

# ON HOW CONTEMPORARY YOUNG PEOPLE FIND THEMSELVES IN THE ORTHODOX CHURCH

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**Abstract:** *The present study offers a general view on Christian youth in the Romanian society and not only, on the understanding of their human and spiritual traits as well as on the quests they undertake in order to get to understand God, Church and the world. Thus, considering the love of the Son of God towards children and young people, one can understand the concern of the Church that, together with the family and the school, seek to instill Christian virtues in young people. God is love and it is out of love towards mankind that He was incarnate, died, resurrected and founded the Church. In their writings, the Fathers of the Church provided valuable advice to parents as to raising and educating children. There are differences among young people triggered by the social environment they live in, the education they receive, the degree to which they allow themselves to be influenced and manipulated by society. The involvement of the parish and of the parish priest in the well-being or in the recovery of young Christians should be a permanent and fruitful concern. The theologians of the 20th century were preoccupied with the spritual and cultural state of young people and contributed to their education according to the Gospel by means of conferences and articles, an approach which should be carried on. It is only with the involvement of young people in the life of the Church (in the Divine Liturgy, the Holy Sacraments and the Hierurgies) that one can hope in a dynamically preserved testimony of Christ in the world. The testimonies given by students and young people concerning the role of the Church in their lives represent the outcome of the Christian education in their families as well as the active responsibility on the part of the clergy and teachers of religion education.*

**Keywords:** *Christ, Church, young people, family.*

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## **Introduction**

According to the teachings of the Gospel, the Christian young people bear the signature of the eternal life insofar as they practice the Christian virtues. In our society there are young people of different character structure and various educational backgrounds acquired due to the family, Church, school and society in which they have lived and matured.

”The Solemn Year of the Religious Education of the Orthodox Christian Youth-2016”, in the Romanian Patriarchy, as well as the topic of the International Symposium “Young people in Church and Society” urge us to reflect on the contemporary Christian youth and their place within the Orthodox Church.

Looking at the Romanian society and the world in general, we notice that there are many young people involved in Church activities, yet many of them are outside these activities for various known and lesser known reasons.

Jesus Christ the Savior, the founder of the Church and her Servant, had a special care for young people and children, attitudes and facts reflected by the Holy Gospels.

The resurrections of Lazarus (John 11), of the son of the widow of Nain (Luke 7, 11-16) and of the daughter of Jairus, are some testimonies of the concern, of the appreciation and of the love of the Son of God towards young people, who symbolize in fact the eternal life.

”(...) Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven” (Mathew 19, 13-14) reveals the thoughtfulness of Christ towards all people, be they children, young or elder, Who looks for their innocence, their kindness, their weakness, their faith and their love.

Christ treats the rich young man who asked Him: ”Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?” (Mathew 19, 16) with the same attention. The thoughts about the endless life, the inner tribulation and the longing for eternity are typical of young people and not only.

Christ himself is the life of the world (acc. John 14, 6), He is "the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser (...). Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15, 1-5).

The apostles He chose abode in the words and learnings of Jesus Christ the Teacher, one of them and the youngest of all being Saint John the Evangelist, the theologian of divine love (acc. John 21, 20-25).

Jesus Christ, the Source of all Grace, conveyed to the Church, to the disciples and to His descendants, life, grace, supernatural gifts and power so that the world "may have life and have it abundantly" (John 10, 10).

Therefore, all the commandments and teachings of the Gospel cannot be truly accomplished without the help of the One Who is the body of the Gospel, Jesus Christ our Savior, Who said: "and surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Mathew 28, 20). He is together with the clergy, the children, the young people and the elders christened in His name and in the name of the Holy Trinity.

By all means the human being, the young people, wish to know God from the offer of their life environment : the Holy Gospel, the Tradition of the Church, the cult of the Church, the circumstances or the challenges of life.

The family, the Church, the school and the environment are the means that allow the Christian young people to know more about the history of the relationship between a people and a christian world and God. This acknowledgment can be both joyful and painful, dramatic and exciting, beautiful and bright.

Moreover, it is the bond between God and every christian, every human being, and from this personal realization one reaches the deepest theology, namely the fact that God loves us even when He challenges us.

In order to reach this state, a youngster needs a Christian education of the body, which is "the Temple of the Holy Spirit" (I Corinthians 6, 19), and also a "fellow worker"<sup>1</sup>, according to Saint Basil the Great and to the other Holy Fathers. They are also the ones to tell us that we should consider the education of the soul, of the virtues and of the will with a view to a formation of virtues in young Christians<sup>2</sup>.

## **1. Responsibilizing parents and children through education**

Saint John Chrysostom points out the responsibility of parents: "Parents, behold. Bring up your children cautiously, in the teaching and compunction of God. The youth is wild and there is need of many caretakers, teachers, pedagogues, nursers and cooks. It is therefore advisable, after so many troubles, that we could master it (...). Let us not allow them to partake in those alluring and harmful, and not always please them, but rather keep them in the whole wisdom and moderation, for it is the abuse of the latter that drives to the loss of youth more than anything else"<sup>3</sup>.

Not until he experiences the love of God, even when facing troubles, will the young person understand the teaching of the Church. The first thing he has to understand is the very close bond between him and God (through the Baptism, Chrismation, Confession and the Eucharist), Who called him because He preferred him, but He preferred him not because he is better than others, for there many servants of Christ better than us, and there are a lot of young people better than those studying theology at the Theological Seminary or at the Faculty of Theology, yet He prefers some devout

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<sup>1</sup> Ioan G. Coman, *Frumuseșile iubirii de oameni și spiritualitatea patristică [The Beauties of Fellow Men Love and Patristic Spirituality]*, Timișoara, Mitropolia Banatului, 1988, p. 41-42.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 45-50.

<sup>3</sup> Saint John Chrysostom, *Tâlcuiri la Epistola Întâi către Timotei a Sfântului Apostol Pavel [Homilies on the Epistles of Paul to the Corinthians]*, București, Nemira 2005, p. 97.

and dedicated young persons who rediscover themselves in the Church as confessors of the revealed truth.

When God prefers you, He obliges you. He preferred Saul of Tarsus, who was His persecutor, but He called him and made of him the greatest missionary. Saint Paul turned into the greatest missionary because he felt compelled, because he was not worthy to be called to apostleship. For that matter, neither did the other apostles, for they weren't the most literate and wise people of their time, but mere fishermen (Peter, Andrew, etc.). Christ might have well chosen Plato, Aristotle or Socrates as disciples, but He chose these Apostles precisely because nobody expected He would, in order for us to understand that He can prefer, that He can oblige (acc. Mathew 4, 19 "Come, follow me and I will send you out to fish for people"), and whoever feels loved without being worthy becomes the greatest missionary of the love of God.

The grace, the will, the quest and the repentance can bring back to the Church the lost young people. The metropolitan Nicolae Mladin once said that "the youth is the permanent renewal force of nations and of history, renewal through ideal, renewal through sacrifice"<sup>4</sup>.

The youth differs from generation to generation, from country to country, from countryside to city etc., but all young people have in common the quest (acc. Marcus 10, 17-27); the quest of the truth, the quest of spiritual, cultural values, the quest of fulfillment etc. When they can't find what they are looking for or when they aren't content with the society, young people redirect themselves to other areas, or to other fields of public life.

The difference between young people is shaped by the environment they live, learn and work in. There are good and bad young people in every place, country, or society. We would like to have only religious, good, educated young people, but the family, the school and the society don't always succeed in bringing and keeping

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<sup>4</sup>Metropolitan Nicolae Mladin, *Tineretul și creștinismul [The youth and the Christianity]*, in „Tinerete și înviere” [Youth and Resurrection], Craiova, Omniscop Publishing House, 1999, p. 97.

them at high standards. The economic crisis, the crisis of the Christian family, the migration, the moral-spiritual crisis of the world we live in create a lot of poverty, despair, confusion, moral and spiritual relativism, as well as the estrangement from God and Church. The loss of ethnic and spiritual identity of young people generates the devaluation of life, the lack of meaning and a drifting existence.

”We live under the impression of irretrievable collapse, but also with the feeling that a new world will emerge from the remains of contemporary calamities. Young people cannot live in the absence of this renewing perspective: they want to fight for a new age. And a new horizon is bound to appear over a tired, exhausted and aged Europe. But where from and how? (...). To put it differently, a new religion is needed (could it be Islam? n.n.). And indeed, our century is tormented more than ever by the religious matter, and alongside with it, the youth”<sup>5</sup>.

We notice the stress laid on religion in the world, on the religious origin and its importance in context of hostilities between civilisations and traditions. Nevertheless, we hope, as our distinguished theologian and metropolitan Nicolae Mladen used to say, that ”Christianity has not depleted its forces creating the European civilisation, now threatened by autumnal gloom. Christianity is above the fatality of historical cycles, it is not a religion resulted from a certain spirit or from a certain age, but a religion that lent history its eternity, to make history fruitful until the end of time, in order to bear other and other cycles of culture and civilisation (...).

Therefore, today more than ever, the mission of the young generation is to get renewed through Christianity. The youth should immerse in the divine truth, the Christian accomplishment, the love of Christ, the Christian sacrifice. It is only in the spirit of

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<sup>5</sup>*Ibidem*, p. 107.

Christianity, in the spirit of the love of God, that a better, more noble, more just and closer to heaven society can be created”<sup>6</sup>.

In their spiritual approach, young people should try to search and understand that Christianity is not a religion, but that it is the life-giving Spirit of the Son of God. His *Birth* in history, His *Death*, His *Resurrection* and His *Ascension* testify that Jesus Christ did not found a new religion. On the contrary, He recreated the world, inviting it to eternal life: “Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent” (John 17, 3).

In this line of thought, Saint Voivode Neagoe Basarab taught his son Theodosie and other young people: ”Thus, brothers, do not cherish the vanities of this world, in order to save your souls, but treasure the justice, the truth, the love and fear God. Care for praying at all times and your heart will enlighten and see God”<sup>7</sup>.

Aside from the turmoil of life, the unfulfilled dreams of the modern mindset (ill- stricken, degraded), youth means optimism, generosity, ideal, devotion, purity and resurrection. Young people ought to understand that the love for God and mankind is born from and through prayer, like Saint Isaac the Syrian says.

Prayer can be expressed in different forms and languages: cultic, personal, cultural, philanthropic and social.

In the conference entitled ”The Youth and the Prayer”, the metropolitan Nicolae Mladin distinguishes between three types of experimental prayers in the life of young people who experience moral and intellectual crises: ”the prayer of the quest” (acc. Luke 15, 11-32) *The Parable of the Lost Son*); “the contemplative prayer” that enables the soul to admire the uncreated Beauty and ”the prayer of

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<sup>6</sup>*Ibidem*, p. 109.

<sup>7</sup>*Învățăturile lui Neagoe Basarab către fiul său Teodosie [The Teachings of Neagoe Basarab to his Son Theodosie]*, Foreword by N. Iorga, Supervised edition and critical references by Teodor Vârgolici, București, Gramar Publishing House, 2010, p. 105.

the trust in God, of the communion with Christ, by which He joins and leads us not only in battle, but also in victory”<sup>8</sup>.

While some young people, influenced by certain philosophical conceptions or demoralizing examples within society question the need, force and use of prayer, the prayers of the Church, of their parents and friends help them rediscover themselves, restore their lives enslaved by pleasures, by passions and by the world.

We learn from the experience of the Church and of the Christian family that ”prayer is the true shaping power of youth, because it descends God into the soul, the very God Who creates and brings everything into being”<sup>9</sup>.

The atmosphere within the Christian family, the personal example of parents (the prayer, Church attendance, fasting, love, faith and good deeds) contribute a great deal to young people’ formation. It is here that they learn to be either large-hearted or selfish. Leaving one’s family may mean giving up the habits and healthy teachings acquired in this environment and choosing a new way of life inspired by the practice of the group of friends and acquaintances the youngster has joined in.

This is why the dialogue between parents and teenagers, between the spiritual father and young people ought to be emphasized and focused on the actual problems the latter are dealing with. Living among colleagues who disapprove of the Gospel and of the teaching of the Church, who refuse to save their chastity until marriage, is already a great effort for many Christian young people.

Then, the parish is responsible for integrating young people into the Church by supporting, helping and involving them in activities bound to produce spiritual contentment and fraternal atmosphere.

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<sup>8</sup>Nicolae Mladin, *Tineretul și rugăciunea [The Youth and the Prayer]*, in *op. cit.*, p. 26.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibidem.*



Freedom, television, divorce, migration, the internet, the confused and secularized society offer young people opportunities to manifest disobedience, indifference towards religion, towards the Church, towards morality and social Christian values.

The permissiveness in society, the negative models, and the tolerated and justified perversions, the immoral and unnatural laws now promoted breed indifference in young people's hearts as to the call of Christ and that of His Church.

Atheism and religious indifference, the diseases that trouble people's hearts, are more deeply rooted in young people's conscience.

The manipulation of young people and the exaggerated amount of lies provided by certain institutions and persons, the drugs and alcoholism generate manifestations similar to those in October-November 2015 in Bucharest and in other cities, when young people at large shouted out: "We want hospitals, not cathedrals!"

Where can a youngster best rediscover himself, ill in hospital, or healthy in Church?

If only we, the clergy, could succeed in making these young people experience the joy of the return of *the lost son to the Father*, that is the relationship of love with God!

Our Church has the means to reintegrate the young people affected by alcohol, drugs, prostitution and Internet addiction, yet these alone are not enough. Greater involvement and human and financial resources are needed in order to recover and reintegrate them in the Church and in society.

I have seen, for instance, in Italy (Milano), how in specially fitted centers, priests and qualified staff dealt with the rehabilitation and recovery of people under detention that had consumed drugs, had committed murder and other crimes, who were afterwards taken and supported throughout the recovery and social integration process. It is very hard, but necessary work, especially when there are many young people wandering on the paths of sin, pleasures and immoral and inhuman practices.

The shepherds must seek these wandering sheep and bring them or bring them back again in the spiritual stable of the Church

(acc. John 10, 1-14), like our Savior Jesus Christ teaches and impels us.

The cooperation of the priest with the Christian family facing this trouble and with the social factors that have responsibilities in the medical and the socio-human field would lead to a decrease in the number of affected young people and of those disorientated from the path of the truth and of the healthy life. The servants of the Church have a very important duty and responsibility in this recovery process of the human beings.

## **2. The young people' answer to the call of the Church**

Here is what a pupil in the seventh grade says in a moment of reflection, comprehension and responsibility: "Youth is the time when we are wrong either by recklessness, either by ignorance. What does society do in order to have pure, kind and beautiful young people? We all know the answer to that: they urge us by tempting advertisements promising us happiness. Once entrapped, we become the target of critics of the entire society, that does nothing more than judge us. By taking part in the religion class, through all sort of activities at church and together with our spiritual fathers, we discover that the only institution that loves us the way we are, that tolerates every doubt and every question is the Church! The Church gets involved in mending our mistakes; it teaches us to find our spiritual tranquility, it shows us we are taller on our knees, while praying. The Church helps us find answers, invoking the grace of God that enlightens our minds and invigorates our spiritual powers. The Church gains one through love and makes one offer love. Surely every man seeks to be loved and understood, not tricked and then judged by dishonest judges. This is why I love the Church, because the Church is the place where God dwells"<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup>Diana Dumitru, Comprehensive School „Ion Băncilă” of Brăila, *Biserica te atrage cu iubire și te face să oferi iubire [The Church gains one by love and makes one offer love]*, in „Hristos în căutarea tânărului și tânărul în căutarea lui Hristos” [Christ in the Search of the Youngster and the Youngster in the Search

Advised by parents and supported by priests and schoolteachers, "young people will learn to choose what is useful in the environment, and then solve the problems of life without going for a chaotic and downfallen way of living.

In a conference with young people, father Mihai Iosu, referring to the gift given to men to choose between good and evil, said : "the greatest temptation young people ( but not only) are faced with is that of always **choosing the shallowness**, the easier, more convenient and accessible ways. There is an avalanche of options that intersect contemporary youngster and assault him with undissimulated aggressiveness under the mask of what we now call the temptations of the young people"<sup>11</sup>.

Modernity temptations are various, from those previously mentioned to the cinematic productions that distort or misshape the historical truth concerning the divine-human person of Christ, to the novels that doubt the existence of God, to the so-called scientific documents, discovered by researchers that are claimed to contain a different perspective on the Gospels as well as other arguments with regard to the earthly life and existence of Jesus Christ and of the Church, then to the media attacks on the Church of Christ and its denial and on the eternal values it promotes, to an attractive but misleading presentation of the world without its Creator.

The student's word presented above, as well as other examples of this sort in students' and young people's lives makes us hope as to a healthy conservation of the Christian faith and of the Romanian nation.

The associations organized by Christian young people in our country (*the Association of the Christian Orthodox Students of Romania, the League of Christian Orthodox Young People of Romania, the Association of Orthodox Youth of Romania, the*

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of Christ], Galați, Arhiepiscopia Dunării de Jos Publishing House, 2016, p. 204-205.

<sup>11</sup>Mihai Iosu and Constantin Necula, *Tinerii și ispitele modernismului [Young people and the temptations of modernism]*, Sibiu, Agnos Publishing House, 2008, p. 37.

*Association of Orthodox Doctors and Pharmacists of Romania, etc.)* permanently contribute to the spiritual formation of young people, as well as to the conservation and better understanding of the tradition of the Orthodox Church.

We should reiterate the way young people nowadays relate to life and to the world: "We live in a time of spiritual crisis. It is more and more often that the society, founded on the moving sand of materialism and erosion of traditional values, attempts to exclude God from men's lives and to turn young people into a manipulable mass, by removing the religion class in schools (...). So, besides family and Church, the religion class teaches children that God is Love and Freedom and sows in their souls the seeds of love for the Creator"<sup>12</sup>, says Ana Maria Fotache from the National College "Vasile Alecsandri" in Galați.

Gabriela Gabor, another young girl, regards the Church as the place where young people can rediscover themselves, where they can improve their lives: "All young people should understand that the Church is an intimate place, where the heart, in all its thoughts and dissatisfactions meets God (...). The Church and the faith are the only ways to solve the mysteries of the youth, the apprehensions and the doubts (...). The youth is a time of quest, of choice in favour of the truth, the kindness and the beauty, but at the same time it can be the time of many temptations, dangers, wanderings or falls"<sup>13</sup>.

What a proof of lucidity, realism and wisdom from these young students, who relate themselves to the authentic spiritual and human values!

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<sup>12</sup>Ana Maria Fotache, 12th grade, 98% dintre elevi au ales «cuvintele vieții veșnice» [98% of students have chosen «the words of the eternal life»], in „Tinerețea - o contagioasă tendință de aspirație la absolut” [the Youth- a Contagious Tendency to Yearn for the Absolute], Galați, Arhiepiscopia Dunării de jos Publishing House, 2016, p. 27-29.

<sup>13</sup>Gabriela Gabor, 12th grade, when educating young people, *Cartea Creștinismului ar trebui să fie....[the Book of Christianity Should Be...]*, in op. cit., p. 24-26.