlje* – Youth Pastoral – Split, SKAC (Student Catholic Centre) Osijek and SKAC Zagreb.

⁹ The terms »respondent« and »research participant« are used in a generic sense, and as such do not imply gender discrimination, but refer equally to men and women.

of responses with different categories or ordinal rating scales with varying degrees. In three questions, the possible responses included the option »something else/other/someone else«, to allow for stating unanticipated responses. With respect to the content, that is, the subject of measurement of survey questions, the survey questionnaire included the following general thematic units (subjects of measurement):

- a) socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents, which included the gender structure of the respondents, age structure of the respondents, regional affiliation of the respondents, religious affiliation of the respondents, work status of the respondents, study experience, and, in the case of study experience, study area;
- b) the level of attendance of religious services and receiving the sacraments, as well as Confession and the Eucharist, of young people in the Republic of Croatia included in the sample;
- c) the conceptualization of faith by young people in the Republic of Croatia included in the sample, measured by the degree of agreement with the six different conceptions of faith offered, and opinions on unbelief, religious doubt, and heresy;
- d) the dominant image of God among young people in the Republic of Croatia included in the sample, measured with seven indicators: the degree of agreement with three different conceptions of God offered, their own depiction of God, the identification of the actor who influenced their current image of God the most, the influence of Church on the image of God (measured with two indicators: the conditioning of the image of God by the Church and the belief in God as presented by the Church), the influence of prayer meetings for young people as non-traditional forms of religious life on the image of God as a close friend, and the opinion whether there is a difference between God of men and women.

The collected data were processed and analysed using the software Statistical Package for the Social Sciences, SPSS 21.¹⁰ There are 27.5% (n = 200) of men and 72.5% (n = 527) of women from the following Croatian regions who participated in the research: Zagreb (34%, n = 250), Dalmatia (32%, n = 231), Slavonia (16%, n = 114), Northern region (9%, n = 62), Lika, Pokuplje and

¹⁰ The free trial version of the package was downloaded from the manufacturer's website <https://www.ibm.com/analytics/spss-trials> for 21 days of use.

Banovina (5%, n = 38), Istria and the Croatian Littoral (4%, n = 32). According to the age structure of the respondents, one fourth are members of the youngest age group from 18 to 21 (24%; n = 179), the largest share of respondents, more than a third (36%; n = 259) are between the ages of 22 and 25, 28% of respondents (n = 200) are aged between 26 and 30, while the smallest share of participants included in the sample (12%; n = 89) are over the age of 30 (31 to 35 years). It is important to point out that in terms of religious affiliation 98% of them declared themselves Catholics (n = 710), therefore, we can determine this a research on faith and the image of God among young believers. In terms of employment, 44% of respondents (n = 320) were employed at the time of the survey, while 56% (n = 407) were out of employment at the time of the survey. With reference to study experience, the vast majority of respondents, 92% (n = 666) graduated from certain faculties or were attending them at the time of the survey, while according to the field of study, most respondents, almost a third (32%, n = 231) have graduated or were attending some type of study in the humanities.

2. Faith and sacramental life

In this chapter, we shall present the results obtained in the research with respect to attendance of religious ceremonies and the practice of sacramental life among young people, which is also reflected on their faith in God. The full fruit of the sacrament of faith can only be received with an open attitude of reason, will, and heart. Through the sacrament of baptism, we receive from the Church not only the confession of faith but also the word of consecration and salvation which applies personally to each individual. In accordance with the sacramental life, faith is that which calls us from God to holiness, and in the celebration of each sacrament, it must be constantly deepened and revived. »Without faith it is impossible to please God« (Heb 11: 6), but the salvific faith is never without an inner relationship with the 'sacrament of faith'.¹¹ Authentic faith, especially a deeper understanding of faith, is possible only if faith is accompanied by a life of faith.

¹¹ Cf. Bernhard HÄRING, *Kristov Zakon*, II, 47–48.

2.1. Frequency of attendance of religious services and receiving the sacraments of Confession and the Eucharist

How often do you attend religious ceremonies and receive the sacraments of Confession and Eucharist?

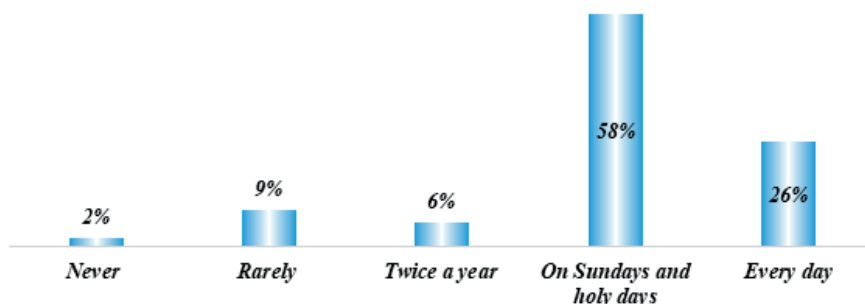


Chart 1. *Frequency of attendance of religious services and receiving the sacraments of Confession and the Eucharist.*

On the question of attendance religious services and receiving the sacraments, we have received high percentages. This should not surprise us since over 90% of survey participants were young Christians. We therefore assert that even today, we can more or less speak about practical Christian believers who mostly attend religious services on Sundays and holy days and receive the sacraments. The percentage of 26% of those young believers who attend these services daily is also not negligible. Given the above percentages, we can conclude that there is 84% of young people who actively participate in the sacramental life and religious services.

At a higher level of generality, by grouping respondents into two groups, those who daily attend religious services or receive the sacraments of Confession and the Eucharist, and those who do it less often, we have found that according to the frequency of attending religious services and receiving the sacraments of Confession and Eucharist there are statistically significant differences between men and women, with a higher proportion of men among those who attend religious services and receive the sacraments of Confession and the Eucharist on a daily basis, and a higher proportion of women among those who do it less frequently. It is also interesting to observe, while it cannot all be shown in the variable and it relates to scientific fields, that among the students of humanities or technical and biotechnical sciences there is a higher proportion of men

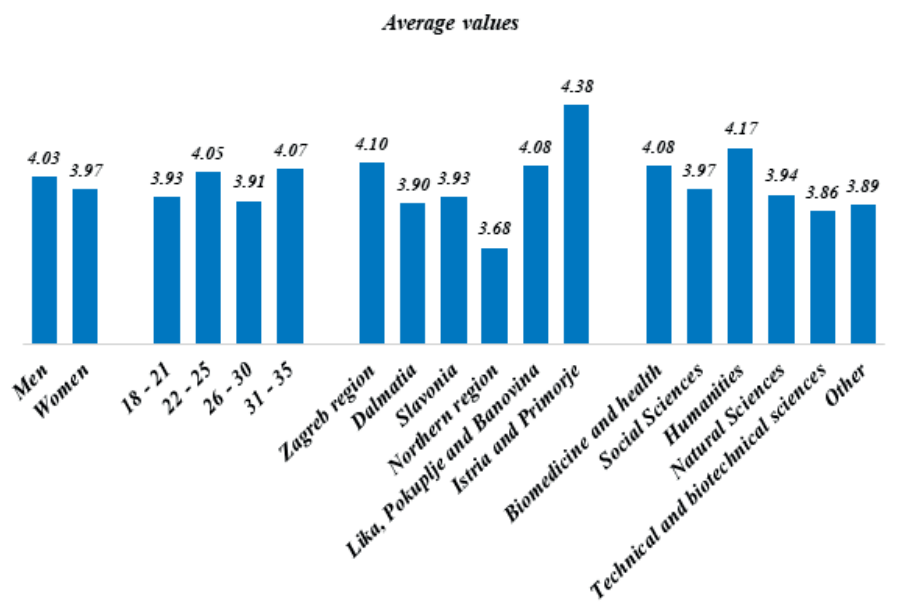


Chart 2. Average value of attendance of religious services by gender.

detected, while among students of biomedicine and health, and social sciences there is a higher proportion of women. This fact certainly surprises us, given that the real picture of our society suggests the opposite, that is, that women are present at religious services more than men. However, we should emphasize once again that this is non-probabilistic sampling, with a convenience type of sampling. We need to take this into account when analysing the data. However, it still provides an insight into the presence of young people at religious services and participation in the sacramental life of the Church. Nevertheless, given the above data, the first hypothesis that women are more likely to attend religious services and receive the sacraments, while men are less likely to attend religious services and receive the sacraments, cannot be accepted.

2.2. The image of God in young believers

Faith is an act that is accomplished in freedom and, accordingly, one must know what one does when one believes. The light of faith has a unique characteristic. It is capable of illuminating the whole of human life. For a light to be powerful, it must come from God. Faith, which we receive from God as a supernatural gift, appears as a light on the way, a light representing a signpost

on our journey of life. Faith does not dwell in darkness; it is a light that illuminates our darkness.¹² Each individual, given the illumination of faith, has a personal image of God. In accordance with this, we have explored what young people most often say when they talk about the image of God.

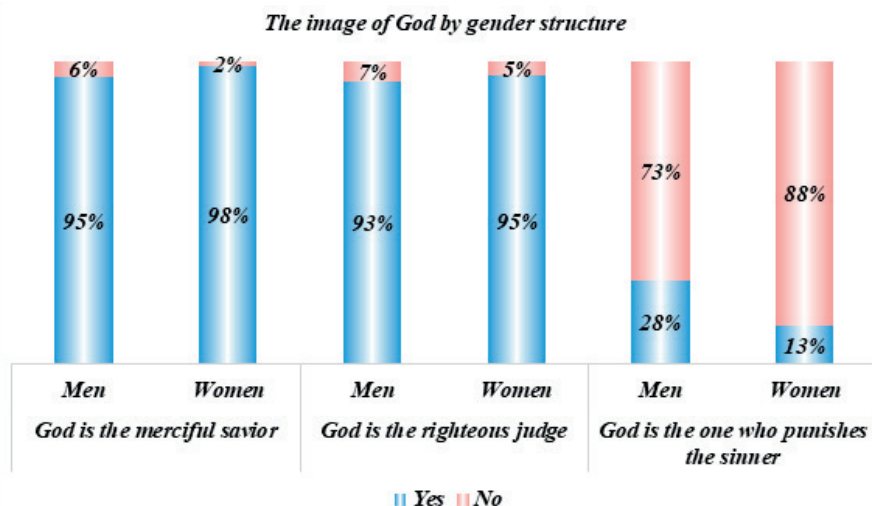


Chart 3. *The image of God by gender structure.*

According to the gender structure, we can infer that a slightly smaller percentage of men than women perceive God as a merciful saviour. Women also more often perceive God as a righteous judge. Nonetheless, with regard to God as the one who punishes the sinner, we see a high percentage of both men and women who do not see him as the one who punishes the sinner. In percentages, the results break down in the following manner: almost all respondents believe that God is a merciful saviour (97%; n = 706) and a righteous judge (94%; n = 686), while only 17% of respondents (n = 121) believe that God is the one who punishes the sinner. Based on the obtained percentages, the third hypothesis that young people in the Republic of Croatia see God to a greater extent as a merciful saviour and just judge, and to a lesser extent as the one who punishes the sinner, can be accepted.

As expected, those who are more supportive of the image of God as a merciful saviour are also more supportive of the image of God as a righteous judge. However, despite everything, we put forward the following question:

¹² Cf. Papa FRANJO, *Lumen fidei – Sojetlo vjere*, (hereinafter: LF), no. 4, Zagreb, 2014.

what kind of understanding do our young people have about God’s mercy and justice, given that only 17% of them perceive God as the one who punishes the sinner? Following this, we can also post the question: how do they view sin? Is not sin a transgression against God, that is, an evil act that separates us from God and the neighbour, and will not God in his mercy and justice judge our weaknesses, flaws, and sins? These are all questions that arise from the research data, which would merit future exploration.

Table 1. *Description of God according to the personal perception of young people.*

Description of God according to the personal perception of young people	f	%
Love	232	31.9
Mercy	179	24.6
Father	106	14.6
Support/security/reliance/refuge	91	12.5
Goodness/gentleness	61	8.4
Greatness/strength	54	7.4
Justice	52	7.2
Light	48	6.6
Man	46	6.3
Friend	43	5.9
Saviour who loves all	38	5.2
Almighty	30	4.1
Everything/omnipresence	29	4.0
Creator	27	3.7
Tenderness/care/warmth	25	3.4
Forgiveness/absolution	19	2.6
Joy/happiness/positiveness/all good	18	2.5
Caring shepherd	18	2.5
Peace	18	2.5
Wisdom	13	1.8
Righteous judge/ruler/king	12	1.7
Trinity	12	1.7
Truth/way/life	11	1.5
Patience	10	1.4
Description of God according to the personal perception of young people	f	%
Nature	9	1.2

Description of God according to the personal perception of young people	f	%
Understanding	9	1.2
Indescribable	8	1.1
Hope	7	1.0
Meaning	6	0.8
Perfect	5	0.7
One and only	3	0.4
Infinity	1	0.1
I don't know/no response	74	10.2

Most respondents have a positive image of God, with some having classical anthropomorphic images and some already close to theological expressions. Nevertheless, we must note that in most of these images they perceive God as the One who is close to them: friend, love, mercy, Father, support, security, reliance, refuge, goodness, gentleness, greatness, strength, justice, light, man, Saviour who loves all, Almighty, etc. The time we live in is a time dominated by image. It sends a message, transmits content, and encourages impressions. We are therefore not surprised by the fact that young people in the research clearly state who God is for them in an image. This expression is concise and fraught because it reflects emotions that penetrate deep into a person's interior. It also indicates that the influence of faith is a dynamic process.¹³

Table 2. *Actors who have had the most influence on the present image of God in respondents.*

Who has influenced your image of God the most?	f	%
Parents	318	43.7
Pastor	79	10.9
Grandparents	51	7.0
Religious education in school	46	6.3
Friends	65	8.9
Someone else	168	23.1
Total	727	100

The second hypothesis that the image of God which young people have today was mostly influenced by parents, and to a lesser extent other actors, can

¹³ Cf. Denis BARIĆ, *Slika Boga u vjeronaučnim udžbenicima*, in: *Bogoslovska smotra* 86 (2016) 3, 671–686.; Zdravka LEUTAR – Ana Marija JOSIPOVIĆ, *Neke dimenzije religioznosti mladih*, in: *Nova prisutnost* 6 (2008) 3, 373–395.

be accepted, given that the largest number of respondents, 44% (n = 318), selected parents to the question: Who has influenced your image of God the most? When analysing how this influence on the image of God among young people varied by gender, we have obtained the following results. In general, we have found that parents have influenced women to a greater extent than men, and that those whose image of God was influenced by their parents to a greater extent attend religious services, to a greater extent accept the image of God as a righteous judge, and to a greater extent agree with the concept that faith is an act of reason and will and not a product of our intelligence, but illumination, deepening and expanding of our knowledge by God's revelation, and the concept that faith in man primarily presupposes sensibility to love. We have determined that pastors have influenced men to a greater extent, and women to a lesser extent, and that those whose image of God was influenced by the pastor, to a greater extent believe that it is our duty to spread and protect endangered faith, and to a greater extent believe in God as presented by the Church. Pertaining to religious education and its influence on the image of God, we are surprised by the fact that those young people to a lesser extent attend religious services and to a lesser extent agree with the concept that faith is a theological virtue and gift, and the concept that faith is not a product of our intelligence, but illumination, deepening and expanding of our knowledge by God's revelation. We have found that young people whose image of God was influenced by their friends to a greater extent attend religious services and feel that prayer meetings contribute to the image of God as a close friend. Given the results, there is certainly scope to discuss why religious education has had such a weak influence on their image of God. However, we could argue that religious education cannot and must not be only about giving information, but that it should be a formative and educational subject, and those who teach it should first and foremost be authentic witnesses to faith in Christ. We have various papers and books written on the topic of religious education and its value in the educational system.¹⁴ However, we can notice that the situation has been changing every year because »new forms of religiosity are marked by overemphasized individualism, by putting the body at the centre and a kind of denial of the difference between God and man. The

¹⁴ We can mention the following: Blaženka Valentina MANDARIĆ – Ružica RAZUM, *Važnost odgoja u današnjem svijetu. Doprinos vjeronauka odgojnom djelovanju škole (The importance of education in the world today. The contribution of religious education to the educational work of the school)*, Zagreb, 2015, 295; cf. Valentina MANDARIĆ, *Konfesionalni vjeronauk pred izazovima dekristijanizirajuće Europe [Confessional religious education facing the challenges of a de-Christianizing Europe]* in: *Bogoslovska smotra*, 82 (2012) 4, 891–915.

crisis of religion and the new religiosity reveal that religion is no longer the only comprehensive way of interpreting reality. There has been a radical pluralization and deinstitutionalization of religion, the loss of common memory based on religious symbols, rituals and teaching that have shaped the common memory, not only in the Church but also in society.¹⁵ As we have compared the data on the actors who have influenced the faith of young people the most with the data on the conception of faith, the following graph is a presentation of this for better clarity of content.

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

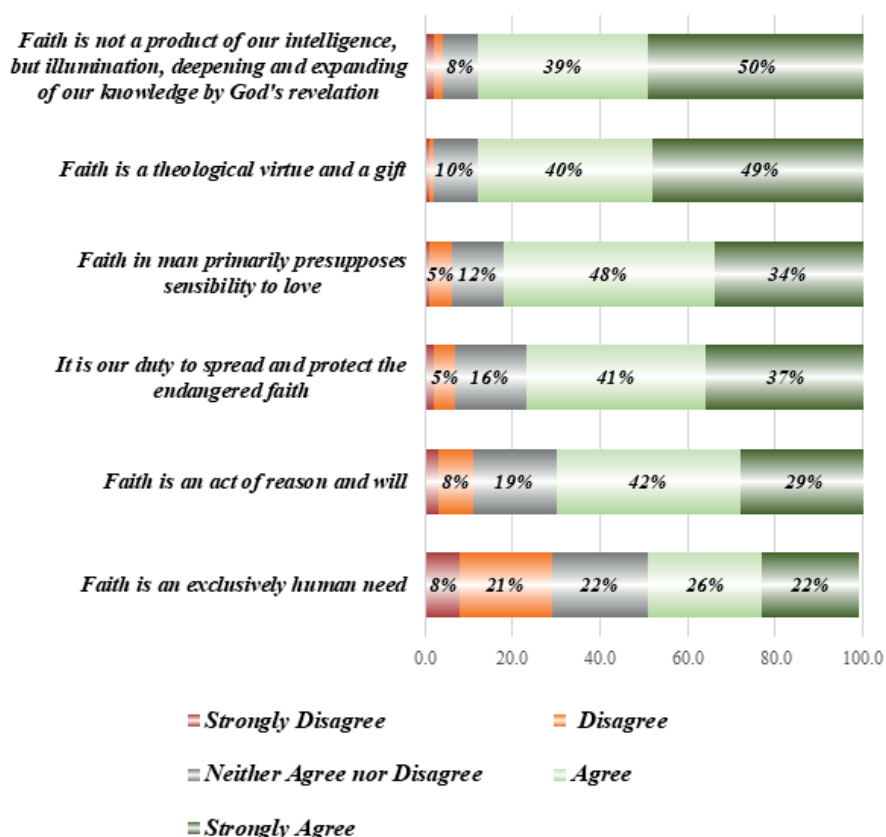


Chart 4. *Level of agreement with each individual specific concept of faith.*

¹⁵ Valentina MANDARIĆ, *Konfesionalni vjeronauk pred izazovima dekrizacijom Evrope*, 895.

3. Biblical – theological analysis of faith among young people

Based on the results of the survey conducted among young people we are faced with what we would call fundamental questions: »Who speaks about faith in God?«; »How do they speak about faith in God?«; and »What image of God do they speak about based on their faith?«

The obtained results certainly return us to the fundamentals of our faith, but also to the mission that the Church received from the Good Shepherd Jesus Christ: »Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation. The one who believes and is baptized will be saved; but the one who does not believe will be condemned. And these signs will accompany those who believe: by using my name they will cast out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up snakes in their hands, and if they drink any deadly thing, it will not hurt them; they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover« (Mark 16: 15–18). The Church has a very clear mission in the history of salvation – unity with Christ.¹⁶ The words of commission from Mark's Gospel also point to the foundation of the survey questionnaire that seeks a specific response to the question: »Which and whose faith do I believe?«. In addition, they reveal in a particular way the three key words of commission: proclamation, belief and signs. These three words are the fullness of what young people were called to reflect on and respond to. In their light, we shall attempt to offer an answer, but we shall not hesitate to suggest some additional questions that we believe arise from the expressed opinions and attitudes, which could allow us not only to critically question and reflect on the understanding of faith in God and the image of God among young people, but also provide a further understanding of faith and the attitude towards faith in general, and ultimately on the position and understanding of the Church and the holy sacraments in the formation and strengthening of faith. The latter, the Church and the sacraments, seem particularly challenging in contemplating faith in God among young people.

In one of his works, Joseph Ratzinger, while reflecting on faith, points to three stages of Christian faith and belief. Thus, he emphasizes that the Christian faith always refers to: 1) the one who knows; 2) to the faith of the community and 3) to the daily experiences of the individual.¹⁷ We immediately wish to point out that all three elements are interconnected, but that the last

¹⁶ DRUGI VATIKANSKI KONCIL, Dogmatska konstitucija »Lumen gentium« o Crkvi (21. XI. 1964), no. 1, in: *Dokumenti*, Zagreb, 1998⁵.

¹⁷ Cf. Joseph RATZINGER, *Guardare Cristo. Esercizi di fede, speranza e carità*, Milano, 2009⁵, 11.

two dimensions emerge from the first, i.e., the one who knows, and that is the Son of God. An individual who believes from the very beginning believes with the faith of the community called the Church, whose faith again grows from Jesus Christ himself who is the head of the Church. Building on the dogmatic constitution *Lumen Gentium*, we note that it is impossible to speak of the true witness of Jesus Christ without achieving unity with Him, and to achieve unity with Him we must accept His word as revealed and proclaimed by the Church.

However, considering the obtained responses and the position of the Church and the holy sacraments, one gets the impression that the Church is a world unto itself, whose faith, from time to time or from one circumstance to another, may differ from the faith of the people. Based on the obtained responses about the impact on the development and strengthening of faith, one gets the impression that the Church communication and relationship towards young people have been lost and vice versa. Therefore, we believe that the research results raise many additional questions that could be used to seek further clarification on the subject of faith and the image of God, which we consider to be inseparable realities pertaining to man and his relationship with God. Of course, so much has already been written and said about eclecticism in the area of faith, and we cannot deny and say that it does not exist among us today, which has introduced considerable confusion and religious and moral disorientation.¹⁸ Specifically, even today, particularly in relation to morals and anthropology, there is an unclear picture of God, Jesus Christ. As previously stated, a critical review of the responses provokes additional questions, which mostly relate to the substance of certain terms used to express the image of God, i.e., what meaning does one ascribe to the terms: love, mercy, goodness, forgiveness... etc. It is necessary to investigate the meaning of these terms of value for the individual, for his relationship with God and neighbour, and where these values draw their source and form. We particularly stress the latter because behind the discourse on God, there is often not the Gospel and the revealed God in Jesus Christ, but an attempt to justify sin and moral disorder, which relieves the individual of personal responsibility. In other words, is the image of God indeed a true image, revealed in Jesus Christ, or is it a caricature.

To begin with, based on the obtained research results, we see that the issue of faith and formation of an image of God is very complex. The results

¹⁸ Here we would like to draw attention to a well-known and valuable work on the subject of eclecticism. Cf. Stjepan KUŠAR, *Djelomično prihvaćanje vjere – kršćanstvo po izboru*, u: *Bogoslovska smotra* 66 (1996) 2–3, 319–345.

point to the fact that man is undeniably involved in the network of relationships on which he depends, with God, with family, and with the entire society. This complexity of relationships and their influences on the individual indicates that faith and the image of God cannot be interpreted and explored based on a single source, the one on which somehow most young people have relied in their declaration, and that is the family. Here, of course, we neither can nor want to deny the value of parents and families in religious education, which is an integral part of the Church teachings, yet we might pose perhaps a somewhat provocative question: »Is family truly the only, not to say exclusive, space and environment for the formation and articulation of faith and the image of God?« In addition, it seems crucial to ask the question of faith as a personal event and encounter with God, and thus the question of the call and personal responsibility of the individual with respect to the call to strengthen the faith and the necessary crystallization of the image of God, and not only as a shared event. This additional question is primarily supported by the fact that salvation is also a personal responsibility which is evident from the above quote from the Gospel of Mark. Namely, faith cannot be built without personal and active involvement. For, as we already know from many speeches of Pope Francis, faith is not a passive state but an active one in which the believer deepens and strengthens his faith and the image of God only through service to his brothers and sisters. In other words, the image of God develops through an encounter with Christ in the light of the Gospel and practical living of that same Gospel. The picture becomes even clearer if the individual accepts the Christ of the Gospel both in words and works. Of course, we do not exclude prayer in any way, but works are those that show all the strength and beauty of faith in God: »What good is it, my brothers, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you?« (James 2:14). Works introduce us to the depth and richness of faith in Jesus Christ. To the Epistle of James, we add the First Epistle of John, in which he speaks of the value of love in relation to faith and the knowledge of God (cf. 1 John 4: 7–21). Hence, faith and the image of God are not based on »avoiding responsibility« but on personal engagement through openness and open cooperation with God. Therefore, it would certainly be appropriate to reflect on which or whose faith young people believe today but not only those who have participated in the research. »Do I believe with the faith of my personal experience or purely with the faith of others?«, »Is my faith really a faith that feeds on the Gospel or other sources?«, »Am I approaching the holy sacraments of my own faith in God or just traditionally because others do it?« Furthermore, an insight into the results gives us data that indi-

cates the sensibility and interest of individuals in regard to faith and its role in their life – a scientific field, since we are talking about students. The results indicate that the majority of those who have responded and participated in the research and have given an opinion on their faith, its origins, interpretations, and the formation of the image of God, are students of humanities and social sciences. Does this mean that faith is more difficult to encounter and articulate in other scientific fields? Of course, it would be unfair to take a negative stance towards students in other scientific fields, but students of humanities and social sciences give the impression that the question of spirit, spirituality, sociability, communication, etc. is much closer to faith than other scientific fields.

Moreover, the data obtained provide us with somewhat confusing results with respect to the Church, i.e., results that indicate the position of the Church and the understanding of the Church in the faith and life of young people. It would be easy to develop the impression that the Church is on the margins of young people's lives, that it is not very crucial in terms of faith, at least for those who have participated in the questionnaire. Thus, we have concluded that as regards the Church's influence on the image of God, 49% of young people think that the Church conditioned their image of God, and 51% of them think that the Church did not condition their image of God. Therefore, the question arises about the Church, i.e., where and what is the Church for that 51%? Is the well-known phrase »God yes – Church no« spreading among young believers? We could search for an answer to this among the responses to the question about the image, i.e., what is their image of God? The vast majority have opted for three images or value concepts: *Love – Mercy – Father* (Table 1). These three values have been chosen by a total of 71.1% of respondents. We believe that there is also something »problematic« in this percentage, and quite at odds with the above question about the influence of the Church and its role in educating the faith and forming an image of God. In other words, the majority, 51% of them, have expressed a negative opinion on the question of the Church's influence, i.e., that the Church had no influence, yet, in the second question, the question of the personal image of God, 71% opted for the above triptych. The reason why we emphasize this concerns the life and mission of the Church. It is enough to look at the celebrations over the past six years, and we draw special attention to the one that still represents a kind of paradigm in the relationship between priest and lay believer, i.e., the period from 8 December 2015 to 20 November 2016, a period of the *Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy*, during which Pope Francis sent missionaries of mercy around the world. We also address 11 April 2015 when Pope Francis issued the bull

Misericordiae Vultus – The Face of Mercy. From that period until today, one of the features of Pope Francis' pontificate is the above triptych or image of God, which has consequently influenced, and still strongly influences, the work of the whole Church, through the sacraments in general and especially in the context of the sacrament of reconciliation. In relation to the above percentage, it is also important to note that young people receive this image of God first and foremost in the Church through the holy sacraments. Either in cultivating a personal encounter with God or through the sacramental life of their neighbours.¹⁹ Notwithstanding, the Church was and still is the fundamental sacrament of encounter and unity with God, which also makes it the primary source of faith and inspiration for developing an image of God.²⁰ The experience of the Church, however, remains crucial for the experience of the individual on the path of faith.

In the end, from the given responses we can only glimpse at the content of faith. Considering the (un)intentional avoidance and importance of the Church in the personal faith of the individual, we could go beyond the questionnaire and think about a deeper understanding of theological virtues in general and faith in particular. Given the (un)intentional avoidance of the Church, we are left with the impression that in her teaching, and especially morals, the Church is extremely rigid compared to Christ. Furthermore, we are given the impression that the faith of the Church is most often thought and valued in the light of moral laws, which creates the impression that Jesus Christ, as the source of mercy, is not a person of norms but open love who forgives and even allows and justifies. Pertaining to forgiveness and love, of course, we cannot but agree, but unity with Christ is also achieved through respect for the norms and laws of faith because they preserve and protect the faith. This area seems to be an exceedingly sensitive issue for many young people, although not exclusively, as laws within the faith are often valued as prohibition laws restricting freedom of action and life. Here we must object because the positive divine law is not primarily a law of prohibitions but a law in which God revealed himself. Therefore, in the positive divine law, which is also of a moral character, a person finds their path of a personal encounter with God. The positive divine law guarantees an encounter with God and pro-

¹⁹ Cf. FRANJO, *Lumen fidei – Svjetlo vjere. Enciklika o vjeri*, Zagreb, 2013, no. 37–45.

²⁰ Cf. FRANJO, *Misericordiae vultus – Lice milosrđa. Bula najave izvanrednoga jubileja milosrđa*, Zagreb, 2015, no. 1–3; cf. KONGREGACIJA ZA KLER, *Svećenik – služitelj Božjega milosrđa*, 2014, br. 1–35.

motes personal dignity because it is realized in the new law – Jesus Christ.²¹ Jesus Christ, because he is the saviour and redeemer of humanity, is also the norm of that same plan of salvation because he teaches that we love not only because we are loved but that we love as he loved us. Christ, hence, reflects two images: the person and the law, which is often missing in the faith of individuals and wounds or distorts the view of the Church. This critique points us to the fact that because it is the gift of God, faith is first and foremost the fruit of listening. Listening is what gives birth to faith and strengthens it because it brings the individual into a particular mystery of unity with Christ through the living of divine values, love in particular.

Conclusion

The goal of this research was to approach young people and listen to their faith and their relationship towards it. To reach their relationship to faith, we have deemed it crucial to explore and reflect on the origins of their faith, the Church in particular. We have noticed that young people do not have problems with faith in terms of belief itself, as reflected in the statistics, since young people, according to their statements, very often attend and receive the holy sacraments, particularly the Eucharist and Confession. Statistics point to the obvious – young people wish to believe in God, they wish to believe in the One whom the Church professes to be full of mercy, love, and goodness, and who like a good Father is constantly and patiently waiting and searching for each individual. Young people wish to believe in this God because they themselves express how crucial it is for their life circumstances, especially in bad times and illness. They are thirsty for forgiveness and mercy. However, we have noticed a problem with respect to a possible gap in their thinking about the Christ-Church relationship on the path of the Christian faith and belief. To a certain extent, they also show a slight departure from the Church, even though their image of God is still formed by the experience of the Church. We can observe a certain of privatization of faith that is subject to personal way of believing, conditioned by life circumstances, desires, or needs. In these circumstances, we have tried to point out the issue of this subjective approach deprived of responsibility towards God, self, and neighbour through openness and obedience to divine laws. Therefore, we believe that the

²¹ Cf. Mislav KUTLEŠA, *Božanski zakon u arhitekturi teologalnih kreposti*, in: *Riječki teološki časopis* 26 (2018) 1, 101–120; cf. Mauro COZZOLI, *Fede. Speranza. Carità.*, Milano, 2010, 81–84.

Church stands before an important task of bringing the positive divine law closer and more personal to each individual and society with the goal of fuller and complete knowledge of God and his love and care for man and humanity. In other words, deeper analysis and catechesis based on positive divine laws will enable young people, and everybody else, to receive a deeper knowledge of themselves as God's creatures called to eternal life.

Sažetak

RAZUMIJEVANJE VJERE I SLIKE BOGA KOD MLADIH VJERNIKA DANAS: PRIKAZ REZULTATA ANKETNOG ISTRAŽIVANJA O STAVOVIMA I MIŠLJENJIMA MLADIH O RAZUMIJEVANJU VJERE I SLIKE BOGA U HRVATSKOJ

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Mladi ljudi nerijetko su objekt promišljanja starijih. Često podliježu njihovom analiziranju, promišljanju i poučavanju. Ovdje svakako ne isključujemo i (ne)potrebno kritiziranje. No je li kritiziranje i analiziranje i danas prihvatljiv način pristupanja mladim ljudima? Mišljenja smo kako svakoj konstruktivnoj kritici s ciljem poučavanja mladih osoba utemeljenoj na analizi i promišljanju nužno prethodi ono na što nas papa Franjo tijekom svog pontifikata poziva – slušanje. Time je i ovaj rad išao u tom smjeru – slušati i oslušivati glas i riječ mladih ljudi, a sve s ciljem kako bi im se služilo na ispravan i cjelovit način, tj. da u njima vjera, kako govori sv. Pavao u Poslanici Efežanima, raste do spoznaje Sina Božjega, a oni rastu do mjere uzrasta punine Kristove (usp. Ef 4,13-14). Kroz te riječi Crkva traži svoj put do susreta s mladim ljudima i služenja Radosne vijesti kao osnovne zadaće povjerene joj od Uskrslog Krista.

Ključne riječi: vjera, slika Boga, mladi, sakramentalni život, Hrvatska