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The Social Character of Christian Education in John Paul II's Teaching

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Abstract

John Paul II combined the principles of Christian education with social issues. In his teaching Christian education (integral development of the human person) was associated closely with the formation of social and pro-social attitudes. In this perspective, conscious striving for holiness permeates the mature personality shaping young man - proper use of the gift of personal freedom, the attitude of love for other people and social activity. The concept of Christian education of John Paul II has dynamic character because it links the spiritual development (self-development) and social development (commitment to the common good).

Introduction

Pope John Paul II ranks among the leading authorities of the modern world who was able to influence millions of people, whole nations and countries. It was possible thanks to his teaching and social initiatives. In this way, he defied evil and changed the world to good – diverted it to the civilization of love. He is still a spiritual director for many contemporary people. In his writings, he reveals the truth about man and about his Christian vocation that should be centered on solidarity with others on the social and religious plane. During his pontificate, the Pope often joined in the discussion about education of man and demonstrated an astounding pedagogic talent in his interactions with people. His charismatic personality made him a real master who cared incessantly for good and respect for human dignity.

John Paul II saw man as a free and independent personal being who develops during his whole life but the foundations of this development are laid during his childhood and adolescence. Such a perception of man through his development dynamics let the Pope stress the particular need for comprehensive (integral) education that would help young people to quest for, find and understand the meaning and purpose of their lives (John Paul II. 2000, pp. 41-44). In the face of contemporary globalization processes, it is more intensive than in the past that the young generation feels the need for ordered and “integrally humane” development and education where all spheres of human life are intertwined, interpenetrate and complement each other. In this way, individuals are given a possibility to find themselves in the modern world and at the same time to take a stance to numerous correlations that now become apparent in human life – to what is local and to what is global; to the real and virtual world; to what is new and to what is eternal (Nanni 2009, p. 73). In his teaching, John Paul II wanted to depict “an integral vision of a human being, the vision that shows in what way the individuality of the personal micro-universe combines numerous aspects of the human macro-universe” (Nanni 2009, p. 73).

John Paul II emphasizes the significance of Christian education in the modern world and at the same time notes that it should stimulate a person that is being educated to his or her spiritual development and social activity. The process of education in the spirit of Christianity should prepare a person to live in society (state) and participate in the legacy of culture and values. It should also enable a person's self-development (self-education) so that he or she could achieve the final goal (Borutka, 1994, pp. 248-252). As a subject of education, a human being is able to learn, love and strive after good that makes it easier for him or her to participate in social life in a harmonic way and fully develop all his or her abilities (Chrobak 1999, p. 57). In his teaching, John Paul II notes clearly that Christian education has a social character because it is a means that enables man to fully live his personal life in harmony with

his dignity of a child of God. He also notes that education that is understood in such a way helps man to develop his natural abilities so that they could serve the common good; it also enables man to enter brotherly relations with others and in this way reach his final and transcendent destiny to which he was called by God (John Paul II. 1989, p. 390). Without any doubt, Christian education is the art of helping man to develop his personality in an integral way, that is to develop spiritually and socially.

Perspectives of man's Christian development and education

Education that takes into consideration the “complexity” of a human being and his or her uniqueness leads to the question who a human being actually is in the context of his or her social and supernatural life. From the perspective of many Christian philosophical doctrines, “man was created »in the image and likeness« of God the Creator and is for this reason a personal substance, a judicious and free subject who, indeed, shares his human existence with others but is an exceptionally unique being on the plane of spirit and body who is able to transcend his body and the world. He is also a self that is »for himself« and cannot be reduced to a mere »means« as he is called to be immortal and see God” (Guz 2007, p. 256). This understanding of man is fully consistent with the principles of Christian education.

In his teaching, John Paul II stresses strongly the fact that “from the very moment of conception, and then of birth, the new being is meant to express fully his humanity – to «find himself» as a person. [...] «To be human» is his fundamental vocation: «to be human» in accordance with the gift received, in accordance with that «talent» which is humanity itself, and only then in accordance with other talents received” (John Paul II, 1994, p. 22). However, in order to be truly human, man needs the presence and help of other people who support his integral development at different stages of his life and in full responsibility. From the perspective of the Christian vision of a human being, an essential task of education is to “save” man on the social and supernatural plane. As persons who are male and female in their universal and exceptional ontological structure, human beings now need to be helped and supported by educational sciences in order to fulfil and carry out their social, religious and family duties. Nowadays, many young people feel the need to become people who live internally, live and act by a deeply integrated truth about their selves and create an indissoluble community of life and action. According to John Paul II's teaching, this “*communio personarum*” on the social plane should become one of the goals and tasks of Christian education that enables young people to meet one another and at the same time thoroughly get to know oneself as a human being – a person who incessantly tries to find himself or herself both on the social and supernatural plane (Borutka 1994, s. 141-144).

The world of human values is more and more often disorientated and chaotic, which leads to manifold alienation. According to John Paul II, alienation means “a reversal of means and ends: when man does not recognize in himself and in others the value and grandeur of the human person, he effectively deprives himself of the possibility of benefitting from his humanity and of entering into that relationship of solidarity and communion with others for which God created him [...]. A man is alienated if he refuses to transcend himself and to live the experience of self-giving and of the formation of an authentic human community oriented towards his final destiny” (John Paul II. 1996, pp. 508-509). Only by freely giving himself to another person or to other persons, man becomes truly “himself” – becomes able to notice the potential and horizon of possibilities to develop his personal self. For this reason, the process of development of human personality in a particular society is incomplete when it does not take into consideration the fundamental truth about man's vocation to find himself in love that is integrally connected with the responsibility for the shape and quality of interpersonal social bonds. From the perspective of the “communion of persons”, persons' or a person's education

is, above all, a process of mutual giving where persons give their mature humanity to other persons. When we give our humanity to others, we ourselves get to know it better and learn it again in a way (John Paul II, 1994, p. 58). In terms of education, it is always connected with discovering the value of man and with the feeling of responsibility as a kind of readiness to be with another person and serve this person – with being always aware that a human being is a value that can be fully recognized only by serving one another and mutual help (Nagórny 2008, p. 114).

Education that takes into consideration the full achievement of man's final goal is only possible when man turns to the Creator who enables human mind and action to build relations with another person that is based on truth and mutual solidarity. Taking into account numerous John Paul II's statements, one can notice that, according to him, man's attitude of "dialogue" that shapes mutual relations in the process of Christian education should be always oriented at building a community of persons and looking for truth in another person and in himself (discovering the meaning and purpose of life) and it should be constantly aimed at getting in touch with another person's different "mind" who also looks for truth. Man cannot build his life on uncertainty or on lies because then his life would be full of constant anxiety. As a being that was created to live in (family or social) community, the community that is a source of numerous truths for him which cannot be fully checked, man is also a being whose life is based on faith (Kazimierczak 2003, pp. 24-25). John Paul II teaches: "Human perfection, then, consists not simply in acquiring an abstract knowledge of the truth, but in a dynamic relationship of faithful self-giving with others" (John Paul II. 1998a, p. 50). Thus, the attitude of dialogue in man's personal development and education is an ability to think (jointly, socially) and to be ready to correct oneself in the light of what another person thinks as well as an ability to listen to another person and to be ready to give an honest answer (Nagórny 1997, p. 333). Christian education should mould society in such a way that it, in its very nature, becomes a community that is built on the truth. In order to achieve this, every member of the society should engage actively in serving one another. This would be a stimulus to accept, respect and support every man's personal development and education in his highest dignity as a person.

The ability to function responsibly in society is a very important factor of man's personal maturity and an expression of his moral autonomy that is shaped by many-sided and integrated educational actions. In this context, Christian education has a social character because it enables a person who is being educated to have thoughtful insight into complex life situations, make good decisions, be guided by consequences of one's own actions and be responsible for the consequences of one's actions. According to John Paul II, contemporary Christian education means a need to mould man's fundamental personal traits, is an intrinsic element of friendly relations with other human beings and at the same time an important factor that gets young people into the process of self-control of their own development (Bissoli, 2001, pp. 96-98). Undoubtedly, it creates a possibility of building such educational interpersonal relations where "another person" is not perceived as an "enemy" (Latin, *hostis*) but as a "guest" (Latin, *hostes*) who is known by us and whom we know, whom we meet, whom we have a dialogue with, whom we solve problems with and with whom we move in the directions that are important and worthy of man. Thus, Christian education helps an individual to discover the meaning of his existence. In other words, it helps man to develop a proper personal and social identity that is able to organize and reconcile his own internal diversity with numerous "voices" that come from the outside and reflect in a person's inside (Nanni 2009, pp. 74-75).

Christian education which serves man's social good

Over the recent decades, in connection with different philosophical doctrines there have been many misunderstandings concerning Christian education that harmonizes with caring of man's social good. Some people regard it as a kind of "social and religious" propaedeutics, others perceive it as an important element of human education that familiarizes man with a widely understood social and religious culture of a particular nation or country, whereas some people regard it as a kind of influence that clerical movements (denominations) have on a given society (Olbrycht 2005, p. 330). It happens that Christian education itself is juxtaposed with social education and is considered as indoctrination and ideological subordination to the assumptions of a widely understood educational activity of a particular religion (Okoń 1998, p. 448). At this point it is worth mentioning that social education itself is considered a conscious organization of social activity that aims at bringing about intended changes in man's personality which are connected with his personal development, understanding of the reality, attitude to the world and people, his beliefs, attitudes, system of values and goal of life. According to H. Radlińska, this activity aims at strengthening an individual's power, supporting his talents and directing his creativity (Kamiński 1982).

The principles of social education that are understood in such a way refer to the Christian concept of education and man's personal development. According to John Paul II, this process of development and education aims in its nature at the formation of the human person in the pursuit of his ultimate end and of the good of the societies by harmonious development of their physical, moral and intellectual endowments. In his numerous speeches, the Pope stresses the meaning of Christian education in contemporary man's life and notes that one of its most important tasks is the thorough formation of the human person that is expressed among others in man's competent and responsible relations with other persons (Jusiak 2013, pp. 179-180). This builds a kind of network of interpersonal relations that are based on long-lasting values and people's influence on one another that are determined by their personality, assessments and mutual feelings, but also by social norms and their social roles.

Man's complete and comprehensive education is possible when he participates in a particular social reality as its member and when he lives and acts in this reality (Chrobak 1999, p. 73). Taking into consideration the social character of Christian education in John Paul II's teaching, it can be noticed that it usually aims at teaching man some values, norms of conduct, attitudes and (physical, moral) personal features that can make him an active and useful member of society. In accordance with this understanding, Christian education that aims at creating a "perfect" man also enables him to serve the common good given that it is in accordance with his good and supports his development (Majka 2005, p. 162). As a result of this assumption, one has to acknowledge the absolute value of the human person and create optimal conditions of his or her social and religious development. According to John Paul II, in the nature of a well understood both Christian and social education there is no room for "seizing" or enslaving man, but there is an enormous potential of possibilities that should serve his many-sided (integral) development. In order to achieve this goal, persons should meet one another and the person who is being educated should be taught, in the spirit of respect and freedom, proper values that should lay the foundation of his social axiology (Olbrycht 2005, p. 331). With reference to social and religious (Christian) education, John Paul II always stresses man's need to improve himself and to "repent", or accept a new vision of life that is a value on the personal and social plane. This proposal for man is a programme of positive social and religious development, which means a programme of good that is adjusted to his situation, needs and life capabilities. Thus, education that is understood as a dynamic process of man's social and religious development takes places on almost every

plane of a person's life and is often expressed in fundamental forms of human activity, such as gratitude, forgiveness, joy and openness to others.

According to John Paul II's strong conviction, young people who participate in Christian education become more internally autonomous and are able to transcend "themselves", renounce their own needs and desires, and engage in an activity that orients their lives, e.g. helping other people. In the Pope's opinion, Christian maturity is closely related to greater social responsibility, which means authentic care of other people's good, ability to be empathetic, sympathy for the suffering, eagerness to act for other people's good out of regard for them and solidarity (Jusiak 2013, pp. 183-185). For this reason, a person who is characterized by Christian maturity is very tolerant when it comes to other people's different way of thinking, reacting and behaviour, but does not renounce his or her beliefs and values. Without any doubt, Christian education increases man's need to develop in an integral way, supports his faith, knowledge and social competencies, and helps him to develop in freedom and responsibility.

John Paul II is aware of the social character of Christian education but stresses that man should discover in a conscious and responsible way the truth, good and beauty as a spiritual experience that has its source in a personal contact with the Creator. In this context, Christian education that harmonizes with social education should clearly help man to fully update his humanity and to find himself as the (evangelical) ideal of the "new man." However, it should be pointed out that education that is understood in this way means helping a person who is being educated to reach the "destiny" that was set for him by the Providence of God, as well as helping him to develop his inborn "buds of good" and to fight his nature and other accidental circumstances. In educational practice, it means the ability to establish "close" relations between the teacher and persons who are being educated in order to learn their needs and "vocation," and then help them with all pedagogical kindness to achieve these goals by using the reserve of natural and supernatural means that are essential in the process of education (Cian 2001, pp. 141-144).

In order to implement the programme of Christian education that is understood in such a way, teachers should adopt a judicious attitude of openness, which means that, in an authentic way, they "are for the person and with the person" in their intellectual, social and religious development. In other words, teachers should – using their competencies – help their students to discover the world, by means of their authority and integrity – help them to strive after their ideals, by means of their engagement and enthusiasm – motivate and encourage their students to self-development, and as witnesses of faith – they can and should support their students' religious development (Olbrycht 2006, pp. 95-96). As John Paul II notes, an important principle of a creative teacher-student relation is a dialogue where both parties try to understand one another and cooperate. It is particularly important because nowadays many young people distance themselves from an active participation in the life of traditional religious communities and social movements; by doing so they neglect their human development (formation) and condemn themselves to a purely external and superficial understanding of human life. According to the Pope, the fact that many young people distance themselves from social issues and neglect their religious life makes them particularly susceptible to the influence of so-called spiritual consumerism that is often expressed in people's fascination for culturally foreign "spiritualities" and sometimes leads to their alienation from the native culture and religious tradition (Spalek 2005, pp. 365-366). The system and dynamic development of new forms of education of the young generation that are based on a solid foundation of Christian values can help overcome this situation in modern man's life.

Concluding remarks

Nowadays, representatives of the young generation do not want to be guided and often manifest their lack of trust in different institutions, but they readily accept “personal (moral) authority” that is based on the truth and respect to another person and that helps them to discover the truth about themselves and the world they live in. In this respect, the social character of Christian teaching supports activities that aim at young people’s permanent development that is full of creative enthusiasm and enrich them internally by teaching them social and supernatural values. As John Paul II stresses, it should be noted that although the modern young people succumb to the charms of what is attractive and superficial in the modern world, the vast majority of them strive after the ideals in their lives that help them develop and open their humanity to the social and transcendent dimension of the reality.

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