

The Church and Young People – Christian Foundations of Youth Formation

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Abstract: This paper analyzes the role of the Church in the formation of young people within a cultural context marked by postmodernity, individualism, and the loss of moral reference points. The study highlights the theological foundations of the Church's mission, the responsibility of the ecclesial community toward younger generations, and the need for an educational paradigm that cultivates discernment, empathy, identity, and communion. In the face of current spiritual, cultural, social, and psychological crises, the Church is called to offer young people a stable framework of guidance, an authentic Christian way of life, and concrete support for their integration into the community and society. The formation of young people thus becomes an essential missionary act, capable of shaping the future of both the Church and the world.

Keywords: Youth, Christian Formation, Mission, Identity, Community

Introduction

Whenever we speak about the mission of the Church in the world, we refer to the fundamental calling and responsibility that every Christian is invited to fulfill within the time and space of this earthly existence. Christ Himself laid the foundation of this work when, before His Ascension, He entrusted the Apostles with the task of transmitting to all people His teaching, His life, and His works, inviting everyone to become disciples of the Lord. Mission must be understood as a duty, for it expresses the assumption of a real responsibility toward oneself, toward one's neighbor, and toward God—especially within the context of the contemporary world.

Today's young people are caught in a rapid rhythm of change. And such transformation, if not supported by a solid inner structure, gradually weakens the spiritual dimension of the person, reducing existence to mere biological reactions and directing life toward an existential void. Radical individualism becomes a major challenge, for it begins with the idea of liberation from any limitation, transforming absolute freedom into the ultimate reality. The rise of technology has induced in many young hearts a sense of self-sufficiency: when one has no close friends or real dialogue, retreat into digital tools seems sufficient, and the need for communion disappears. Instead of bringing people closer, technology has created a distance between them—one that is difficult to bridge through digital entertainment or time spent on electronic devices.

The difficulty of living naturally in today's world results from the absence of solid reference points, of values, of authentic examples, and of moral leaders. We hide behind external forms that delight the eye but do not touch the inner being, and this emptying of substance generates educational, identity, spiritual, economic, and psychological crises.

A true change in the lives of young people can come only through replacing the current paradigm with an entirely new one—not through superficial behavioral adjustments. Adapting gestures and reactions according to circumstances, without a healthy inner foundation, becomes a mask without depth. Spiritual formation and the awareness that the human being is more than body and sensory reactions can be achieved only through cultivating empathy, emotional intelligence, and attentiveness toward others. Withdrawal into one's own comfortable inner universe does not offer the freedom to be oneself; on the contrary, it uniformizes and weakens.

Supporting young people, granting them trust, and motivating them represent a permanent necessity in the life of the Church. Only insofar as young people receive a real place within the community—both spiritually and socially—can we speak of the authentic future of parishes, of strong communities, and of a society capable of harmonious growth.

The Current Configuration of Postmodern Society

The world today can no longer be described as being grounded in firm moral values, nor can it be placed within a coherent framework of thought or life capable of offering clear reference points for the formation and inner balance of today's youth. Modern culture—transformed into what we call postmodernity and already undergoing a continuous process of change—produces profound shifts in all dimensions of human existence. This instability generates an acute lack of security, despite the appearance of freedom—freedom that paradoxically ends up limiting the person of the twenty-first century, especially when we consider the global evolution of contemporary societies (Petcu, 2023, p. 482.).

The term *postmodernity* has been used to describe the transformations that emerged at the end of the last century, when the old structures and institutional frameworks—considered restrictive for the development of the individual—began to dissolve. With this dissolution, personal desires became almost unlimited, and the pursuit of one's own satisfaction became the primary objective. However, Gilles Lipovetsky argues that we have already surpassed this stage and are living in a *hypermodern* period, defined by excessive consumption and the emergence of the “hypermodern individual” (Lipovetsky, 2005).

Today's society, dominated by the logic of hyperconsumption, reveals how the need to consume infiltrates more and more areas of social life, stimulating individuals to seek pleasure for themselves as their primary mode of existence. The welfare state is no longer a priority, and hypermodernity is characterized by constant dynamism, fluidity, and the absence of stable structures—features even more pronounced than those of the modern era. Here we encounter the first paradox: the person oriented toward hedonism ends up overwhelmed by tension and anxiety precisely because he lives in a world severed from traditions, without continuity with the past, and with an increasingly unpredictable future. The individual is gradually consumed by anxiety, blending fear with the desire for pleasure, and the much-desired freedom becomes a burden (Bauman, 2000). *Time fights against time*—this is the new paradigm. Everything becomes a source of alarm and restlessness, and people can no longer find a system of values, convictions, or stable reference points on which to ground their lives. This is the reality of the hypermodern world (Lipovetsky, 2005, p. 51).

Renewed Paradigms of the Church for the Formation of Young People

In today's society, the need for spiritual renewal is becoming increasingly evident, for the thinking of the human person is ever more absorbed by immediate materiality, by an “here and now” mentality dominated by the hedonistic impulse of a *carpe diem* that demands the complete satisfaction of all pleasures. The way of viewing the world has become predominantly secular, severed from stable reference points that could orient existence from the perspective of the other (Crainic, 1993). Christ identifies Himself with every human being, and this reveals that the fulfillment of our condition, our inner becoming, and the maturation of our humanity presuppose union with the One called “the Man,” the only true novelty under the sun, according to the expression of Saint John of Damascus (Damaschin, 2005, p. 118). As we grow as human beings, we draw closer to deification. This profound desire to have someone beside us—someone who can reveal God's presence—shows that we were created for communion, for dialogue, and for shared life, although we are often not consciously aware of it.

Yet today's world, dominated by excessive technologization, has radically changed the cultural paradigm, especially in Europe and the United States. Globally, we observe that in a world of over seven billion people, various religions and cultural traditions come into contact

through the phenomenon of globalization, influencing one another through models of life and social expressions. In Europe, this situation requires a new paradigm for the way life is understood and lived. However, the idea of freedom (Rotaru, 2023, pp. 825-874), understood almost exclusively as individual autonomy, has generated an explosion of orientations, tendencies, and identities, while perennial values are eroding. Sensuality and personal pleasure are elevated to the rank of norms, whereas values such as goodness, truth, and beauty are relativized, losing their universal character and becoming mere personal preferences.

The human being today is engaged in a continuous search for God, even if unaware of it. Jacques Maritain stated that every will, even the most misguided, seeks God without knowing it (Maritain, 1973, p. 11). One may choose false ends and love unsuitable things, but at the core one still longs for God, albeit in a distorted form and contrary to one's deliberate choices. When a person becomes aware of this state, the desire for profound transformation naturally arises—a transformation that begins with a change in one's paradigm of life (Petcu, 2005, pp. 448-458).

The term *paradigm*, in its current sense, was introduced by Thomas Kuhn in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. He does not use it as a mere theoretical concept, although it is grounded in theoretical principles, but as a framework capable of generating real solutions to the “puzzles” of human existence. This idea was further supported by philosopher and computational linguistics specialist Margaret Masterman, who highlighted the richness of the term and its capacity to reorganize our perspectives on the world (Masterman, 1970, p. 67). Computational linguistics is an interdisciplinary field that seeks to describe and interpret natural language through methods specific to computer science, thus adapting the interaction between humans and digital systems to the real needs of the human being. This type of linguistic approach is used especially in the development of artificial intelligence.

A new paradigm can take shape only through a threefold mental openness manifested across three planes of existence. First, the way we perceive reality—the manner in which we come into contact with things and interpret them—automatically determines how we apply them in our lives. If perception is flawed, then understanding becomes erroneous, and the consequences will affect both one's own existence and that of those around us. For example, a person in a position of responsibility who perceives reality falsely, influenced by the manipulations of those close to him, will inevitably arrive at a distorted interpretation of situations and, consequently, at decisions incapable of producing authentic good or real progress.

Today's world is dominated by appearance. Success is associated with public image, with “politically correct” gestures, with the mimicry of empathy, and with a masked form of domination. The “successful person” in contemporary society often asserts power by manipulating the vulnerable, using strategies of intimidation and keeping them in fear. Such behaviors, no matter how well crafted or strategically applied, eventually collapse. Imposture, no matter how refined, becomes visible, and inner duplicity betrays itself, turning the individual into an untrustworthy figure, perceived as false and manipulative (Covey, 2002, pp. 6-7). True change can be generated only by a sincere paradigm, one springing from the heart and grounded in will and reason. Only such people are, in fact, the truly “successful”—persons who grow together with others and help those around them reach their potential. What is essential is not the refinement of social techniques, although Romanian society in particular still places emphasis on “getting by,” on avoiding the system, on appearances, and on tricks meant to compensate for the lack of inner consistency. This way of living may function temporarily, but it cannot withstand the test of time, much less the perspective of eternity. The results will be proportional to the seeds that are sown.

On the short term, a person may appear efficient, may simulate competence, may manipulate, and may create the impression of work well done. But when confronted with the challenges of life, when inner stability is required, these strategies collapse. Without authentic

values and without a mature inner strength, the human being cannot withstand real trials, and relationships inevitably fall apart. This is why there are people around us to whom Ralph Waldo Emerson's words apply without exaggeration: "*What you are speaks so loudly in my ears that I cannot hear what you say*" (Emerson, 2004, p. 359).

Today's young people—often lacking inner stability and especially material security, which has unfortunately become the central criterion of success—need to rediscover that we communicate far more convincingly through what we are than through what we declare. The authenticity of the person conveys a message stronger than any discourse or action; therefore, it is essential to find the inner strength to consciously express outwardly what we already radiate without realizing it: our real identity, not the social mask we display. The paradigm of empathy provides a framework that deeply supports the development of young people, and numerous studies and motivational works demonstrate the importance of this perspective for cultivating inner resources (Rosenberg, 2005). Empathy does not only help the individual achieve balance; it contributes to the formation of a conscious, open, and united society.

A first step toward such transformation is learning to express feelings, since emotional intelligence is almost entirely absent from Romanian educational culture. Empathic listening—marked by understanding—cannot be offered until we come to know our own emotions and difficulties. Following the ideas of Thomas Kuhn and Stephen Covey, we can say that judging a situation before carefully observing it and before understanding its context generates an unhealthy paradigm. If such a perspective comes to be seen as "normality," it becomes fatal both for ourselves and for those around us.

The clear expression of emotions and desires, without unnecessary justifications, without labels or hasty evaluations, creates the necessary space for genuine compassion. Premature evaluation of a situation brings inner distortion, emotional closure, and a predisposition toward falsity (Rosenberg, 2005, p. 22). Cultivating a conscious language and a real presence in the current moment can be achieved only by observing concrete facts and understanding their impact on us—on the feelings they awaken. Inner needs, values, and desires are the forces that generate affective reactions, leading in the end to various requests we make of ourselves and of others in order to enrich our lives.

Contemporary society is overloaded with moralizing judgments. Our gaze must be shifted from evaluating people to understanding their real identity. The Sufi poet Jalāl ad-Dīn Rūmī said in the thirteenth century that "*beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing there is a field. I'll meet you there*" (Maulana, 2001). This vision should be revived especially among young people. Human needs must be grounded in profoundly human values, and the call to responsibility must be free, not imposed.

From a linguistic point of view, we misrepresent reality when we say that the other person "makes us feel" a certain way; the truth is that our inner reaction makes us feel that way, because we are not aware of our own affective life. The human being becomes dangerous for the human being when he does not assume responsibility for thoughts, emotions, and behaviors, transferring it outward. If we do not use language to sincerely express what we are living, the purpose of the word is lost. Expression must be made without malice—constructively, directly, sincerely, and with empathy—so that human relationships may remain alive and authentic.

The Church's Care for Young People – A Constant Christian Priority

The Church has always shown continuous care for the formation of human beings, especially for the education of children and young people. The responsibility of transmitting the teaching is part of her profound identity, directly linked to the command given by the Savior to the Apostles when He sent them to bring the message of faith to the whole world, to baptize, and to teach the observance of all that God has ordained (Matthew 28:19–20).

In their ministry of proclaiming the divine word, the Apostles do not set age limits; they address all people, offering the necessary guidance for the path of spiritual life. Christ Himself called the little ones to Him, stating clearly that the Kingdom of God opens to those who are like children, with pure hearts and complete trust (Matthew 19:14). The young people and children present in the ecclesial community remind adults of the model of sincerity and spiritual clarity to which they are called to return continually.

The age in which we live is marked by a profound crisis, felt even within ecclesial communities, where the weakening of spiritual life exposes many to the influences specific to postmodernity. This mentality—seductive through the ease with which it enters the soul and through its emphasis on immediate comfort—directs people toward an “here and now” without responsibility for the common good. Therefore, bringing young people closer to the Church depends on individuals formed in ecclesial life, capable of overcoming the temptations of contemporary culture and of showing them not only the idealized beauty of life, but also the efforts, trials, and depth that give birth to a meaningful existence.

Young people have often been perceived, throughout history, as a challenge for older generations—from ancient civilizations to the reflections of Socrates and Aristotle, who described the impulsiveness and disobedience of the youth of their time (Felix, 2009, p. 97). Today, however, the Church adopts a hopeful perspective, supporting their formation in a responsible and encouraging manner (Tineret, Biserică, Societate, 2009).

The Church transmits nothing other than her own life, which is the life of Christ lived in communion with Him. The model that fills existence with meaning remains Christ—the foundation of our love and mind. This form of life cannot be experienced in isolation but together, for the Christian existence is a shared gift, a common transformation within the family of God, where Christ reveals Himself as the brother of each one, calling us to the same adoption (Galeriu, 2009). However, such transformation presupposes authentic self-knowledge, necessary for the formation of one’s own reference points. Youth is decisive, for it is the period in which the foundations of the future are laid. The essential question is: how can a young person structure his or her criteria of discernment in a world full of contradictory options? The answer is offered by the life proposed by the Church—a communal existence anchored in the reality of the Kingdom, where time becomes an encounter with God and opens toward eternity (Stăniloae, 2003).

The parish bears responsibility for all ages, but toward young people it is called to a special effort in order to integrate them both into society and into the Body of the Church. Today’s social environment pushes them toward two extremes: indifference, born from the illusion of a comfortable life without involvement, and radical reactions, which turn faith into a rigid exclusivism. Between these two margins, the Romanian context and ecclesial life find few examples of spiritual balance capable of viewing existence through its profound meaning and seeing in holiness the true maturation of the human being—not through self-sufficiency, but through divine grace that initiates and sustains the work of salvation in each person’s life.

Contemporary society continually generates new forms of behavior and social orientation, such as nihilism, antisocial tendencies, excessive self-glorification, or violent ideologies (Metallinos, 2004, p. 125). The loss of inner security, associated with the disintegration of identity, has driven many young people toward a pragmatic materialism accompanied by moral degradation and spiritual confusion. The separation between concrete life and mature thinking—based on discernment and empathy—has led to an approach to Christ that is distorted: not the Christ of the Gospel, but an image born of superstition and exaggerated pietism, centered on mechanical practices and the fulfillment of canons without deep understanding. Such an approach forms fragile personalities, lacking inner autonomy and reduced to formal behavior without responsible maturity.

The crisis of young people is not due only to external influences but also to internal difficulties of the educational system, where orientations grounded in religious tradition and

national identity have been neglected. Respect for the vocation of one's own people and for the spiritual role of the Church has been diminished, and the dominant model is that of the European individual formed according to socio-economic logic. Western programs, European educational experiences, and academic mobilities are promoted, but the perspective of spiritual and cultural identity is fading. Thus, the young person is shaped primarily as an economic agent, while the inner dimension and spiritual values are pushed into the strictly private sphere (Metallinos, 2004, p. 126).

In this context, the essential question arises: how can the ecclesial community support young people so that they are not carried away by cultural currents foreign to the values of the Gospel? How can the parish remain faithful to the Orthodox tradition while engaging in dialogue with a society that promotes modern paradigms? The first step is to acknowledge a real rupture between generations and a lack of responsible accountability. If the Church and its leaders do not understand that responsibility toward young people is enormous and requires a climate of unity—faithful to tradition and free of conflicts or conformisms—then their absence from parish life will continue to be a painful and visible reality (Metallinos, 2004, p. 128). Authentic closeness to young people begins through formative efforts, catechesis, sincere dialogue, materials adapted to them, and openness toward the concrete problems of their lives. An orientation toward truth is necessary, as well as a transformation of the community environment into a space transfigured in Christ (Rotaru, 2012, p. 5).

All social efforts of the younger generation must have their roots in the interior struggle carried out with the help of grace. They must discover that the values of freedom, democracy, truth, and justice have their source in the Gospel. One cannot demand obedience before forming dignity and moral uprightness (Jurca, 2009). Unfortunately, virtues such as obedience and humility are sometimes misunderstood—both by religious leaders and by those who consider themselves disciples. The natural order is clearly expressed by Christ when He calls the Apostles “friends,” not “servants,” and when He shows that in the Kingdom the one who leads must place himself in service to the others. The God of Christians is the humble Christ, Who—although almighty—accepted suffering and death in order to free human beings from their own wandering.

Conclusions

The Church offers today's world a common perspective—a shared horizon shaped through dialogue, openness, and understanding—within a climate marked by postmodern characteristics. Her mission is directed first of all toward the society in which she lives, for the absence of the active presence of believers as bearers of the divine message inevitably leads to the loss of identity and to the diminishing of the value of the human person as a whole. We cannot reduce the human being to biology and psychological reactions while forgetting the spiritual component that gives unity to life. For this reason, an attitude filled with love and empathy is necessary toward the people of this world, who are captive to materiality and gradually “materialize” themselves, pushing the inner dimension into a hidden corner of their consciousness.

Accepting the world with its lights and shadows—seen through the lens of truth—offers us the possibility of a deep understanding and of adapting the message to its real level of receptivity. Yet, in order to speak truthfully, we must look at reality detached from its immediate influences; otherwise, we will lose direction. Mature understanding is decisive for establishing a proper, healthy, and realistic framework. If not, the risk increases that the workers of the Church will fail to transmit the Gospel message to those who are lost. The Church, for her part, must assume her own shortcomings, acknowledge limits, and work where the context allows and demands.

The challenges of the modern world, especially regarding the lives of young people, require an immediate response—particularly in the face of Western nihilism and the disintegration of family values. The relativization of relationships, the glorification of

pleasure, and the uncontrolled exposure of intimacy have created a society saturated with comfort yet emptied of emotional stability, marked by anxiety and insecurity. In a culture of total transparency, responsibility and discretion become increasingly rare. The general technologization of life inevitably influences the structure of society: a world centered exclusively on individual autonomy loses connection with authentic love, fidelity, and belonging to family and community. The exaltation of absolute freedom produces isolation, and loneliness becomes a serious social illness.

The lack of stable reference points casts humanity into an existential void, into a culture without meaning, dominated by hedonism and the desire to avoid pain at any cost. In such a climate, it is not surprising that euthanasia becomes accepted, as the result of a mentality that seeks only “a happy life” and, consequently, “a happy death.” Young people represent the future of the Church. The quality of tomorrow’s Church depends on how we choose today to support them, integrate them, and form them. Educational, spiritual, and material support is needed so that young people may feel that the Church genuinely supports them and considers them valuable. Their involvement in ecclesial and social structures must become a true priority.

Ultimately, only love can transform the face of the world. Only love leads us toward God, giving profound meaning to our lives and renewing the vocation for which we were created: to become children of the Father in His endless Kingdom.

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