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- Abstract -

Perpetual Adolescence in Psycho-Pastoral Analysis

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Keywords

infantilization, emerging adulthood, psycho-affective immaturity, perpetual adolescent, early psychotrauma, pastoral psychotherapy, emotional abuse, Christian parenting

Perpetual Adolescence in Psycho-Pastoral Analysis

Perpetual adolescence is a growing phenomenon that rewrites both the nature of intra-familial relationships with all its aspects and the dedicated intervention of the Church generally

called pastoral care. Responsibility for the future of society as represented by today's young people is a common goal for psychology and religion, and the present paper is an effort to provide an interdisciplinary response to this problem. From a pastoral point of view, the approach to the infantilisation of young people and adults facilitates the pastoral act by adapting the response, the correct positioning in relation to problematic cases or situations, the profound and updated knowledge of the problems related to the growth and development of children in relation to their multiple relationships, the insertion of elements of current psycho-pedagogy compatible with the rigours of Christian life and the opportunity to create specific activities for both young people and their parents.

The general objective is to identify, define and conceptualize perpetual adolescence in correlation with current research, the demands of Christian pastoral care, cultural trends and the needs of priests in the communities they care for. More specifically, in the content of the paper the challenge of today's world will be exposed in the context of youth ministry, the defining features of adolescents and young people will be delimited, emerging adulthood and its role in the development process will be addressed, the distinction will be made between normal and abnormal pathological development, the principles of Christian pedagogy will be identified in accordance with psychological ones, and at the end a series of guidelines for the preventive and curative intervention of the priest in the parish will be synthesized.

Although some changes in the maturation process of young people have been mentioned since the beginning of the 20th century by authors such as C. G. Jung, Erikson or Levinson, it is only since the 21st century that the problem has been better highlighted, called „emerging adulthood” by Jeffrey Arnett, „Peter Pan Syndrome” by Kiley Dan or „Perpetual Adolescence” by Sally Porterfield. The work is unique both in terms of the topic addressed in the Orthodox theological environment and the interdisciplinary nature of the work, which seeks a complex perspective on the development of young people, from adolescence to adulthood. For these reasons, old and new resources from the theological sphere were used, belonging to Saint John Chrysostom – „Despre slava deșartă și despre cum trebuie să își îngrijească părinții copiii”, Themos Vasilios – „Pentru o înțelegere a adolescenței”, Tia Teofil – „Tânărul postmodern și construcția viitorului”, Turansky Scott and Joanne Miller – „The Christian Parenting Handbook”, but also psychological studies on trauma: „Tratat de psihotraumatologie” by Gottfried Fischer; „Psihologia traumei” by Maria Nicoleta Turlic and Cornelia Măirean; „Tratat de psihopatologie a dezvoltării copilului și adolescentului” by Peter Riedesser; „Child abuse” by Ruth and Henry Kempe; Frantz Ruppert and Harlad Banzhaf with „Corpul meu, trauma mea, eul meu”, or „Mitul normalității. Trauma, boala și vindecarea într-o cultură toxică” by Gabor Maté and more.

The interdisciplinary exposure of the concept, beyond the practical nature of research, increases awareness and adaptation to the new context of pastoral activity, a process of continuous formation that the clergy involved can support in order to update and change perspective, from a passive attitude to a combative and reactive one. In this sense, the present research participates in the inner fortification (increases the feeling of professional efficiency, self-esteem, self-efficacy, etc.) and the personal development of priests (through the awareness of their own emotional gaps, the traumas of the inner child, the recovery of relationships with family or believers), transformations with indirect but major repercussions (through the power of example) on the psycho-emotional and spiritual state of the community they are responsible for.

The paper is structured in five chapters, organized in a logical, coherent and sequential form, with a progressive exposition from the general to the specific, following the objectives previously established, as follows:

The first chapter is an introductory one, guided by three clear objectives: **a) to define the concepts** and position the paper from an interdisciplinary perspective, taking into account the relationship between science and religion, on the one hand, and the relationship between psychology and religion, on the other, expressing their historical evolution. Four types of relationship are identified between science and religion: conflict, contrast, contact and confirmation. Psychology is considered a subdivision of pneumatology that has "lost its soul". In its original form, empirical and rational psychology coexisted until Wundt launched the new psychology based on scientific methods. As a reaction, Christian Psychology or Biblical Psychology emerged, which later became known as Christian Anthropology. Recovering the relationship between psychology and theology is an approach of universal scope that is part of the process of reconciling science and religion. The extent of interdisciplinary studies proves the partnership between psychology and religion with their common mission of healing and prevention in relation to the human person. **b) highlighting the need** for collaboration between psychology and theology in the pastoral act, pastoral care being a therapeutic, curative and prophylactic action and theology a "psychotherapeutic system". In its various forms (pastoral counselling, pastoral psychotherapy, pastoral psychology, orthodox psychotherapy, pastoral medicine, pastoral sociopathology, etc.), Christian therapy is the key to pastoral intervention in post-modernity. The post-modern society, represented by young people, marked by distrust of existing values, superficial, egocentric, self-confident, independent, spiritual but not religious, makes its members vulnerable through isolation, constant discontent, psycho-spiritual instability, fluid identity, etc., to which the Church is called to intervene through a correct and dedicated pastoral act. **c) young people and their ministry in postmodernity.** Youth, defined by UNESCO as "a period of transition

from the dependence of childhood to the independence of adulthood and the awareness of our interdependence as members of the community" is a fluid category, dependent on the cultural, social, biological or relational conditions in which a person lives and develops. Youth ministry, as an imperative of the Church, is an act of teaching, of transmitting information of a religious-moral nature through alternative means, with the aim of making them responsible in relation to their peers or to God, to create a stable identity, to help them to set a goal in life and to live healthy. The efficiency of pastoral care is conditioned by its adaptation to the target group, which, in the current conditions, is constantly changing. The difficulty of the pastoral act depends on the cultural currents (e.g. the post-truth era, postmodernism), the different generations temporarily brought together due to rapid changes in technology, possibilities, resources (generation Z, generation alpha), genetic baggage and psycho-emotional and social resources (cognitive intelligence, nature of intra-family relationships, creativity, logical analysis, emotional intelligence), spiritual experiences and religious education received, etc. The multiple theories regarding the needs of young people and their psychological, social, spiritual, moral and biological development highlight the specific needs of each category. In essence, the role of early experiences in the development and maturation of young people is affirmed, which is why throughout the work the focus will be on childhood and adolescence.

In the second chapter, emerging adulthood is discussed, as an intermediate stage of development, located between adolescence and adulthood, with major repercussions on all specific aspects of young people's lives. The postponement of responsibilities and maturation is a characteristic of industrialized societies, being anticipated by Erik Erikson in 1968, then by Kenneth Keniston in 1971 and Daniel Levinson in 1978 when he mentions the novice phase. It wasn't until the 2000s that Jeffrey Arnett researched and launched the theory that supports emerging adulthood as a new stage of development. From the outset, five essential traits are asserted: the search for identity, instability, self-focus, indecision, and endless possibilities.

In the maturing process, an essential element is the development of motivation that is built from needs for self-realization and affirmation, cognitive concerns, the growth and shaping of interest in the desired professional area, sensory experiences. At the same time, in the development of motivation, the will is exercised, which makes the transition from external pressure (extrinsic motivation) to internal pressure (intrinsic motivation) in the fulfillment of chosen goals. Leaving the guardianship of parents gives young people the feeling of complete freedom followed by the void of orientation that can throw them into dangerous surroundings. However, the degree of religiosity becomes a protective factor against the excesses and temptations of youth.

Spiritual development is a process that Paul Evdokimov states has three stages: the preliminary unity of the fragile and unstable human being; the conflict between the spiritual and the empirical and the final integration, the emergent youth being in the conflict period. For the consolidation of spiritual identity, four reference factors were identified: faith, affective connection, behavior and belonging. Depending on the possible combinations of the exposed elements, young people can be divided into: dedicated traditionalists, selective followers, spiritually open people, religiously indifferent, spiritually disconnected and non-believers. A particularly important element in overcoming the crises of the emerging period and the crystallization of identity is represented by the experiences of childhood and adolescence, amplified by the psycho-spiritual climate of the family.

In our country, emerging youth have much stronger ties with their parents, having the role of model and educator. From the perspective of young people, parents can represent a support in their development by providing trust, accepting the fact that they no longer have absolute control over their children and making God responsible in the process of spiritual growth.

The third chapter deals with perpetual adolescence itself, as a dysfunction that goes beyond the broad and permissive frames of the transitional age and affects the sphere of relationships, the professional, family and social dimensions.

Jacopo Bernardini offers the following indicators of maturity according to European culture: completing education, living independently, having a job, marriage, fatherhood, political participation, developing religiosity and spirituality, and abandoning deviant behaviors. Psychologically, according to Lindsay Gibson, spiritually mature people are confident and grounded in reality, show respect and reciprocity, and are receptive and engaged.

Among the causes that determine the stagnation of psycho-emotional development are the orientation towards the environment and the increased attachment to friends, the dysfunctional family with communication difficulties and low educational level, deficient coping strategies, the existence of traumas in childhood and adolescence, failure to fulfill the basic responsibilities of parents towards their children.

Carl Jung speaks for the first time about the pathological aspect of delaying maturation when he mentions the "puer aethernus", the eternal child, described to him as an adult, apparently functional, but in an exaggerated emotional connection with his mother whom he finds no equal, being in continuous search and dissatisfaction. Another form of immaturity is called "Peter Pan Syndrome," characterized by irresponsibility, anxiety, loneliness, and conflict in sexual identity. With onset in adolescence (12-17 years), it crystallises in youth and becomes acute in physiological maturity, although it fulfils all the features of a socially defined maturity. Consequently, after the

age of 40, it is prone to depression and tries to re-experience its adolescence and youth. Among the traits of the perpetual adolescent are: emotional paralysis, procrastination, social impotence, magical thinking, ambivalent attitude towards the mother, alienation from the father, unstable sexual and emotional relationships. Fernando Almeida proposes the independent diagnosis of immature personality disorder which fits the symptoms found above in the definition of puer aethernus and Peter Pan Syndrome.

Immaturity is understood as a consequence of the laws of the market - Kidult - the ideal child consumer. At the same time, the lack of maturity is a consequence of some deficient coping mechanisms, specific to children (impulsivity, fantasy) and co-dependent status. The consequences are reduced to major emotional disorders: depression, anxiety; deviant behaviors (addictions, risky behaviors and suicide attempts), the development of personality disorders: dependent, immature, antisocial, narcissistic, borderline and couple problems.

Chapter four discusses the childhood and adolescent traumas responsible for the development of immaturity and their pastoral implications. The experience of trauma becomes dysfunctional through the automatic intervention of defence mechanisms in the post-traumatic phase. Franz Ruppert identifies several categories of trauma: existential trauma, trauma of losing an attachment figure, love trauma, sexuality trauma and attachment trauma. Regardless of their nature, there are four types of reaction: fight, flight, freeze and compliance. The manifestation of trauma in emerging adulthood and later is conditioned by internal and external resilience factors that mitigate negative effects. Individual factors: gender, age, docile, active, gentle temperament, developed social skills, high degree of intelligence, internal locus of control, humour, charisma. Family factors are the quality of relationships, parents offering empathy, acceptance, support, openness, understanding, integration of the child in the family, empowerment. Extra-familial factors are: extended family, existence of social support, integration in groups with various activities, socio-cultural climate.

Psycho-trauma always appears in relation to children's basic needs, either through closeness (violation of privacy, annulment of the person and free will), or through distance (disinterest, neglect, forgetting). Gabor Maté remembers what those unfulfilled needs are that create stress. These are: healthy, honest attachment, secure attachment and a sense of safety, permission to feel and express emotions, freedom and the opportunity to play. The most common forms of psychological aggression are abuse, neglect, emotional incest and parentification. Depending on childhood experiences, we encounter several types of parental behaviors that predispose to immaturity: the obsessive-compulsive parent, the depressive parent, the paranoid

parent, and the detached parent. The psycho-spiritual path to healing consists of truth recognition (disclosure), forgiveness and compassion.

The last chapter is dedicated to prevention and psycho-spiritual intervention, offering both a patristic (Christian parenting in the vision of St. John Chrysostom) and biblical (the example of St. Paul the Apostle), but also a psychological perspective. St John Chrysostom emphasises the training of the child's soul, common sense, restraint, limits, economy, parental love and obedience at an early age. St. Paul, as a spiritual father in relation to the Christians he cared for, showed responsibility, authority, praise and encouragement, sharpness of speech, humility, physical presence and a spirit of peace. In terms of Christian parenting, a number of tips or exhortations for parents to balance the responsibilities, benefits and values emphasized in the family were summarized.

The action of the Church through the pastoral involvement of the priest in pathological cases or at risk of psychopathology is summarized in a few aspects: a) the insistence on the spiritual and psychological health of young families, considering the directly proportional correlation between the condition of the parents and that of the children; b) increasing the quality of intra-family relationships by identifying relational terrorism, relational transparency and creating an environment of acceptance; c) verbal and non-verbal communication between parents and children that involves respect and obedience: knowing how to receive and how to give, how to ask and how to refuse; d) imposing healthy limits on children, applying positive corrective discipline; e) stimulation of the secure attachment with a role in the emotional nourishment of the child and emotional imprinting for the whole life; f) the correct expression of love towards children, adolescents and the life partner through the different languages of love: words of encouragement, physical contact, giving time resources, giving services (sacrifice) and gifts.

Starting from the real problems of society, but also from pastoral demands, a complex profile of the phenomenon of immaturity in adulthood has been outlined, with deep roots that start from childhood (or even the prenatal period) to adolescence and youth. This justifies our concern with early life experiences: personal, family or cross-generational traumas, the nature of relationships, living conditions, parents' emotional or material problems, etc. The experiences of the early years set the child's course for the rest of life, but with a similar impact on the relationship with God. We can say that a childhood lived and misunderstood undermines not only earthly life but also eternity.