

## Pastoral care of young people: prophylaxis, remedies, practices

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### **Abstract:**

*According to Christian teaching I try to study here the two practical aspects related to pastoral care of the young: the approach to sexuality and the dilemma of the priest-physician. The pastoral preoccupation of the priest concerning children must be continued and intensified during adolescence and youth. I am firmly convinced that the vocation of priesthood highly encompasses the sphere of psychology. The psychological qualities of the priest, the ability to understand and identify human psychology, provide the efficiency of treatment starting from a temporal healing to eternity. Through the priest, the Church provides pastoral services, welcoming Christians in the life of Christ.*

**Keywords:** *liturgical practices, confessor, teenagers, Christians*

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The priest is the one through whom the young and all the believers are first born and reborn through the Sacrament of the Holy Baptism, and then through the Mystery of Confession. Hence the attribute of „father”. He is by no means inferior to the parents of the flesh, having as much spiritual debt for his spiritual sons as natural parents have for the flesh. In the tradition of the Church, the quality of a *spiritual parent* is superior to that of the parent of the flesh, just as life in Christ is superior to that of the flesh. In this sense, St. Gregory of Nazianzus points out: “*It is thy breeder [...] that you must trust more than your parents according to the flesh*” (Cândea 1954: 466), and St. Theodore the Studite commonly called St. Platon, his confessor “father”, and Photeinos, his natural father, „his mother's husband” (Hausherr 1999: 34).

*a. The confessor and the child.* Children, like the elderly, are members of the Church of Christ (Sfântul Ioan Gură de Aur 2001: 255) with full rights and must be treated as such. We notice this from the hierurgias related to birth and Baptism, but especially from the fact that the newborn receives at the same time the Baptism, the Anointment and the

Eucharist, called the „mysteries of initiation” (Braniște 1990: 55). In this way, the priest introduces the children „in the plan of God’s care, but takes him at the same time into the plan of his care” (Plămădeală 1996: 107) cori. In the Gospels we often find invoked the motives of childhood and of the child (Matthew 18, 2-6, 19, 14, Mark 10, 13-16, Luke 18, 15-17) „these being the reference points for our spiritual moral becoming. Childhood means innocence, plasticity and, therefore, the capacity for improvement, the promise of its realisation.

Consciously, the child gets in touch with the shepherd of souls on the occasion of the divine worship in or out of the church, during pastoral visits or other in circumstances.

From the first meeting of the priest with a child, he must become his friend [...]. The priest must speak friendly with the child [...], to gain his confidence so that the child will always rejoice when he meets the *father*. Good mood gained in childhood is maintained until old age (Brânzeu 1930: 278).

If in the pre-school period the pastoral activity is somewhat restricted and generally related to the child’s family, at the school age the child will know the priest as a catechist and confessor. The re-introduction of religion into Romanian schools is a new „chance” (Daniel 1999: 4) for the Church. „Today’s children will be the faithful of tomorrow and they will be as they are prepared now” (Vasilescu 1940: 118). Although a significant number of laymen are involved in state religious education, the presence of the priest in the school as a moral and pedagogical authority is more than welcome.

Along with school age, the priest begins to exercise for the child his quality as a confessor, the Sacrament of Repentance being „of the highest value for the education of the little ones” (Procopoviciu 1945: 139). Although there were different views on the age of confession, it was finally established that „from the age of 7, children can become the confessor’s concern” (Vintilescu 1995: 64), „which is also consistent with the observation of psychologists and teachers that this is the age of „moral consciousness” for a normal child” (Evdokimov 1996: 316).

Children are the easiest category for spiritual leadership and, at the same time, the future of the Church. What is imprinted on man during childhood will be amplified later. „Skills acquired in childhood are like words dug into the bark of the young tree; they grow up with it, they grow

and often become a part of it” (Alexandru 1999: 51). Because in the early years of school age, children do not fully realise the gravity of sins, many of which are done by ignorance, through the Sacrament of Confession they must be aware of the existence of these moral deviations, because „when they grow up and become ambitious they are ashamed of recognising” [Hrapovičchi: 1932, 53] their mistakes. The sooner the child confesses, the more we have the chance to guide and establish him on the right path of the Church. „If we do not get children used to the conscience exam, which is the confession of sins, from primary school, it will later be very difficult or even impossible to bring them to the Confession seat” (Radu 1939: 115-116).

Another issue related to the confession of children is reflected in how it is administered. Some confessors, paying little attention to the personality of children and seeking to „conclude” as soon as possible this liturgical and pastoral obligation, practice confession in small or larger groups, or - even worse - confine themselves „only to read them the absolution prayer” (Melchisedec 1862: 178). There are also priests who believe that the first confessions must be made in small groups of 4-5 students, so that they become accustomed to the confessor, and then the individual confession will be made (Felea 1939: 326). Regarding the actual confession, we have to say that some children „show some restraint, shyness and even fear at first because they do not know what will actually happen: why they have to confess, what they have to say, will they be punished for their confessed trespasses?” (Bulugea 1999: 3). This fear is also perpetuated by some parents who, in admonishing their own children, use the threat of being punished by the priest. Therefore „the first duty of the confessor will be to calm the child” (Vintilescu 1995: 118). Approaching the soul of the little penitent „will be done with the utmost caution and unmeasurable love” (Cucoş 1996: 190).

Without the confession experience, most of the time children have to be helped with questions such as: *Do you pray in the evening and in the morning? Before and after the meal? Listen to your parents? Go to church?* and so on. In order to protect the child's special sensitivity, but at the same time trying to obtain the confession of age-specific sins, the confessor will skilfully adapt his questions. Another sensitive issue concerns the avoidance of those questions that would become an opportunity of

foolishness, awakening perplexities over unknown sins. As the child becomes more mature, the complexity of dialogue in the seat of confession will grow, both because the penitent's power of understanding increases, but also because the temptations to which he is subjected grow and multiply with age. These temptations, which can lead to sins, are related to the family and social environment in which each child lives. The more moral the environment is, the more chances there are for preserving the innocence of childhood and vice versa. Some bad deeds can be learned from other older children or from people who are at odds with Christian morals.

For the confession of children no material gift will be accepted from them, but on the contrary, the confessor will be the one who at the end will offer candy, crosses, icons, leaflets, or even religious magazines dealing with themes specific to their age. Thus, the Sacrament, and also the approach of the Confession while

carefully, tactfully and patiently used, will have a decisive importance in the formation of the soul, the growth and religious orientation of children throughout their life. This is all the more so since children pay more importance to confession than adults (Felea 1939: 335).

That's why the sensations and emotions experienced now are never erased!

**b. *The confessor and teenagers.*** The pastoral preoccupation of the priest concerning children must be continued and intensified during adolescence and youth. Regarding the period of adolescence, „some consider it a “terrible age”, others, on the contrary, an „age of gold”; for some it is „the age of crises, anxiety, dissatisfaction”, while for others it is „the age of great aspirations”; is „the age of contestation, marginality and sub-culture” but also the age of „social integration”; is „the age of drama, with all its glow, and also superficiality” - some say, while others claim it is „the age of participation in social progress”; most people consider it to be a „moral-psychological issue”, but there are also some who believe it is almost exclusively a „social problem”.

#### Adolescence

coincides with the departure of the child from the parental home to the foreign world, and instead of the acknowledged and indicated authority of the parents and qualified educators, young people resort to what they happen to be in contact with or is imposed upon them. As a sad consequence of this danger a certain alienation

from faith, from the Church [...] emerges. The spirit of the world that surrounds young people is contrary to the pure spirit of the parental home. There is a formal assault on the beautiful childhood constriction. The result will be all the more gloomy as this destructive work will be perpetuated by a fallen life of that young person who will be afraid to meet with the priest, and will avoid him because it is difficult for him or her to reveal his or her soul before the confessor (Brânzeu 1930: 282).

The priest must note that some of the former children at high school age, especially boys, cease to come to the church as well as to the seat of confession. That is why „one of the most noble missions of the priest is the salvation of the young” (Brânzeu 1930: 238). That „the rise and fall of a nation begins with” (Felea 1939: 349). One of his major duties is to constantly watch over young people, to make them understand that their religious preoccupations, including confessions, should not end with childhood, but they should intensify. The introduction of religion as a discipline of study in high school creates an opportunity for young people to structure their beliefs and religious experiences on superior moral, dogmatic, rational or even philosophical arguments. However, the formation of the religious character can not be limited to the theoretical level, the direct connection with the church is required. In his general pastoral work, and especially as a confessor, the priest will take into account certain temptations that lurk in the souls of the young. I would recall here the tendency toward terrible, nonconformist actions, fun, and last but not least, the sexual problem. In fact, the desire to give at all costs and insufficient self-control is the cause of many sins of youth. I want to mention smoking, alcohol, drugs, illegal fun. The young Christian may or may not take note of the priest's warnings, namely that many may not be allowed, but also the fact that they are not all useful (1 Corinthians 6, 12). Often early warning is sufficient, but it is not appropriate to incriminate entertainment as a danger in itself, but through the consequences it may bring about (Bunea 1957: 67-75).

***c. Two practical aspects related to pastoral care of the young: the approach to sexuality and the dilemma of the priest-physician.*** First of all, it is worth mentioning that of a special importance for young people and adults is their correct attitude towards the sexual problem. According to Christian teaching, the body is the „temple of the Holy Spirit” (1 Corinthians 6:19), and therefore the Apostle Paul warned: „*Flee from*

*fornication. Every sin that man will make is beyond the flesh. Whoever devotes himself to fornication sins in his own body.*” From the beginning we must state here that the true confessor never makes any interference in the fleshly life of his disciples. What he has to deal with is sin, offering the most appropriate medication to everyone. The confessor should not be scrupulous, or “too loose” either, that is, harbouring a indulgence that allows for sin to manifest. Sexuality is not similar to sin in every aspect and in all respects. But certain aspects that have become generally valid and that are serious sins can not be circumvented. Sin should never be accepted by the confessor.

The gravity of the sin of fornication is highlighted by the fact that the Church includes it in the seven deadly sins, and that the Book of Sacraments „provides great extension to questions about the kinds of sexual sins that the canons debate to an even greater extent” (Vintilescu 1995: 111). While the Church manifests a clear attitude to condemning fornication and adultery, all the more it disapproves of incest, prostitution, rape, homosexuality (Durlea 1999: 6), lesbianism as well as other sexual perversions (Adams 1993: 416-438; Here we find an approach of sexual deviations from the perspective of a neoprotestant pastor)], for some of them trying to provide „protection the laws” of the secular state. Perhaps more than ever, young people today are subject to aggressive sexual propaganda. A genuine pornographic industry (books, magazines, movies, etc.) has been created being immediately followed by a justifying ideology.

That is why, in the confessional seat, the confessor will take care to form a healthy Christian view of the sexual problem in young people.

His intervention must, however, be full of decency and mastery at the same time, avoiding [...] to stir curiosities [...]. At the end of the confession, the priest can begin as follows: All ages have their temptations. Youth also has her own, more and more powerful. As a student, as a clerk, as a young man, etc., in circles of young people and other circumstances in the world, you could have met with such temptations. How do you present yourself? Or: what can you tell me from this point of view? (Vintilescu 1995: 113).

We believe that questions must be prudent and not necessarily addressed to all young penitents, because most of those who fall victim to this sin are no longer confessing. An effective prophylactic measure is to awaken in the souls of young people of both sexes the awareness of the special value of virginity „This should be their supreme ambition and pride,

to which they can only give up in marriage” (Brânzeu 1930: 283). In connection to this, many young people nowadays attach greater importance to civil marriage at the expense of the religious ceremony and consider that once the act of civil status is signed, the sexual life can begin. Young people will be warned that the temptation of the premature start of sexual life will accompany them until the religious ceremony, and therefore they will have to remove the opportunities of sin. Since sin committed in the mind is a step that can lead to sinful deeds, the young person can be warned of the danger of literature and degrading films that various television stations deliberately transmit. In the case of girls, the belief that their value and even virginity is limited to being as courted as possible and so they must be liked and attract at any price will be discarded (Brânzeu 1930: 288).

The confessor has a leading role in the life of young people. In fact, his relationship with the whole Church is essential from at least a few points of view: first for his own salvation and connection with God, then for his obedient disciple without whom he can not exercise his God-given mission (Dinu 2011: 162). Regarding the second issue, it is important to note that with the development of Romanian society, more and more Western influences have entered, each having its consequences more or less harmful. The migration from a closed society in the country due to the communist context, to a „without borders” society, where everything can travel freely, has inevitably brought new currents often incompatible with the spirit of the Romanian nation. A pressing problem arising with integration into the great European family starts to be the parallelism between the priest and the psychologist with the attempt to delimit the sphere from the influence of both from a perspective of the relationship of the postmodern human being to the dimension every one encompasses.

The difference between the confessor and the psychologist is a social distinction and must not necessarily be reported to faith. By faith man is physically distinguished from other creatures. With free will, the human being can adjust according to his preferences either to the priest or to the psychologist. It is known that in the modern, secularised era, the question of this artificial dilemma has been raised. We do not want to say that the work of the psychologist is irrelevant, but we can not, as Christians, mark a sign of equality between the two works, because the plans they are targeting are different, the priesthood has the perspective of eternity,

psychology-temporality. Psychology aims to solve problems on the motivation of personal good here and now, and focuses on the human behavioural study, while the confessor brings to the fore the necessary conduct to acquire eternity.

However, I am firmly convinced that the vocation of priesthood highly encompasses the sphere of psychology. The psychological qualities of the priest, the ability to understand and identify human psychology, provide the efficiency of treatment starting from a temporal healing to eternity. Communication is the convergent point between the priest and the psychologist. Both communicate but the content of the message is as distinct as possible. The instruments of healing those with whom the two come into contact are as diverse as possible, given the two plans I have been talking about earlier. The relationship with the psychologist directs us within, the relationship with the priest engages us in a dialogue with the one next to us. And the extent to which we establish a real dialogue demonstrates the depth with which we relate to communication through communion. From a theological perspective, the relationship with the confessor-priest is able to develop in the penitent the spirit of the true Christian experience that can be associated (in a primitive manner) with psychic balance. In current practice it can be seen that this dialogue with the confessor is minimal, many times, even for those known as Christian practitioners. The role of the psychologist has grown because of the Christian fails to truly understand and live a relationship with the confessor. The young theologian lost - at least in school, formally - this dialogue, first and foremost, out of convenience. Therefore, many prefer not to confess to the Teacher-Fathers, but to the priests of the towns and villages or from the monasteries. The dialogue with the confessor implies a continuous transformation as concerns one's deeds, a continuous responsibility that contemporary man does not want to assume. The relationship with the psychologist is more convenient and does not involve so many changes that we should be responsible for.

Communication within the Church is communion and it becomes confession through the Divine Liturgy, which is not merely an emotional and aesthetic framework, or the peak ceremonial aspects of the Eucharist (communion), but is the great restitution and symbolic representation of salvation symbolism. It prepares and affirms what is produced in the



Eucharist as a cult expression of the content of dogma. Mass is the Church itself in its act of common gratification of communion. Since the Church is in the world a ministry in love, Christians are also bound to one another by love, according to the pattern of inter-trinity love (Stăniloae 1964: 185). The psychologist makes us work with ourselves, and the priest engages us in dialogue with God and our neighbor. Herein lays the condition of love and basic virtues. Love for our neighbor and not self-love. Let us worry about our brother's pain, and then ours will disappear.

Therefore, there should be no controversy between the choice between the confessor and the psychologist, but it should be a mature personal consecration of every man who has problems and wants to solve them. The priest has the purpose of making man understand the meaning of Creation and the ministry to which he is called.

We **conclude** by saying that the priest who is not consumed by the missionary fire of gaining and enlightening souls can not be called a priest. In the Church we often use a phrase: *the priest must work with time and without time*, but this is not necessarily the interpretation of good day-to-day management, but especially the observance, the discernment and the love he has to prove. By doing things of substance, the confessor becomes better. That is why St. John Chrysostom said: „*When the priest is not capable, the believers are forced to suffer much harm to the soul*” (Sf. Ioan Gură de Aur 2004: 147).

Through the priest, the Church provides pastoral services, welcoming Christians in the life of Christ, which it deepens afterwards. Today, it is possible to distinguish the existence of many types of Christians, beyond those who criticise the Church, the nominal, the Sunday ones and the esoteric ones. It is important to know that we are Christians not only for the great feasts and occasional parish gatherings, because we define the world, in the evangelical sense of the term, and we relate to the spiritual and the worldly often without being aware of it. This is seen much more in the case of young people that priests want to see attending the Church, but also knowing why. I believe that the current pastoral care of the Church is intended to focus on the re-Christianisation of young people, not because they are necessarily separated from the Church, but - more damaging, unfortunately - because they are indifferent as concerns an intense spiritual life.

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