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**The Spiritual Formation of Adolescents in the  
Archdiocese of Vad, Feleac, and Cluj: The  
Needs of Adolescents and the Church's  
Response in the Context of Global Culture**

**ABSTRACT**

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**KEYWORDS:**

Spiritual Formation, Adolescents, Needs, Mission of the Orthodox Church, Identity Crisis, Pluralism, Sociological Research

**ABSTRACT**

The spiritual formation of adolescents within the context of global culture represents both a major challenge and an essential mission for the future of the Church. In a world where values are increasingly relativized and identities fragmented, adolescents and young people deeply feel the need for a solid point of reference that can offer them direction and meaning. In response to this profound search, the Church is called not merely to provide answers, but to offer a living encounter with Christ.

The postmodern context has given rise to a cultural and religious pluralism that profoundly influences the spiritual formation of adolescents. More and more often, they are placed in situations where they must define their faith within a diverse cultural environment, marked by syncretistic tendencies, moral relativism, and the lack of clear points of reference. This context generates confusion and insecurity among young people seeking truth and meaning in life.

Adolescence is a delicate stage on the axis of human development, marked by specific challenges related to religious education and spiritual formation. It signifies a profound transformation in a person's life—a time when the soul searches for the meaning of existence and begins to penetrate more deeply the mystery of faith. The mind opens to the understanding of divine truths, and the soul senses the call to communion with God. The young person begins to ask essential questions about their purpose, eternity, and the work of grace in their life. At this stage, freedom starts to be assumed with greater responsibility, and relationships with others gain a moral and spiritual dimension. Life's trials and challenges become opportunities for spiritual growth, while lived experiences shape character and strengthen faith.

Adolescence is a decisive period for the personal orientation toward religious faith. Although the preadolescent and adolescent years (especially during high school) often bring spiritual and existential crises with potentially serious repercussions for both the individual and society, this is also the period when faith is usually lost, rediscovered, or gained. As Maurice Debesse noted, "God, ceasing to be a reflection of the parental image, now embodies the supreme value in which all other values are gathered."

As a transitional stage between childhood and adulthood, adolescence is defined by a range of specific and general characteristics that influence and determine the crystallization process of a young person's personality. This complexity has led to many contradictory definitions of this stage of life, which underscores the need for thorough and comprehensive research on the subject. The definitions provided by experts from various fields of study highlight the complex and unique nature of this age.

The present study aims to analyze the real needs of adolescents in relation to the mission of the Orthodox Church and to identify concrete directions for their spiritual formation, suited to the challenges of contemporary society. The approach seeks to combine faithfulness to the theological foundations of Orthodoxy with a deep understanding of the psychological, cultural, and social context in which adolescents live.

Both a general objective and a series of specific objectives were set for this work, designed to detail the necessary steps for achieving the proposed goal. The general objective of the thesis is to investigate how the Orthodox Church contributes (or can contribute) to the spiritual formation of adolescents in the Archdiocese of Vad, Feleac, and Cluj, in the context of today's global culture. This objective involves, on the one hand, a deep understanding of the spiritual, social, and emotional needs of young people within the Archdiocese and, on the other hand, an evaluation of the Church's current response to these needs, as well as the formulation of concrete pastoral solutions for improving this response. Essentially, the aim is to identify the existing gaps between young people's expectations and the Church's pastoral offerings, and to find ways of bridging these gaps, strengthening the connection between youth and ecclesial life.

To answer the research questions and test the formulated hypotheses, we employed a predominantly quantitative methodology, complemented by elements of qualitative analysis, tailored to the subject under study. The research can be described as a case study focused on the Archdiocese of Vad, Feleac, and Cluj, using a sociological questionnaire as the main investigative tool. The following sections detail the methodological design—from the instrument and sampling to the data collection and analysis procedures—while also highlighting the advantages and limitations of the chosen approach.

The research tool was a structured questionnaire composed of 25 questions. These questions were designed to cover all major themes of the study: respondent profile (age, gender, background, education, etc.), personal relationship with faith (declared level of religiosity, frequency of prayer and church attendance), perceptions of the Church (what they appreciate and what they do not, trust in the Church, opinions on its relevance), past experiences (involvement in youth activities organized by the Church, such as camps, pilgrimages, choirs, or volunteering), perceived needs (expectations from the Church and what would help them spiritually and emotionally), and suggestions for improvement (including an open-ended question allowing respondents to express their proposals or observations in their own words).

The questionnaire was designed to be completed anonymously and relatively quickly (within 10–15 minutes) to encourage a high response rate and sincere answers. The format included multiple-choice items, rating scales (e.g., from 1 to 5 for level of agreement or satisfaction), and a few short open-ended questions. To ensure content validity, the questionnaire was reviewed by two specialists—a theologian and a sociologist—to confirm the clarity and relevance of the questions.

The sample was a convenience, non-probabilistic one, due to the practical constraints of the research. The target group—Orthodox adolescents within the Archdiocese of Cluj—is difficult to reach through classical probabilistic sampling (which would have required population lists and random selection). Instead, the questionnaire was distributed online through available communication channels: social networks (Facebook, Instagram) used by local youth, and parish youth groups (WhatsApp, Facebook). We also contacted religion teachers and youth coordinators from the nine deaneries of the Archdiocese, asking them to share the questionnaire with students in their schools.

In conducting this research, we deliberately avoided applying the questionnaire in contexts involving youth already actively engaged in Church activities. This was to prevent the creation of informational “bubbles” that could bias the final data analysis. The snowball sampling method allowed the research invitation to spread organically within the youth’s networks of acquaintances. The typical respondent targeted was an adolescent aged between 14 and 35, and the data collection period extended from February 2023 to January 2024, providing nearly a full year to gather a sufficient number of responses. This extended period was chosen to cover different times of the year, including youth-dedicated events or holidays, which could have influenced both the availability to respond and the attitudes expressed.

The preadolescent and adolescent period is marked by a profound inner struggle, in which young people confront essential questions related to identity, meaning, and spiritual direction. The influence of the digital environment, social pressures, and models promoted by contemporary culture intensify these searches, negatively affecting the process of spiritual formation. In such a context, the mere transmission of religious knowledge is no longer sufficient. Adolescents need authentic guidance toward living the faith as a real encounter with God. Christ is not an abstract idea or a mere doctrinal reference but the living Person who reveals Himself to those who seek Him with a pure heart. Only through a personal relationship with Him can the adolescent find true light and step on the path that leads to the Kingdom of God.

Authentic spiritual formation involves the engagement of the whole being—mind, will, and heart—in a process of growth in communion with God. This spiritual maturation is fulfilled within the liturgical and communal life of the Church. Personal and communal prayer, Confession, Holy Communion, and active love are the means by which the young soul is shaped and strengthened in faith. In this process, the presence of spiritual fathers, religious education teachers, and young confessors of the faith is crucial, as lived testimony convinces and inspires more than any theoretical discourse. The Church is called to be a place of



encounter and growth—a space where adolescents can learn, ask questions, experience, and deepen their life in Christ. Vibrant parishes and youth initiatives within organizations such as ASCOR, ATCOR, or LTCOR offer frameworks where faith becomes a lived reality, not merely a formally professed one, and where spiritual formation gains depth and fruitfulness. At the same time, this work aims to highlight the need for a solid spiritual formation for adolescents, in a context marked by religious pluralism and identity instability. The analysis is based on biblical and patristic foundations, as well as on sociological research conducted in the nine deaneries of the Archdiocese of Vad, Feleac, and Cluj, through a questionnaire applied to over one thousand respondents. The purpose of this endeavor is not merely to describe a situation but to propose viable pastoral responses that concretely support the Church's mission in working with today's adolescents. The Church is called to respond with coherence, authenticity, and love. Adolescents can no longer be formed exclusively through classical methods; there is a need for a living presence and spiritual accompaniment adapted to new realities. Looking toward the new generations and starting from their needs, this work brings to the forefront the Church's responsibility to preserve the treasure of Holy Tradition unaltered while also translating the message of the Gospel into a language accessible to today's generations.

The mission of the Church remains to form man for the Kingdom of God. Through religious education, adolescents and young people are taught to live the Gospel in daily circumstances, to assume faith as complete trust in God, and to become living members of the Body of Christ. This is also the objective of this work: to contribute, through analysis, reflection, and pastoral proposal, to the formation of a generation capable of following Christ in the midst of a constantly changing world. Young people represent both the present and the future of society and, especially, of the Church. For this reason, they require special attention, particularly today when they are exposed to an intense flow of information and theories that promote a desacralized vision of life. In this context, their orientation often becomes difficult. They occupy an essential place in God's plan, being a living and dynamic part of the ecclesial community. In the Church, their role is not limited to assimilating Christian teaching but also includes active participation in liturgical and missionary life. Throughout history, their spiritual education has been a constant concern, with emphasis placed on forming a solid Christian conscience capable of responding to the challenges of contemporary society.

Youth is a crucial stage of life, situated between childhood and adulthood, characterized by psychological and physical development processes and gradual integration into social life. In a contemporary context where the spiritual dimension is increasingly marginalized or relativized, young people face an inner tension: they reject worthlessness and inauthenticity but show a particular interest in models that embody solid principles and clear ideals. This fact demonstrates that young people are in profound search of their identity and a living relationship with God. The need for education became evident after the fall of the first parents into the sin of disobedience—a moment when man, deprived of divine grace, felt the necessity for a means of guidance toward a blessed existence. This means took shape in the process of formation and perfection through education. The foundations of this endeavor are highlighted in the pages of Holy Scripture, both in the didactic literature of the Old Testament and throughout divine revelation, which offers parents essential examples for guiding their children spiritually and morally. Through this formative dimension, Holy Scripture has historically established itself as a fundamental source of Christian pedagogy, playing a defining role in the education of children, adolescents, and young people.

The reason for choosing this theme is based on two main coordinates: its novelty and its usefulness. The originality of this approach lies in the in-depth analysis of how this tension manifests and can be overcome through a synthesis between Orthodox teaching and the daily realities of today's youth. The work proposes a new perspective on spiritual formation, combining the theological landmarks of tradition with the analysis of the current social context and the understanding of the concrete needs of the young generation within the Archdiocese.

The novelty of the theme also stems from the fact that this issue is scarcely explored in local specialized literature. By investigating the specific realities of the Archdiocese of Vad, Feleac, and Cluj, this study fills a gap in contemporary research. It offers a practical example that could be extended to other dioceses as well. Through this research, we aim to identify the needs of young people concerning the mission of the Orthodox Church and the expectations new generations have in their relationship with the Church. The approach to this phenomenon gives the work an interdisciplinary and innovative character. Thus, this research brings an original contribution, highlighting how the Church can engage effectively with the tendencies of the globalized world to support the spiritual development of the new generation.

The practical utility of this theme is evident on multiple levels. Pastorally, the expected research results will provide concrete guidelines for priests, religious education teachers, and coordinators involved in adolescent formation. A better understanding of the difficulties and spiritual aspirations of today's youth will allow the adaptation of catechetical strategies and missionary programs to current realities, making them more attractive and relevant to the younger generation. For example, the findings could serve as the basis for developing innovative educational and spiritual projects in parishes and schools—projects that combine the perennial values of Orthodoxy with the language and means accessible to the digital generation.

Socially, the theme has value by fostering dialogue between the Church and young people—a dialogue that directly contributes to their spiritual formation in a pluralistic world. This doctoral research aims to offer a relevant perspective on the spiritual formation of adolescents and young people, responding concretely to current cultural demands without compromising the richness and beauty of Orthodoxy.

In the first chapter, we sought to highlight the biblical and patristic foundations of youth spiritual formation, providing an extensive analysis of the age of youth in light of Holy Scripture and patristic tradition. The chapter begins with an overview of the Old Testament, examining how religious education, moral principles, parental authority, and prophetic teaching contributed to shaping the character of young Jews. This section also emphasizes the importance of divine law, sapiential wisdom, and a personal relationship with God in spiritual formation. In the second part, we analyzed the New Testament context, in which the young person is called to perfection through personal responsibility and following Christ. We underscored the special attention given to young people by the Savior and the Holy Apostles, as well as the constant call to purity, faith, and self-sacrifice. The final section of the chapter addresses the teachings of the Holy Fathers on youth, highlighting the specific temptations of this age and the virtues that can be cultivated during this stage, with numerous references to authors such as Saint John Chrysostom, Saint Basil the Great, and Clement of Alexandria. We also analyzed the role of the family in the spiritual formation of adolescents and the impact of the formative process on their development.

In the second chapter, we approached the spiritual formation of adolescents from a contemporary perspective, analyzing the challenges and risks they face in the context of cultural and value pluralism in today's society. We began with a radiography of adolescence viewed as a stage of identity crisis, marked by insecurity, relativism, and contradictory external influences. In this light, we explored how globalization, secularization, and new

ideologies contribute to the emotional and moral instability of young people. Next, we analyzed the impact of the digital environment, highlighting the risks of alienation, excessive exposure, and superficiality, as well as its potential as a tool for catechesis, connection, and spiritual information. We dedicated a special section to the social pressure felt by adolescents, emphasizing group conformity, the desire for validation, and the difficulties of resisting modern temptations. The entire chapter aims to present a realistic picture of the adolescent's condition today and the need for pastoral care adapted to these realities. The 21st century does not introduce an entirely new reality but rather highlights the end of a traditional way of existence. Spiritually, the current context resembles in many ways the universalism and syncretism of the Hellenistic era, when multiple cultural and religious influences met and merged.

The contemporary man lives in a world characterized by uncertainty and growing identity fragility. His situation can be likened to that of a traveler who has crossed a frozen terrain and, with the coming of the thaw, finds the surface beneath him beginning to break apart, turning into an unstable, hard-to-cross landscape. In the face of the pluralist trend, the surface of traditional values and concepts seems to fragment, making the path forward increasingly difficult for today's person. Some lucid voices affirm that Western Europe is rapidly advancing on a path of dechristianization—a phenomenon unfolding before our eyes and against which the Churches are striving to highlight the most effective missionary strategies. In this pluralistic climate, spiritual landmarks and moral values seem to be under continuous pressure to be redefined, making the formative journey of the adolescent more challenging than ever. Faced with these challenges, the Church is called to offer adequate responses to the needs of today's society—a society standing, as Father Dumitru Stăniloae noted, "at one of the greatest crossroads in history."

In the third chapter, we analyzed concretely the pastoral-missionary and catechetical programs carried out by the Romanian Patriarchate, with special emphasis on initiatives dedicated to adolescents and their spiritual formation. In a detailed manner, I have presented the program "Christ Shared with the Children," a national catechetical initiative that responds to a genuine need for systematic religious education. I analyzed its foundations, the motivation for its initiation, its objectives, structure, and implementation methodology, as well as the results achieved. Moreover, I addressed the project "Choose School!" as an educational and spiritual intervention aimed at preventing school dropout, shaping character, and promoting Christian values among children, adolescents, and youth. I described the stages of its implementation, its objectives, and the impact it has had within the participating

dioceses. The chapter continues with other significant initiatives, such as the Orthodox Youth Meeting (ITO), summer camps with religious themes, the March for Life, and other activities that have contributed to the active involvement of young people in the life of the Church. The analysis highlights the Church's efforts to create living, accessible, and formative contexts for adolescents, where they can discover their belonging, purpose, and spiritual calling.

The chapter dedicated to programs carried out by the Romanian Patriarchate for adolescents emphasizes the Church's constant efforts to offer a spiritual education adapted to contemporary challenges. The initiatives implemented demonstrate a permanent concern for the moral and spiritual formation of adolescents and young people, aiming to create a balance in their intellectual, emotional, and spiritual development. Through such programs, the Romanian Orthodox Church provides adolescents with a favorable framework for spiritual formation and support in preventing negative social phenomena, including school dropout and estrangement from religious values. These initiatives continue the Church's educational mission, deeply rooted in the cultural and religious history of the Romanian people. Faced with the challenges brought by the pluralistic phenomenon, which often promotes values incompatible with Christian moral principles, the Church adopts innovative methods of catechesis and youth support. The proposed activities help adolescents understand and authentically live the Orthodox faith, integrating harmoniously into the life of the ecclesial community. Through involvement in these programs, adolescents discover their personal vocation, develop solid moral principles, and cultivate an authentic spiritual life based on Christian values.

The Romanian Patriarchate complements the education provided by the family and school, offering adolescents not only theoretical knowledge about faith but also a spiritual environment where they can relate to Orthodox values together with other young people. These efforts confirm the necessity of religious education in a dynamic and pluralistic society, highlighting the Church's fundamental role in shaping the new generations. In the long term, catechetical programs contribute to forming a society founded on respect, solidarity, and Christian love. More than a mere educational initiative, these programs represent a deep commitment of the Church to forming young people as future members of the Body of Christ. They provide essential support in a world increasingly marked by rapid changes and uncertainties, ensuring that future generations will have clear reference points for an authentically Christian life.

In the fourth chapter, I documented the concrete realities of adolescent ministry in the Archdiocese of Vad, Feleac, and Cluj, highlighting the structures, associations, and active

projects within this ecclesial space. I presented the most important youth organizations, starting with the Association of Orthodox Christian Students of Romania – Cluj Branch (ASCOR), followed by the ATCOR branches in Cluj-Napoca, Bistrița, Gherla, Huedin, Turda, Beclean, and Năsăud, as well as the League of Orthodox Christian Youth in Dej. I also included a section on parish youth groups and philanthropic associations such as “TurdaTin” and “A Small Gift for a Great Joy.” Special attention was given to the “Ioan Bunea” Youth Missionary Center in Sângeorz-Băi, an essential space for camps and the continuous formation of adolescents. The chapter provides an overview of a well-organized and dynamic youth ministry network, specific to the Archdiocese of Cluj, one of the most actively engaged dioceses in working with young people.

In the fifth chapter, I included the applicative dimension of this study by presenting a research report conducted among adolescents from the Archdiocese of Vad, Feleac, and Cluj. The research was based on a questionnaire applied to a sample of 1,010 respondents, aiming to identify adolescents’ perceptions and expectations regarding the Church, as well as directions for improving pastoral mission. I presented the methodology used, the research tool, and the thematic structure of the questionnaire. The analysis covered aspects such as family background, religious participation frequency, denominational affiliation, as well as issues related to emotional support, communication, the Church’s online presence, social needs, and unmet expectations. The chapter reflects, through the voices of young people, the real difficulties in their relationship with the Church, but also their openness to an authentic, sincere mission based on involvement, dialogue, and spiritual accompaniment.

In the final chapter, I synthesized the conclusions of the entire work and formulated several directions for revitalizing the relationship between the Church and young people, especially adolescents. Based on the theoretical chapters and the empirical research results, I emphasized the need for pastoral care centered on dialogue, active listening, and the building of authentic relationships between clergy and youth. I proposed modernizing communication by adapting language, diversifying involvement opportunities, intelligently using online platforms, and integrating young people into the decision-making life of the community. I also highlighted the theological and missionary role of the Church in the spiritual formation of adolescents, showing that fidelity to the Church’s dogmatic teaching can coexist with pastoral creativity and adaptation to new social realities. The chapter concludes with a forward-looking perspective, outlining the premises of a living, profound, and relevant pastoral work in support of today’s youth.

The Church's vocation regarding young people is, in essence, a vocation of love and service, following Christ. From the moment of Pentecost, the Church was born as a community open to all ages, and the prophetic voice of Scripture reminds us: "I will pour out My Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions." (Joel 3:1). Young people are not marginal in God's plan but are called to be protagonists in His work. The Holy Apostle Paul told his disciple Timothy: "Let no one despise your youth, but set the believers an example in speech, conduct, love, faith, and purity." (1 Timothy 4:12), showing that young people can themselves become models of faith when supported and encouraged.

Our Lord Jesus Christ Himself offers us an example of attitude toward young people with the words: "Let the little children come to Me and do not hinder them." (Mark 10:14). This call resounds even today, inviting the Church to open its parental arms to the new generation with patience and gentleness. The Church's vocation is to be a spiritual mother for young people — to give them birth and nurture them in the faith, to protect them, and also to give them wings to fly toward the fulfillment of their talents under God's watchful eye.

The necessity of adolescents' spiritual formation lies in their participation in the life of Christ and in ecclesial communion, for their perfection as persons. It is not merely about transmitting religious knowledge or imposing moral norms but about guiding the young soul toward a living encounter with God, the discovery of an identity higher than what the world offers — that of a son or daughter of God by grace. Authentic spiritual formation offers young people deep roots — the assurance that they are unconditionally loved by God and belong to a spiritual family — and strong wings, meaning the responsible freedom to grow, to use their gifts, and to contribute to the world inspired by Gospel values. In a fragmented society often devoid of stable landmarks, spiritual formation provides that solid identity core that helps young people navigate life with purpose and discern between the ephemeral and the eternal, between the false allure of consumerism and the true joy that comes from love and faith.

The role of pastoral ministry in this contemporary context becomes, therefore, crucial. The priest, the religious teacher, the youth coordinator — all those involved in guiding young people — are called to be living icons of Christ's care for souls. Today, perhaps more than ever, being a pastor of young souls requires a sensitive heart and an open mind. The servant of the altar is no longer just the preacher at the pulpit whom young people listen to in silence; he must become their companion on the journey, able to walk alongside them through adolescence — like the Risen Christ who walked with two disoriented disciples on the road to Emmaus, explaining the Scriptures to them and revealing Himself at the breaking of bread.

The priest is called to first listen to young people's struggles, gently explain the meaning of the sacred, and help them recognize God at work in their lives. This requires much patience, empathy, and creativity.

This research has strengthened our conviction that young people are not only the future but also the present of the Church. Encountering their thoughts, hopes, and even struggles — through the questionnaire and dialogues — was more than an academic exercise; it was a lesson in humility and hope. We discovered that often, beneath their apparent withdrawal or indifference toward sacred matters, young people harbor unspoken questions and a genuine hunger for the absolute. We sensed, indirectly, their joys when speaking about moments when they felt close to God, but also their pain or disappointment when they felt misunderstood by the Church's adults. These testimonies led us to reassess certain pastoral attitudes and seek new communication paradigms to draw closer to the new generations. At the same time, we became optimistic, seeing that today's generation has so many good seeds planted in their hearts, waiting only for the right light and warmth to grow.

In a mysterious way, the Church itself learns and transforms in its relationship with young people. Each generation brings new challenges but also a freshness that renews the Body of Christ. If we know how to listen to the voice of youth, the Church itself becomes more vigorous, "rejuvenated" by their enthusiasm and questions. This is a reciprocal exchange of gifts: young people receive the wisdom and experience of their elders, and the elders receive the enthusiasm, creativity, and fresh perspective of youth. Such an exchange is possible only in a Church that cultivates real communion between generations. The Church's vocation toward its young people can be summarized in two words: love and hope. Love — expressed through unconditional and sacrificial care to educate and accompany them — and hope, because in every young person, no matter how lost they may sometimes seem, the Church sees the image of God and a potential future apostle of His love. The mission of adolescents' spiritual formation is perhaps one of the most delicate but also one of the most beautiful pastoral tasks. By working with young people, the Church works with its very future and with what humanity has that is purest and most eager for the absolute. In today's global tumult and unrest, the Church is called to be a guiding beacon and a welcoming shelter for young people — a place where they find the truth that sets them free, the love that heals them, and the wings to soar.

We conclude this study with the hope that we have managed to approach what it means to identify the expectations and needs that the younger generation has in relation to the Church's mission. We trust that our effort will serve — even if only in a small way — a better



understanding and fulfillment of this noble vocation of the Church, for the glory of God and the good of the souls entrusted to its care.