

Renaissance of the Virtues as a Means of Educating Young People in Their Current Trends and from the Perspective of Seeking Holiness

Renesansa kreposti kao sredstvo odgoja mladih u suvremenim trendovima i iz perspektive traženja svetosti

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Summary

The call to holiness is Christ's call to Christians of all times. The present contribution aims to highlight this fact and the need to offer young people role models of the Christian life as an inspiration to live a meaningful life from the perspective of holiness. The starting point for this paper are the results of the research project VEGA 1/0299/21: »Current religious-ethical themes among youth under the influence of the current coronal crisis«, which was carried out by the Department of Catechetics of the Catholic University in Ružomberok on a sample of 903 respondents in the period from June to October 2023. The first part of the contribution intends to characterise the recipients of the Christian message - young people in puberty and adolescence - as well as the trends that resonate with today's young people. The contribution then explicates holiness as a fundamental direction in the Christian life. The next part provides a rationale for the moral and theological virtues as a fundamental means of growing in and attaining holiness. The contribution concludes with a clarification of the characteristics of the basic virtues and other selected virtues that can be considered as cardinal elements in the moral formation of young people.

Keywords: Young People, Education, Virtues, Holiness, Morality, Trend.

Sažetak

Poziv na svetost Kristov je poziv kršćanima svih vremena. Ovaj rad želi istaknuti činjenicu i potrebu da se mladima ponude uzori kršćanskog života kao nadahnuće za život traženjem smisla iz perspektive svetosti. Polazište za ovaj rad rezultati su istraživačkog projekta VEGA 1/0299/21: »Aktualne religijsko-etičke teme među mladima

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pod utjecajem aktualne korona krize«, koje je proveo Katehetski odsjek Katoličkog sveučilišta u Ružomberoku na uzorku od 903 ispitanika u razdoblju od lipnja do listopada 2023. godine. Prvi dio rada želi okarakterizirati primatelje kršćanske poruke – mlade u pubertetu i adolescenciji – kao i trendove koji vladaju današnjicom mladi ljudi. U radu se potom tumači svetost kao temeljni smjer kršćanskog života. Sljedeći dio daje obrazloženje moralnih i teoloških kreposti kao temeljnog sredstva rasta i postizanja svetosti. Prilog završava pojašnjenjem karakteristika temeljnih kreposti kao i drugih odabranih kreposti koje se mogu smatrati glavnim elementima moralnoga odgoja mladih ljudi.

Ključne riječi: mladi, obrazovanje, vrline, svetost, moralnost, trend.

Introduction

The role of the teacher of religious education is to enable students to formulate questions about basic values of life, ethical attitudes and ethically right actions, to confront them with scientific and religious (Christian) world views and to seek their own life values. In exploring and dealing with current religious-ethical issues among young people today, it is the doctrine of the virtues and their formation that offers opportunities to build increasingly positive traits in the character of young people, such as human freedom, human dignity, and human responsibility. Can virtue be learnt? A simple question from the fifth century B.C. is inevitably looming on the horizon again at the end of the twentieth century A.D. In the present contribution we, as teachers of religious education, want to contribute to the rebirth of moral qualities and habits in the rising generation. It takes work to give explicit characteristics of young people. They are a very diverse group. Every single young person has his or her own life story, expectations, dreams and hopes. Despite all the diversity of cultures, opportunities, abilities, and economic or social differences, it is nevertheless possible to find common characteristics. Our job is to know them.

1. Characteristics of Young People Today

The child enters the period of adolescence and puberty at an older school age. Feelings, perceptions, and memory at this age are very similar to those of adults. However, attention is more often fluctuating. Although the child is already capable of logical operations (sorting, comparing, connecting, concluding), he or she is still focused on specific situations. They are not satisfied with only one solution to a situation so they look for other possibilities and try to verify them. They do not only think about what the world is like, but also

about what it could be like. In this period, the child is faced with the dilemma of finding his or her identity. Rapid changes also occur in the area of emotionality. Feelings play a significant role in the lives of pubescents and strongly influence their behaviour. The pubescent reacts irritably and often changes moods; rather negative emotions prevail. Hormonal storms make it difficult for the pubescent to control their emotions. The adolescent does not understand what is happening to him or her and looks for the cause primarily in the relationships and the behaviour of others towards him or her (Říčan 2021, 177). Imbalance is also manifested in feelings towards oneself. The pubescent's self-love is very vulnerable; they are very sensitive to the other people's comments about them (Oravcová 2002, 62-63). The challenge of this period is to achieve self-regulation, which depends largely on external influences such as the environment, discipline requirements, parenting style or cultural norms (Čerešník and Čerešníková 2022, 78). In this period, we distinguish the developmental period of faith: the formation of autonomous religiosity (12-16 years). The so-called »questioning faith« develops. During adolescence, the young person becomes autonomous and responsible for his or her actions. Parents play only an advisory role. They seek spiritual reality. If their religious experience is only connected with sentimental or social experiences, and they have not resolved their previous doubts, they fall into spiritual confusion. It is then necessary to evangelise them, i.e. to call them to the personal aspect of a living faith and later to active ministry for Christ. On the other hand, this period is full of generosity and the desire to save humanity. Many young people who came to faith in Jesus Christ earlier in life might be confronted with various questions, either by their reason or by their peers. In this case, it is advisable to point out possible ways of dealing with doubts, for example, by learning about the experiences of others in similar situations (Hanesová 2011, 78-100).

In the following period of adolescence, the most significant changes take place at the level of the psyche. Attention and perception improve, and logical memory gets better. In particular, abstract thinking gains in quality. As its level increases, the adolescent is more and more keen on thinking and solving various philosophical, religious, political or social problems. They have the need to justify and criticise things in order to make a judgement. They are very keen to engage in debate, to argue and to defend their beliefs. On the other hand, however, they are limited by their range of thinking and their lack of experience, which often results in hasty judgements that may be wrong, radical or ill-considered solutions that do not take into account the complexity of the situation. The adolescent does not want to passively accept the opinions of

adults. However, compared to the pubescent, he or she is already more open to admitting mistakes. He or she wants to make changes and comes up with original ideas (Končeková 2014, 231-232).

In addition to the outer appearance, a young person is interested in his or her inner self; he or she wants to know it. Self-reflection and interest in one's own personality grow, and introspection often occurs. They evaluate their personal qualities and their actions in different situations and also by comparing them with others. Their self-evaluation is influenced by how other people evaluate them, they perceive their approval, disapproval, praise or reproof. Based on their self-assessment, they then develop self-esteem, which strongly influences their behaviour and actions. Adolescents with adequate self-esteem are more active, less afraid to express their opinions and have a more realistic career path in life. On the contrary, those with low self-esteem struggle with difficulties in social interaction, they tend to escape from the people around them by interacting inwardly. They try to put on a kind of mask, which increases their inner tension. They are very sensitive to criticism, reproof, ridicule and the opinions of others (Končeková 2014, 236-237). Adolescents often want to enjoy all the rights of adults, they want to be seen as adults and as equals, but they are not always willing to take responsibility for their rights, especially when it comes to fulfilling the responsibilities that come with adult rights (Končeková 2014, 243-244).

2. Trends Among Young People

What is a trend? It is a long-term change in the attitudes and behaviour of young people. In the following section we look at some of the current trends affecting the mentality of young people. As Pope Francis says, *»Today we adults can often be tempted to list all the problems and failings of today's young people«* (František CHV 2019, 66). In doing so, however, we often fail to realise that young people are the image of adults. They live in a world 'created' by adults, they are shaped by it, they are influenced by it. This starts in the family, through school, social networks, work, and society. The aim of the following section is to penetrate, at least partially, the reality of young people in today's world, so that we can better understand them, rather than pointing out their faults and depravity.

Today's world is dominated by advertising; offers are lurking everywhere we go - in the car, at the bus stop, on public transport, on the internet, everything seems to be for sale. We are tempted to just click and look. Just a

few clicks and we have it at home. We have enough of everything, even an abundance, but we are not able to be satisfied with it; advertising artificially pushes us into the need to always have something newer or better. *»Wealth and consumerism are presented as the most important values in life.«* (Balík 2019, 115). The culture of seduction does not only want to satisfy man's needs, but artificially creates in him other superficial desires, increases demands, and thus goes hand in hand with the culture of *»use and throw away«* (František LS 2015, 129), as Pope Francis often calls it. This mentality wants to infiltrate all areas of life and penetrate people's thinking: *»You see a better and newer smartphone? Throw the old one away! You don't like this food? Have the other one! You don't like this girl? Find another one!...«* Everything is at hand. This culture also influences upbringing. As Tony Anatrella, priest and psychologist, aptly states: *»The adults who have always gone out of their way to make sure their children lack nothing are the cause now of young people thinking that all their desires must be satisfied, confusing them with needs. However, desires are not there to be fulfilled: they are a source of inspiration. As young people have not had the experience of doing without, a situation in which desires are formed, they are undecided and unsure.«* (Anatrella 2016). They live under the illusion that in their lives they can have it all at once, and even more effortlessly. As a result, the values that lead to stability in relationships, willingness to sacrifice for others, surpassing oneself and a strong will are lost. Education for moderation, which is a path to creativity, resourcefulness, mutual cooperation, solidarity and encounter with others, can help (Balík 2019, 115). Education focused on emotional well-being also leads young people to substitute their feelings and ideas with reality, which is reinforced by the various media, social networks, the Internet and video games (František BM 2018, 100). Reality tends to disappoint young people's illusions of happiness and life, so they escape into the virtual world and lose touch with concrete reality. The Holy Father Francis calls this escape a *»digital migration«* (František CHV 2019, 90).

Today's world is characterised by the digital environment, which greatly influences the perception of the world, space and time, changing the way we communicate, obtain information, and enter into relationships (František CHV 2019, 39). In particular, the internet and social networks are the place where young people spend a great deal of time, which has become even more pronounced during the pandemic and the lockdown. In addition to the many advantages and benefits it brings, it also has its limits and dangers, such as the spread of false news, hoaxes. The truth is bent and it is difficult to recognise it among so much information, so it is relativised. Personal opinion be-

comes more important, and social networks become a place to present one's own views uncritically in a safe bubble of anonymity, often in closed groups that prevent confrontation with others. People in such groups feel the need to comment on everything, but often without due respect and consideration for others. Living in the online space creates a distorted picture of reality (Russinová and Matejčíková 2024, 27).

Another risk is the development of various addictions. The urgent need to be online all the time has created the prerequisite for the emergence of a modern phobia called 'nomophobia', which is described as *»the fear of or concern about the idea of being without or unable to use a mobile phone.«* (Russinová and Matejčíková 2024, 28). For many young people, a dead battery on their mobile phone causes feelings of anxiety and helplessness. On the other hand, there is an emerging trend to be offline. Some young people are fed up with the constant contact with the virtual world and show interest in activities that take place in the real world. According to Pope Francis, *»it is the task of all of us to promote activities that test young people and allow them to see themselves as protagonists«* (František BM 2018, 100). In this way they will be able to touch the concrete.

The culture of profit and money creates an ideal of the person that is associated with youth and beauty. Young bodies are exploited in advertisements that sell all sorts of things, creating an ideal that even older people strive to achieve through aesthetic interventions and dressing styles to feel beautiful and accepted. *»The ideal of beauty is youth, but we need to realise that this has very little to do with young people. It only means that adults want to snatch youth for themselves, not that they respect, love and care for young people«* (František CHV 2019, 79). With these words, Pope Francis warns of the danger of the cult of youth, which prevents young people from growing up and promotes a culture of exclusion. It often happens, even in the world of work, that people are not hired on the basis of their experience and expertise, but on the basis of their appearance, age, performance - anyone who is not young and full of strength is excluded. At the same time, adults, and sometimes parents, compete with young people, trying to reach the level of their adolescent children. The Holy Father calls this the *»devil's game«* in which adults seem to be saying: *»You are young, you have enormous possibilities and promise, but I want to be even younger than you, I can be younger, I can pretend to be younger, and even in that I am better. A lot of parents think they are adolescents, playing at eternally living a fleeting life, and, whether they realise it or not, make their children victims of this perverse game.«* (František BM 2018, 29).

Young people develop insecurity and anxiety due to the pressure and high expectations of society, which demands perfection and success for which they are not prepared. This also applies to their entry into the world of work. Unlike previous generations, who mainly sought stability in work, today's young people want a job that they like, that makes them feel secure, and gives them room for personal development, recognition and emotional balance. However, many are faced with unrealistic demands. They are expected to have a very high level of performance and experience, which causes a lot of pressure and stress, leading to frequent job changes and further instability (Rusinová and Matejíčková 2024, 29).

Because of the high standards set by society, there are young people who feel the need to be different from who they are and conform to the created ideals. »They continuously 'photo-shop' their digital image, hiding behind masks and false identities until they finally become 'fake' selves. Many are obsessed by getting as many 'likes' as possible. And these unreasonable expectations give rise to multiple fears and uncertainties.« (František PSDM 2018). This is also the reason why many young people are afraid of adulthood, they do not trust themselves and therefore delay life decisions and definite commitments. They try to avoid reality, not only by escaping into the virtual world, but also by taking the drugs that the today's world so easily offers and presents to them as a means of entertainment and relaxation. All this slows down the maturation of the personality, since a mature personality is considered to be the one who has »*completed the organisation of the basic functions of psychic life and is able to distinguish his or her inner life from the outer world*« (Anatrella 2016). Instability, uncertainty, rapidly changing conditions and fear of reality lead to a culture that favours the present moment.

In a culture of temporariness, decisions made forever are meaningless because people think the future is uncertain, so it is better to live only in the present (František 2015). But perhaps the preference for impermanence is just a mask to hide the fear of commitment, which requires determination and a willingness to lose something in order to gain something. Pope Francis speaks of this phenomenon as the 'domination of the moment over time', »The moment never assumes development, time does. Fleetingness is provisional because it is closed in itself, it is a slave to moments, it is a momentary inclination to grasp at the provisional, to accept moments as a 'limited eternity'. Time is always moving forward, towards something definitive« (František BM 2018, 95-96). The danger of this is to confuse the understanding of moment and time, so that even when considering a life decision, he or she thinks

in the moment and only assumes that he or she is in the time. There is a widespread mentality of *»living in 'open' situations and behaving in life as if it was a reality show, without aim and without purpose«* (František 2017). The above mentioned preferences in society also greatly affect family life and the perception of marriage. Many young people come from broken or incomplete families, which has left them with a lack of trust in others and in their own future. Young people are afraid of emotional commitment; it is better for them to live in a kind of provisionality. *»They think that without commitment they will keep their freedom, while consequently they reject freedom, because it is only in commitment that we discover and realise our freedom«* (František 2017). According to the mentality of the society in which they are used to having everything instantly, even the expression of feelings should be immediate, such as connecting to the Internet or sending a message. There is no sense of building relationships; in their world, the fleeting moment rules over time. Moreover, the exaggerated sexual exhibitionism in television programmes, in advertisements, on billboards, on the Internet, on social networks and everywhere else shows that we live in a society that does not help young people to deal with their sexuality, but distorts it into an urge that must be satisfied and degrades the dignity of the human person, especially women, into an object of gratification. Various ideologies, including gender ideology, also contribute to the chaos in relationships and in the acceptance of one's own identity and dignity as a man and a woman. Contemporary society questions the permanent commitment to love, even though young people long for it. Today's generation of young people is in mental turmoil. They often feel lonely and have no one to help them understand what is happening in and around them. Their constant exposure to the news, where at one moment they may be scrolling through a news story about a war, a major tragedy, along with a new post from a favourite influencer about a nice outfit or a funny video without having time to process their emotions, which further desensitises them and dulls their sense of empathy for the suffering of others (Russinová and Matejčíková 2024, 28).

Today's young people often make decisions based on emotions and impulses because they lack criteria for making decisions. Even in the spiritual life, they often overestimate the importance of feelings. If they do not feel good when they pray, they do not pray; if they do not feel guilty when they sin, they do not go to confession. Moreover, this is also connected with inner laziness - if the spiritual life requires effort, self-denial, they are not able to do it (Balík 2019, 395).

3. The Church as a Guide on the Path to Holiness

The Church is a mother who, for many centuries, has accompanied her faithful on their journey to God. Although she is an ancient institution, she can become young again and again when she is 'herself', when she receives ever anew the strength from the Word of God, from the Eucharist, and the daily presence of Christ and the power of the Spirit. She is young when she is capable of constantly returning to her source (František CHV 2019, 35). In her, it is possible to encounter Christ, the eternal friend of youth (František CHV 2019, 34). A good example for understanding the role of the Church in relation to young people is the event of the disciples of Emmaus, who, having left Jerusalem, did not understand what had happened after the crucifixion and therefore went in the opposite direction. Jesus, as a model for the Church and every accompanying person, walked with them, listening patiently, asking questions to help them discern what they were experiencing. Then he sensitively led them to understand the events in the light of Scripture. He accepted their invitation to spend the evening with them, he was close to them and entered into their night. As they listened to him, their hearts were stirred and they recognised him in the breaking of the bread. In the end, they themselves decided to change direction and return to their community to share the experience of encountering the glorified Christ (XV. Řádné generální shromáždění Biskupské synody 2018, 4)

Holiness is the most beautiful face of the Church. The basic idea of holiness is »separated, set apart for God«. Places, objects, subjects, people, and times were called holy when they were set apart for Almighty God. He Himself, the Creator, absolutely set apart from creation, reflects holiness. God is holy (Encyklopedie Bible 1997, 154). It is impossible for a Christian to think of his own mission on earth without understanding it as a path to holiness. God created man in his own image (Gen 1,27) and asks him to be conformed to him by appropriate actions. »Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect«, comes from the mouth of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5,48). With these words, Christ appeals to people of all times, and with his life he offers a guide to holiness for each one of us. »His silences, his miracles, his gestures, his prayer, his love for people, his special affection for the little and the poor, his acceptance of the total sacrifice on the cross for the redemption of the world, and his resurrection are the actualisation of his word and the fulfilment of Revelation.« (Katechizmus Katolíckej cirkvi 1999, 561). Christ's teaching of the Beatitudes, of interior self-denial, humility and obedience, is the perfect guide to love of God and neighbour. By his own life, he encourages us to live a living

faith, trusting prayer, patience, peace of mind, and constant communion with the Holy Spirit. »By his obedience to Mary and Joseph, as well as by his humble work during the long years in Nazareth, Jesus gives us the example of holiness in the daily life of family and work« (Katechizmus Katolíckej cirkvi 1999, 564). He teaches the ways and means to the virtues, the acquisition of which will not only leads to one's own holiness, but will also become an instrument for the sanctification of the whole Church and of the world. We are all called to holiness (Katechizmus Katolíckej cirkvi 1999, 2013). Pope Francis writes at the very beginning of his exhortation *On the Call to Holiness*: »The Lord asks everything of us, and in return he offers us true life, the happiness for which we were created. He wants us to be saints and not to settle for a bland and mediocre existence« (František GE 2018, 5). Pope Francis goes on to encourage that holiness means always moving forward, following Christ daily despite difficulties. It is often that the holiness of those 'next door' neighbours, those who live among us and are a reflection of God's presence (František GE 2018, 8).

The following lines offer a brief reflection on how and why to encourage young people on the path to holiness through the cultivation of the virtues. To be holy does not require being a bishop, a priest or a religious. We are frequently tempted to think that holiness is only for those who can withdraw from ordinary affairs to spend much time in prayer. That is not the case. We are all called to be holy by living our lives with love and by bearing witness in everything we do, wherever we find ourselves. People do not have to be bishops, priests, nuns or religious to become saints. Every Christian becomes useful to the world to the extent that he or she grows in holiness. Pope Francis calls young people in particular not to be afraid to set their sights higher, to allow themselves to be loved and guided by God. Holiness will not make us less human because it is an encounter between our weakness and the power of grace (František GE 2018, 12-14).

4. The Renaissance of Virtues

The personal holiness of each individual adds beauty to the face of the Church and makes her message more acceptable to the contemporary world. Within the framework of holiness, we would like to summarise some of the characteristics necessary for understanding the way of life to which God calls man. The means of sanctification already known to us are the various methods of prayer, the precious sacraments of the Eucharist and Reconciliation, the offering of personal sacrifices in ministry, different forms of devotion, spiritual

mentoring, and many others. In the following section we will only touch upon certain aspects of the call to holiness that are particularly resonant and, at the same time, have been neglected to such an extent that they have become, as it were, an unknown word in need of clarification. We are referring to the virtues (František GE 2018, 54). People in the twenty-first century moralise and worry more about morality than medieval people in the Middle Ages. The seven cardinal virtues were known to everyone in the Middle Ages, whereas today it is a rarity for a young person to be able to name them all. Ethical behaviour without virtue is an illusion. From a Christian point of view, on the other hand, we cannot create virtues for ourselves. Virtue is a fruit of faith. If the doctrine of the virtues is not true, then the whole Bible is a lie. For every verse of it either implies or directly teaches the virtuous life. Only then does man please God. To be virtuous is to be fully human. Pope Pius XII explains that to make the world a holy place, we must first make it human. The reason for our social decline and confusion is that we have lost ourselves. But as we move closer and closer to the abyss, the only right choice is a return. A return to the virtues as the path to holiness (Kreeft 2007, 9-14).

In his *Diary of the Soul*, St John XXIII, known as the ‘kind Pope’, writes: »From the saints I must take the substance, not the accidents of their virtues. I am not St Aloysius, nor must I seek holiness in his particular way, but according to the requirements of my own nature, my own character and the different conditions of my life. I must not be the dry, bloodless imitation of a model, however perfect. God desires us to follow the example of the saints by absorbing the vital sap of their virtues and turning it into our own life-blood, adapting it to our own individual capacities and particular circumstances. If St. Aloysius had been as I am, he would have become holy in a different way« (Martin 2016, 397).

»A *virtue is a habitual and firm disposition to do the good*« (Katechizmus Katolickej cirkvi 1999, 1803). It can also be described as a positive moral quality or moral virtue that »allows the person not only to perform good acts, but to give the best of himself«. In a narrower sense, virtue is a Christian virtue. It is the bestowal of God’s power upon man, a participation in God’s goodness and holiness. »The virtuous person tends towards the good with all his sensory and spiritual powers; he pursues the good and chooses it in concrete actions«. The virtues, then, are a strength for right action, an action of the intellect and of the heart by the grace of God. They perfect the good image in man, deepen his union with God, and are the practical proof that the Christian is a follower of Jesus Christ (Stanček 2005, 17).

The virtues perfect or complete man, because God's style is not to create everything ready and finished, but to give man the opportunity to participate in the work of creation, which also applies to him. The virtues form the profile of man's personality, and their perfection represents the most precious thing in human morality and the highest degree of noble humanity. They make man act in such a way that his life becomes dignified, good and respectable. The virtues are therefore not an unattainable ideal, but a real possibility and a necessity (Stanček 2005, 20).

The horizon of existence in today's society is completely filled by the world and temporal progress. We think primarily in earthly categories. The mention of virtues in modern people usually makes them feel uncomfortable, which stems from their knowledge that it is something good, but it requires great effort to do it. With the gradual distancing of the various spheres of social life from the moral doctrine of the Church, the term 'virtue' has lost its original meaning, and the reality it describes has been discredited along with the word. Modern ideologies present the key moral values as a relic that prevents modern man from self-realisation. In societies with a relativistic view of morality, there is a tendency to regard as good only that which suits and benefits the individual (Liptáková 2012, 9-25). At the same time, however, it is clear that when we place ourselves in the presence of Christ, we are confronted with the question: *»What must I do to inherit eternal life?«* (Mk 10,17) Any other question about the meaning and value of our life would be insufficient and unessential in the presence of Christ. Everything whereby man, in himself, goes beyond the world, though he is rooted in, is explained by the image and likeness of God which is inscribed in the human being from the beginning (Ján Pavol II 1985, 5). This divine image in us is brought to perfection through the virtues. The doctrine of the virtues – aretology (from the Greek *»areté«* – both a gift and a faculty acquired through learning) – distinguishes between natural and supernatural virtues. The virtues are by their nature like muscles that need to be strengthened through exercise. They are the inner force that drives a person to strive to achieve a goal. Their opposite are the vices. A vice means to admit one's inability to do good, to be content with inactivity, to desire to have pleasure without effort (František and Pozza 2021, 8). In the professional discussion of the virtues from the point of view of social ethics, it is often said that it is the merit of the ancient philosophers, especially Plato, to define the virtues, to educate them, and to arrange them in a system. However, the four cardinal virtues do not come from Greek philosophy. We find them in the Holy Scriptures. They were formed in the human heart by God, not by

Plato. He was the first to formulate them into terms, but he did about as much for the virtues themselves as Newton did for motion - that is, he discovered and defined the already existing internal laws of a given quantity. The four cardinal virtues are not the only virtues, not even the highest ones. Just as Einstein surpassed Newton, so Jesus surpassed Plato. But just as Einstein did not contradict Newton's teaching, but built on it, so Jesus' supernatural virtues do not contradict Plato's natural virtues, but presuppose them. Plato gave us the grammar of virtue; Jesus gives us its poetry (Kreeft 2007, 59). »If virtue is a permanent disposition to do the good, then a virtuous person is one who does the good of his own free will.« These words refer primarily to human, that is, natural virtues. Of these, the four basic ones - prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance - are already mentioned in the Old Testament (Wis 8,7).

The natural human virtues are at the very root of human nature and are therefore of great importance for Christian formation. They are the foundation upon which the supernatural virtues are later built. Pope Pius XII repeatedly emphasised that we must first make the world human in order to later make it holy (Stanček 2005, 108). »Human virtues are firm attitudes, stable perfections of intellect and will that govern our actions, order our passions, and guide our conduct according to reason and faith. They provide man with self-mastery and joy in leading a morally good life.« (Katechizmus Katolíckej cirkvi 1999, 1804).

All the natural virtues can be grouped around the four cardinal virtues: prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance. The natural virtues are acquired through human effort. Man is not born with them as a ready-made product. They grow through education, conscious and voluntary actions, and perseverance. God's grace purifies and elevates them. They are both the result and the germ of morally good deeds. For not doing evil is not doing good. With God's help, virtues shape a person's character and make it easier to do good (Katechizmus Katolíckej cirkvi 1999, 1804; 1839). The supernatural virtues are directly related to God. That is why we also refer to them by the term theological virtues. They dispose Christians to live in a relationship with the Holy Trinity. Their origin, motive and object is God, whom man knows by faith, in whom he hopes and whom he loves for his own sake. The supernatural virtues - faith, hope, and charity - are the foundation of the Christian's moral actions because they embody and animate all moral virtues. God infuses them into the souls of the faithful to make them capable of acting as his children and of meriting eternal life. They are the pledge of the presence and action of the Holy Spirit in the faculties of man. Through their interaction, they become a living part of

the Mystical Body of Christ, the Church (Katechizmus Katolíckej cirkvi 1999, 1812-1813). Faith, hope and charity are the »breastplate and helmet« in the life of the Christian. But charity is superior to all the virtues (Katechizmus Katolíckej cirkvi 1999, 1826-1827).

In the next section, we would like to offer selected virtues through the example of young people who excelled in them. The aim is to show the rising generation that even today a young person can choose to live a meaningful and purposeful life (Russinová 2023, 14).

5. Role Models for a Virtuous Life: From Youth to Youth

Youth is not a subject to be analysed in the abstract way. In fact, there is no such thing as 'youth', there are only young people with their concrete life stories. Many young people and teenagers are ideologised, exploited for their vulnerability, or used as a strike force to destroy, intimidate or ridicule others. How can we help them find the right path? How can we help them find their way to humanity? The worst thing we can do is to use the recipe of the worldly spirit, which is to numb young people with other messages, other distractions, and other banalities. In young people we find wounds, failures and sad memories imprinted on the soul. Often, »these are the hurts of frustrated desires, experiences of injustice, or of feeling unloved and unaccepted« (František CHV 2019, 31). But Pope Francis reminds us of the good news we received as a gift on the morning after the resurrection of Jesus: that there is a way out of all the dark and painful situations of which we speak. There are young people who, even in this world and in this time, are an example of normality and humanity. Young people who are an example to be admired and followed (František CHV 2019, 31; 45).

Through Jesus, his Son, God reveals to us the knowledge that he chose us before the foundation of the world (Eph 1,4), and through his Spirit he was able to do great things in his name. Scripture shows this in a special way in the case of young people: Jacob's son Joseph (Gen 37-47), Samuel the insecure young man, (1 Sam 3,10), David was anointed king when he was a boy (1 Sam 16,7b), Solomon (1 Kings 3,7b), Jeremiah (Jer 1,6). (František CHV 2019, 7-8).

The above examples illustrate what is possible when the potential of youth is combined with the power of God. God's perspective places the young person in the position of a child worthy of the Father's trust. From the moment God calls us, he turns his attention to what we can do, to all the love that can flow from us. When God touches the heart of a young person, like the Virgin

Mary, he becomes capable of truly great things. Let us recall Joan of Arc, Aloysius Gonzaga, Gemma Galgani, Maria Goretti or Pier Giorgio Frassati. These young people, who lived ordinary lives with an extraordinary love for God and neighbour, found their followers in Anka Kolesárova, Karolina Kózka, José Sánchez del Río, Chiara Corbella Petrillo, Sandra Sabattini, Matteo Farina and Carlo Acutis. They are proof that, even in today's young generation, the strength of youth lies in the heart and in virtues. Their deeds tell us of a journey through life that is not a meaningless wandering, but a journey that can find its fulfilment in God, even if it contains many uncertainties and sorrows (Russinová 2023, 16).

»So what?« This popular question by the American Jesuit John O'Malley, Professor of Church History at Georgetown University, leads one to reflect on the importance of role models of Christian life for young people (Martin 2016, 397). Whichever way one looks at these young saints, the fact remains that their actions are a guide that offers a range of possibilities for acting in such a way that the life of the individual becomes an instrument for the betterment of the world. If a young person accepts them as role models, their virtues and experiences become a compass that enables him or her to participate in a story that transcends him or her existentially and to leave his or her mark in history. But this is only possible if we live an authentic experience of love, if we take the Lord's call seriously and follow him. And that is the only thing that can make us happy (František 2017).

The learning process of religious education should be interesting and stimulating. It should teach pupils how to deal with the practical problems of personal and social life on the basis of moral principles which are unchangeable. The goal of religious education in school catechesis is to form citizens of high moral standing. Through selected virtues, we can present to the young generation role models of Christian life as an inspiration for a fulfilling life. The four virtues that are particularly neglected in contemporary culture can serve as an inspiration for catechesis. They are: Humility - which is rejected by today's world; Chastity - which is dehumanised by mass culture; Christian joy in the Spirit - which consumerism does not know; and Ministry and charity to our neighbour - without which today's civilisation cannot stand.

The virtues mentioned above are among the essential moral elements in the formation of a young person's character. Specific examples of young people who have been raised to public veneration or who are in the process of being beatified can be used as inspiration in the formation of virtues: St. José Sánchez del Río was, for some, still a young boy. Despite his age, he was virtuous. Above

all, his life showed most of all what it meant to live hope, love and faith, even when he was ridiculed, condemned and persecuted. The three divine virtues helped him most to endure. Faith, which he considered a gift, was the most precious to him from everything he had. The path of humility is the only way to the glory of the life to come. Without it, religiousness is like a straw stuck in the ground - it is blown away by every gust of wind. Man is not the steward of his salvation; he brings nothing of himself but sin and deceit. With this knowledge, humility teaches us that *»to fear the Lord is the beginning of wisdom«* (Sir 1,16) and opens our hearts to merciful charity to our neighbour. Only by abiding in this precious virtue we are able to reflect on the words of Christ: *»Just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve«* (Mt 20,28) and to adapt one's life to this message. To show us that humility is the most beautiful and precious of human virtues, Christ begins his Beatitudes with it (Mt 5,3): *»Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.«* *»But to this one I will look, to him who is humble and contrite in spirit.«* (Is 66,2). This is the answer to the question why the Heavenly Father looks so favourably on the Virgin Mary. The Incarnation itself was caused above all by her humility. Today, if Mary is the Queen of all the saints, she is also the Queen of the humble. A person with a sense of humour recognises the incongruity between the life of another and his own. This recognition leads him to a profound humility, which is also the essence of perpetual joy. In this sense, theologians like to compare four Latin terms that have the same root: *humus* (earth, soil), *humanus* (man), *humor* and *humilitas* (humility). They explicate their interrelation as follows: Man was created from the earth. Therefore, he should not forget that he is a creature who is totally dependent on God throughout his life. This is where his glory lies. In case he forgets this, he should be helped by the humility which is caused by the humorous situation. The saints were aware of this fact, which is why humour was an essential tool in their pursuit for humility. When laughter erupts from the depths of a person's inner self, he sees things as they really are (Bubák and De-Marco 2009, 236-238). Humour seems to be almost a prerequisite for holiness. The introduction to the life of the Venerable Matteo Farina, who died of a brain tumour at the age of eighteen, proves to be a fine example of a joyful man. This Italian teenager was remarkably aware of his place in life, resistant to hardship, and clear about the meaning of human existence. He looked at worldly matters from the perspective of eternity, was quick to laugh at the foolishness of this world or at himself, and always trusted in God. His deep inner determination to purify his heart from all sin, led him to a serene and joyful view of the future, focused on eternity. Chastity makes it possible to love with a

sincere and undivided heart. It has its own *laws of growth*. A chaste and virtuous person is formed day by day through his many free decisions. Chastity is therefore an eminently personal task (Katechizmus Katolíckej cirkvi 1999, 2343-2344). In his book *Love and Responsibility*, St John Paul II emphasises the affinity between chastity and love. One cannot be fully understood without the other, because chastity frees love from the tendency to use a person. True love does not exist until the desire to use is subordinated to the readiness to love in every moment. Blessed Anna Kolesárová can be an example for young people. It is necessary to realise a fundamental truth: being young does not mean seeking only short-term pleasures and superficial achievements. If the years of youth are to serve their purpose in life, they must be a time of generous giving, of sincere dedication and sacrifice, which make us fruitful even when they cost us something. It means living fully in the present moment, using our potential and abilities for good things, cultivating community, following Jesus, and making the most of every little joy of life as a gift of God's love (František CHV 2019, 46, 62). The works of mercy are God's invitation, a guide for Christians to follow Christ. The life of Blessed Carlo Acutis is an example of this attitude. The deeds of this admirable teenage saint can be brought to the attention of young people through the documentary film »Highway to Heaven« (Highway to Heaven 2020).

Conclusion

The first victims of a spiritual and cultural crisis are always young people. Since they represent the future of society, the courage and creativity of the Church in proclaiming the Gospel should be directed especially to them. The experience of the Church in Slovakia is well known: after receiving the sacrament of Confirmation, many people are almost completely drawn away from practicing faith so that education in the faith is out of the question. Children often find themselves in a strange world of religious concepts that are not brought to life by a living faith, but only by the desire to 'get it over with'. Knowledge will not flourish unless a living relationship with Christ is built. Contact with God-filled people definitely gives more to young people at this age. It proves to be even more valuable when it comes to their peers, as socialisation in friendships and fellowships is the most important influence at this stage of adolescence.

We would be happy if our children were 'better' than us and did not have to go through so many crises. We expect our children to know how to

embrace the weak and the poor, not to be swept away by the crowd, and to save face even if it costs something. What can we do? Do the best you can. Sometimes it is 'only' a catechesis of presence and 'normality' when young people have the opportunity to experience that a person who practises the faith is 'normal'. The young people of the Church - the Blessed or Venerable Servants of God presented in this educational material - are great examples of both normality and the pursuit of holiness.

Our attention has been drawn to the increasingly common problem of the loss of motivation among teenagers who prefer the consumerist values of a profane society. In the pastoral work of the Church with young people, it is necessary to pay greater attention to the issue of the virtues that are being sidelined by contemporary society, and thus to teach children and young people how to get oriented in the false moral values of consumerism. Religious education in schools should emphasise the importance of living the virtues and following role models of Christian life, which can help children to find their own identity at the beginning of puberty. A positive experience we have had in putting this knowledge into practice is that young people in the puberty phase are open to hearing about the Christian ideal as a model, because it provides them with a guide to achieve a fulfilled life.

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