

## Young People in the (Post)pandemic Church Młodzież w po(pandemicznym) Kościele

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**Abstract:** The coronavirus pandemic paralyzed the functioning of many institutions, including the Church. However, it did not cause the present religious crisis which has more complex roots of ideological rather than “medical” character. Nonetheless, the mental condition of young people continues to deteriorate, which is directly related to the current destruction of social life. This paper aims to analyse the conditions that should be met if adolescents are to remain in the Church. On their basis, I try to sketch a new paradigm of working with young people. I also draw on the indications of the new “General Directory for Catechesis” regarding catechumenal inspiration. I conclude that the basis of a formation model should be the recognition that we educate a person-in-growth. Indeed, young people explicitly say that they are interested in joining an ecclesial community that can appreciate current challenges faced by teenagers.

**Keywords:** adolescent, pandemic, youth catechesis, models of formation

**Abstrakt:** Pandemia koronawirusa sparaliżowała codzienne funkcjonowanie wielu instytucji, także skomplikowała życie w Kościele. Nie spowodowała jednak kryzysu religijnego, który ma bardziej złożone korzenie i zdaniem wielu badaczy jest raczej wynikiem podążania za decyzją wynikającą z powodów światopoglądowych niż medycznych. Niezależnie od tego wciąż pogarsza się kondycja psychiczna ludzi młodych, co ma bezpośredni związek z obecną destrukcją życia społecznego. Autor w niniejszym artykule dokonuje analizy wypowiedzi adolescentów dotyczących warunków, jakie stawiają Kościołowi, by zechcieli w nim pozostać. Na ich podstawie próbuje naszkicować nowy paradygmat pracy z młodzieżą, wykorzystując wskazania autorów nowego *Dyrektorium katechetycznego* dotyczące inspiracji katechumenalnej. Autor konkluduje, że podstawą budowania modelu formacyjnego jest uznanie, że podmiotem wychowania jest osoba-w-rozwoju. Wiąże tę tezę z zainteresowaniem młodzieży wstąpieniem do takiej wspólnoty eklezjalnej, która potrafi docenić aktualne wyzwania, przed jakimi stoi nastolatek.

**Słowa kluczowe:** nastolatek, pandemia, katecheza młodzieży, modele formacji



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## INTRODUCTION

Let me start with a cliché: it is not easy for a young person to function in the contemporary world. The world of a young person (an adolescent in particular) is full of contradictions, dismay and pain, even though we can hardly see it, or believe it. I shall not give a meticulous characteristic of the young, which would divert our attention from the main topic of this paper. Instead, I will quote a literary example. In her short story *Księżniczka z ostatniej ławki* [The Princess at the Last Desk], Barbara Kosmowska brilliantly depicts the inner dilemmas of a contemporary teenager. Anna, the protagonist, lives with her mom in New York where she goes to a Polish community school. She is rejected by her peers because she is shy and poor. To cope with the situation and regain her “dignity,” she makes up her new image. She does not become a star in the class, but at least she can live a normal life for a while. However, after the holidays she does not come back to her school. She leaves a letter which her teacher reads out to the class: “Now that you are listening to these words, I am with my grandma in Poland. We have moved here after difficult and sad months of struggling to lead a normal life. When I came to your class, my dad was no longer living with us and my mom, at the end of her tether, was cleaning other people’s houses. You could see one of them in the photos. It happens sometimes that a little family world falls apart like a decayed chestnut. I wanted to tell you about it, but I realized that you did not deserve it. You would not understand it because to you I was merely a worn-out jacket and thrift store sneakers. This is what you scrutinized when I first came to your class. That is why I made up a completely different world with fake photos. It was your world, not mine. I could gain favour with you only in this way. Today I close the door to the non-existent world. I did not drive a limo. I did not have any of these beautiful dresses, nobody bought me a dog (...) Now when you know all this it is time to thank you. Yes! I want to thank you. For when I was making up ‘scenes’ from my life, I felt like a princess. In this most difficult time, I could dream and imagine that everything I tell you is true. By the way, this overworked woman who picked me up from school is Elżbieta. It really did not work out well for her (...). And yet she teaches me how to carry on and live with dignity. She is my mum” (Kosmowska 2022, 7).

My study will have a theological character. I adopt the perspective of practical (pastoral) theology and with the experience of everyday pastoral care I illustrate the situation of the young in the contemporary Church. This is discussed from the points of view of a priest, an adolescent (and a parent). When I speak of “young people” I mean, above all, adolescents. Adolescence is pivotal when we think of educating the young in the Church. An adolescent undergoes significant physiological and mental changes (including emotional and cognitive ones), which impacts his/her perception of God and the community in which God is spoken of and in which one speaks to God. That is why, I take the position of an ethnographer who draws data from being among people and observing them

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(this research methodology is called participant observation). However, I do not present the final results of this research – my paper is rather an introduction to future analysis.

The pandemic turned out to be so important that it is worth discussing its influence on the religious life of the youth. I intend, therefore, to inquire as to what the pandemic – as a sign of the times – has revealed to the Church about teenagers, and what pastoral and catechetical postulates can be put forward based on these discoveries. I pass from general remarks on the growth of adolescents (mainly in the context of social maturation) to specific observations related to perceiving the Church as a place where one can become mature.

## 1. DEVELOPMENTAL CONDITIONS OF ADOLESCENTS

The brain of an adolescent is biologically immature, which one can see at every turn, especially in his/her risky behaviour. Adolescents cannot foresee the consequences of their actions unless they trust adults, which is rare (Jensen and Nutt 2014, 47-51). They are also hypersensitive to social stimuli and, in line with personal growth, reorient their attachment. This includes, first, “breaking ties” with parents (or guardians) to make room for entirely new relationships that will determine what is valuable (good) and “mature.” Adolescents are prone to sacrifice a lot for these relationships – not because they want to but because they must. Their growth reveals the whole plenitude of being open to them, provided they dare to “set out on a journey” to become truly mature/adult.<sup>1</sup> Even though this separation from parents and their values seems painful to both parties, it is exactly this pain (and rebellion which manifests differently in a teenager and parents) that is crucial for maturation (and, as we shall see, conversion). An teenager’s identity is like a construction site: the outlines of his/her personality are already visible due to a double package of genes and quite a lot of experience. Maturation lays bare various flaws and shortcomings that in the end may turn into active mental mechanisms, reaction patterns and even more or less latent mental disorders. That is why the stage of adolescence is pivotal – one still has a chance to “change one’s personality.” This is possible among people who are ready to accept the “demanding” character of a teenager and join him/her in the confrontation with his/her nature, which practically means overcoming it and heading for transcendence.

Maturation is also crucial from the theological perspective as it is forging a relationship with oneself, with others – with whom we are ‘a community of pilgrims’ – and ultimately with God. In science that deals with the growth of man<sup>2</sup>, one finds an image of a mythical journey of a hero and his *rites of passage*. The latter helped one understand the meaning of suffering and one’s roots and thus

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<sup>1</sup> God invites Abraham to set out on such a journey, telling him to “go for the sake of himself.”

<sup>2</sup> It is worth paying attention to anthropological psychology (Kurzydło 2015).

discover one's adult identity.<sup>3</sup> As a result, one was included in the community of adults which translated into the ability to be responsible for the community.

At present, rites of passage have survived in a degraded form: bushcraft schools or staged esoteric rites. They are not meant to help one achieve mental (emotional) or spiritual maturity. Rather, they are a pop-culture version of rites meant to prepare one to separate from one's parents and to live autonomously. Significantly, they rarely translate into experiencing internal transformation or discovering one's place in the adult world. A teenager, therefore, does not become ready to be a valuable member of the community or to solve difficult problems.<sup>4</sup>

It is in the interest of every community, the Church included, to recognize these developmental conditions of the young and to "take part" in them. The civilization at present, with its technological development, is at the same time axiologically chaotic and unable to maintain stable relationships. Thus, various educational milieus should take responsibility for teaching how to shape mature bonds and care for the common good (Francis 2020).

Adolescence is the period most suitable for this kind of "forging" because of the changes (e.g., psychological ones) that take place at that time. Unfortunately, adolescents fearfully experience the world. This includes, above all, relationships. When devoid of stable bonds with one's family and peers, they find it difficult to face the challenges that maturation poses. Uncertain about their social status,<sup>5</sup> teenagers may get stuck in this stage of development. Also, they may reject their identity (including gender identity) and undermine the very sense of striving for maturity. As a result, they may choose the mode of being that is easiest, i.e., they construct *the ideal self* picking from a variety of attractive images submitted by pop culture (Brosch 2013, 114-148). The phenomenon of avatarization is a dangerous one – as a child, one managed to overcome the temptation to remain in the world of fairy tales, but as an adolescent, one finds it hard to give up functioning in the world of virtual reality.

This is the key moment when an educator can invite an adolescent to enter the world of adults, i.e., the world of real suffering, demanding relationships and the necessity to deal with failure. At the same time, an educator should make it possible for an adolescent to encounter true friends and reliable authorities.<sup>6</sup> A dramatic

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<sup>3</sup> Victor Turner wrote that in a true *rite de passage* one dies to be transformed or transfigured and attain a higher quality of one's existence. One leaves the state of undifferentiation and amorphism that is characteristic of childhood and is reborn into masculinity and personality (Cf. Turner 1962, 173). Traditional *rites de passage* had three phases which, in terms of development, can be arranged in a sequence: you are no longer a child – you have set out on a journey which will teach what life is – you are an adult, ready to die for the sake of others.

<sup>4</sup> Martine Segalen claims that contemporary initiation practices merely reflect neurosis of young people and deepen the problems with which they cannot cope (Segalen 2008, 60).

<sup>5</sup> In most cases, teenagers have not yet experienced a meaningful parting with their childhood. Therefore, they display infantile behaviour and associate being an adult with activities that are harmful to their health (e.g., smoking, getting drunk, having sex or driving fast (Stare wino 2014, 14-15).

<sup>6</sup> Extensive research on teenage risk behaviour has shown that peer groups are very important points of reference for teenagers. A group focused on values that contribute to growth is capable of

rise in adolescent depression and suicide attempts reveals that the young feel helpless in the face of the real world. When left unattended, they wander around their made-up world and painfully experience their lives as lonely and redundant. Therefore, every parent and educator (formator) should realize the significance of these developmental conditions. Pedagogical models, especially catechetical/pastoral ones, which do not encompass developmental psychology and the analysis of adolescents' needs (Congregation for the Clergy 1997, 279-280) are doomed to failure. The methods employed by St. John Bosco or Franciszek Blachnicki were successful precisely because they responded to the needs of young people. In my analysis, I am going to see these issues through the eyes of adolescents.

## 2. ADOLESCENTS AND THE PANDEMIC

The global coronavirus pandemic paralysed the functioning of the state and society. Mobility restrictions, remote learning and the necessity to deal with the illness or death of loved ones have had serious consequences of psychological and spiritual character (e.g., questions whether God was absent when millions of people were suffering or whether it was possible to catch covid through contact with the Host). Research shows that various types of symptoms have intensified, e.g., those related to depression, anxiety, sleep disorders, obsessive-compulsive and even psychotic symptoms (Kowalski 2021, 135-148).<sup>7</sup> As for now, there is no major research that would reveal the impact of the pandemic on spiritual life. However, the studies show that participation in Church services and the life of the Church has dropped significantly (mainly due to quantitative limitations). Participation in religious practices has become more "truthful," especially in the case of the young: those who are deeply religious have not given up their practices while those related to the Church superficially have found a good reason to justify their absence during Church services. However, we still have to wait for specific numerical data.

Apart from the pandemic, ideological issues have contributed to the decreasing participation in religious worship. The credibility of the Church has diminished due to paedophilia scandals, ideological demonstrations or decisions of politicians. That is why while analysing adolescents' crisis of faith, one ought to consider these factors and see the pandemic as a catalyst for certain resolutions. The clergymen confirm that although these are mainly decisions to leave the institutional Church, in some cases these are commitments to search for God, join a religious community and even return to the Church. In the past, a conversion was

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"fixing" previously acquired destructive behaviour. It is worth analysing all results of this research in *Vademecum skutecznej profilaktyki problemów młodzieży* [Vademecum of Effective Prevention of Adolescents' Problems] (Grzelak 2015). A particularly important element of a peer group is the presence of slightly older friends whose example one may follow. They are of similar age but have already faced "difficult reality" (Znaniński 2001, 85; Sroczyńska 2015, 61-62).

<sup>7</sup>When we compare the results of this study with the results of research before the pandemic in Poland, a significantly higher percentage of people aged 18-34 is now described as depressive (16,2% - 36,6% respectively) (Kowalski 2021, 148).

rather a return to inherited religiosity. At present, it is about a conscious decision to choose faith as the highest value while imposing firm conditions on the Church: “I do not want the priest to decide about my life; I disagree with certain standards of the moral teaching of the Church (e.g. on contraceptives or in vitro fertilization); I demand the exclusion from the Church of those who have turned a blind eye on evil deeds within Her.”<sup>8</sup> These rebellious statements reveal a broader awareness of adolescents and, at the same time, their fear that they might be identified with a milieu that – in the virtual reality – is associated with values that are outdated or even threatening mental health. Notwithstanding, young people are ready to remain in the Church provided their conditions are satisfied (or at least heard). Leaving aside the question of the legitimacy of their requirements, in the present axiological condition of society and creeping depression among the young, it is all the more important to discern any signs of kindness and deeper religious feelings on their part. In practice, this entails creating adequate models of pastoral care and support of the young in various crises (George and Kasper 2020).

Laying down conditions is part of adolescent rebellion which has a developmental character: the young question values or structures that have been imposed (or they consider them imposed) by adults. Either we educationally use this rebellion, or we lose young people. The message “it’s meant to be like that, end of story” is unacceptable to the young and we run the risk of losing the bond with them. They cannot yet recognize that there are absolute values that are not to be imposed but chosen freely. That is why, they unconsciously try to cast these values into “the flame of everyday life” to feel with their whole being whether they are truly indestructible, useful and reasonable. To do this, they need space, our consent and the discreet presence of mature and considerate adults (Christians). Usually, adolescents reject any attempt to interfere with their growth at that time: “I want to be left alone so that I may find out if I can take responsibility for my life. I don’t seek help from adults – their lecturing paralyses me; I don’t know how they could help me if they can’t cope with their own problems; when I tried to talk about my problems with a priest, I thought he didn’t understand a word; [if I seek help], it won’t be in the Church, because they think they are already ‘in the know,’ but then I am different.”

The pandemic has helped the young see that “freedom” from the obligation to participate in Church worship (due to dispensation) is “cool”, but also that it triggered or sanctioned their “acedia.” When asked if they watched the Mass via the Internet, some adolescents admitted, that yes, they did have to “stare” at the screen with the whole family. However, the majority “did not feel the need to watch.” All of them considered the situation artificial and weird, which is good as it shows that they have a sense of real participation in the Eucharist in the church: “I prefer to be in the church even though I cannot focus; it is different though, a real Mass during which you may receive the Holy Communion is something important, whereas

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<sup>8</sup>The quotes in italics, sometimes slightly altered, come from young people with whom I talked during the pandemic.

the one via the Internet is, as if, for show; I rarely went to the Mass but when I did, I went to my favourite church and it meant something to me. The Mass via the Internet is... sad; it made me laugh when my whole family stood before the computer screen; I don't know, it was ok, even though I couldn't concentrate."

The conditions that the young lay down should be treated as an introduction to their world in which not everything is ready or ideal. Their will is honest and rooted in the need to experience something truly good. However, this does not automatically entail pastoral success. We should pay attention to certain signals which reveal their longing to be noticed. The conditions they impose are in fact an expression of their rebellion. In this way, they check what they can take from their childhood to adulthood.

In this sense, the pandemic has not changed the young. Pandemic stress translated into specific mental or organizational problems. However, adolescents still look for what is best in the Church, especially if they have in mind the negative image of the Church in the media. Nevertheless, they do not want to be in the Church that requires standard behaviour or treats everyone alike. They search for a life that is more valuable and "truth that is better than the one enclosed in virtual bubbles." Obviously, "bonds built by the young are (...) very fragile and susceptible to constant promises of a better life, that is one cherished by celebrities and media stars" (Kurzydło 2018, 98; Białecka 2013, 23-25). However, they may use this made-up world as a camouflage behind which they take pains to face the hostile world and their experience of growing up. Jesus' pedagogy may be used here. He accompanied his disciples on their way, in their dilemmas, inquiries, sorrows and loneliness after His death.

The pandemic showed the world without the Church to the young. Due to restrictions on the number of faithful during services, at least some of them "missed what always happened so regularly. Now you had to wait if there was still room [to enter the church]." Even though such statements are rare, they reveal the strength of those young people who have been more attached to the community and have not lost hope. Perhaps it was this hope that saved the longing for the Mass and surely gave them strength to overcome the stress which triggered so many mental problems. The pandemic, therefore, has not changed much in the crucial issues but confirmed the shallowness of the faith of those who had never seen it as a value, and the strength of faith of those who had treated it seriously. As one of the older adolescents admitted: "If you do not want to believe, then even a tragic event will not change your behaviour. If you truly believe, then in the face of deep suffering, you may get closer to God." Stress and anxiety are not only pathogenic, but they also reveal the true mental toughness to which mature faith contributes.

### 3. WORKING WITH THE YOUNG AFTER THE PANDEMIC

History shows that when the Church was in crisis due to Her sins, God purified Her and raised Her from the fall. Various theologians emphasize the ground-breaking character of the present stage and assure us that the Church,

above all, belongs to Christ. She is not guided by temporal success but points to the eschatological goal. Therefore, the community must be restored in line with this goal. The dogmatic perspective stresses that the community should aim at discovering the Truth; the catechetical perspective underlines that in the educational model, other issues should be emphasized. I am going to discuss the latter perspective.

Man's growth is a long journey of self-knowledge. Therefore, the new "Directory for Catechesis" contains a new and useful term "catechumenal inspiration" (the Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelization 2020, 2; 61-65; 135; 232; 242; 262; 297; 303; 328; 421). Point 61 of the Directory speaks of the requirement "not [to] assume that our audience understands the whole background to what we are saying or is capable of relating what we say to the very heart of the Gospel."

The kerygmatic character of catechesis requires a catechumenal process of formation which encompasses: processuality (graduality), the dynamism of evangelization (inculturation), the ability to initiate into faith and the community of faith (with the participation of a living community of friends). The pedagogy of initiation should, therefore, be sensitive to "the variety of circumstances" in which people live at present. Consequently, pastoral influence should be individualized though not isolated from the community. It is such catechesis that introduces one to the Christian life (the Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelization 2020, 65) and at the same time meets the conditions that the young talk about. These conditions for their participation in the Church mean that they, rebellious as they are, would like to belong and contribute to a certain kind of community. It is worth noting that this model corresponds with the recommendation of psychologists to restore a good community in which the social context is therapeutic and contributes to recovery (Cechnicki 2021, 241-258).<sup>9</sup>

Even though in such catechesis and "therapy" the objectives seem similar (which in the case of the pandemic is of huge importance), we ought to remember that the Communion with Christ – the primary goal of catechesis – goes beyond the postulates of humanism and understands man's endeavours in the context of much deeper source and goal. Therefore, a religious element should be part of man's education, a part that may be easily overlooked if we limit the "therapeutic motive" to restoring someone's well-being or the experience of the meaning of life. Referring to the teaching of Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI, Jerzy Szymik points out that our world of secular humanism contains 'a deadly virus of God's dethronement, of replacing the Almighty with idols, i.e., depriving life of the root and the relationships of the fundamental bond' (Szymik 2019, 275). In a theological context, we reach a spiritual dimension of pandemic *kairos*. The catechumenal model of Christian formation should immunize the young against the virus of 'God's dethronement.'

Let us see how this can be incorporated into the catechetical work with the young. However, I should make some clarifications. Firstly, catechetical work

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<sup>9</sup>Such a community makes sense especially in the face of growing loneliness, individualism and consumerism of young people.



does not mean teaching religion at school. Even though we generally call it 'katecheza szkolna' [school catechesis], it is more an element of interdisciplinary dialogue (The Dicastery for the Clergy 1997, 73), an opportunity for students to add a religious dimension to their knowledge about the world and man. Thus, they may enrich their perception of reality and/or make their lives sensible and comprehensible. The above elements of catechesis at school are of a cultural and ecclesiastical character. On the other hand, catechesis as the expression of everyday life of a given community is rooted in cultivating communion with Christ – with liturgy and through discerning one's situation in the community of faith and in the light of God's Word. Secondly, adolescents are at a particular developmental stage. Therefore, in the Church, they should be treated according to their capabilities. Above all, we should hear their "cry of helplessness." Adolescents feel doomed because of what they dream about or because they do not have dreams. Realizing what is crucial – amid the confusion and noise that surrounds them – means that we reach out to their true world, language and culture. First and foremost, it means that we see their fears and anger.<sup>10</sup> Thirdly, catechumenal inspiration which is recommended at present should not translate into dusting off the ancient model of pastoral care or adding a new activity to the old pastoral practice. Inspiration is, first of all, creativity and zeal. Therefore, we have to find witnesses of living faith and formators who understand modern times. Thus, the catechumenal model should not copy some general patterns, but – if "man is the way of the Church" (John Paul II 1979, 10) – pay heed to men in their given situations, amid their everyday lives, and find true friends to stand by them.

In pastoral documents this attitude is now called "accompanying" and "the culture of encounter" (the Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelization 2020, 3; 50; 55; 64; 68; 85; 11; 113; 118; 132; 135; 139; 155; 179; 203; 234-235; 244; 252; 259; 261; 263-265; 271; 352; 370-371; 404; 419; 423; Congregation for the Clergy 2020, 25).<sup>11</sup>

While thinking of ways to work with the young, one ought to take into account the above conditions. I realize how hard it is to devise a detailed plan for such an endeavour. Moreover, we have learnt that attempts at renewal which literally implement a given model easily turn into a rigid structure. Consequently, the young protest or leave. We should acknowledge that the Good News is/should be easy to grasp even for the most sophisticated people. Jesus used simple stories thanks to which he received feedback from His listeners (the refusal to accept these simple truths was rather the result of the refusal to believe and not the inability to

<sup>10</sup> When devoid of existential motivation, the young perceive belonging to the Church as belonging to some organization whose rules they must obey. Such an immature attitude usually leads to "dependent religiosity", ecclesio-genic neurosis (Andrzej Molenda), noogenic neurosis (Wiktor Frankl) and/or sectarian thinking (Molenda 2022; Buksik 2009, 191-199).

<sup>11</sup> "Accompanying people in their *dramas of life* (in their unbelief) means that we agree that they follow their own paths (it is thus a form of spiritual hospitality), that we try to recognize this enslavement from which God wants to free them and see the wounds that they try to hide from others and sometimes from themselves" (Kurzydło 2019, 48).

comprehend). We should, therefore, realize what content we put forward that the young cannot accept – not because they lack faith but because they may have no philosophical background.<sup>12</sup> Perhaps they lay down conditions regarding moral issues because they do not understand expectations that are formulated in a specific way. The young are often accused of not taking up these issues. But maybe this is because they are not invited to speak freely. Rather, certain views are imposed on them. The catechumenal model should, therefore, involve making the young aware of the significance of their problems for their growth. It is these situations (exams, change of school, illness, rejection, falling in love) that should become part of their initiation, and not teaching catechism, which is more fruitful in religious classes. The term “pedagogy of transition” seems to correspond well to the situation of adolescents. Moreover, it is well reflected in the Bible.

Jesus did not explain the world but proclaimed the presence of God in the world. At the same time, He made it possible for people to see the reality truly/completely and adequately to their situations (which also contributed to their recovery). Young people are repelled by an impersonal attitude which would be impossible in Jesus’ pedagogy.<sup>13</sup> They are attracted by certain idealism with which they try to mask their own imperfection (“if others are far from ideal, I do not have to strive to achieve it”).

That is why the catechumenate at this stage should help them accept their own sinful nature and reorient their lives. The idea of conversion which is so crucial in this model does not imply that we stop sinning. Rather, it means that we come closer to Christ who embraces sinners. For holiness is not the outcome of our efforts but the fruit of the Holy Spirit. That is why, when inspired by the catechumenate we may discover the ways the Holy Spirit works in our lives and the mission He gives us in the Church and the world.

What elements of the catechumenate during adolescence could we consider? Let us discuss “the rite of parting with one’s childhood.”

When an adolescent discerns that he/she is ready to take on the tasks of adolescence, they are invited to ‘the rite of parting with their childhood’. Of course, this decision is not only his/hers. The idea of fulfilling certain tasks together with others is part of the catechumenate. The rite, organized by the parish, should include a solemn acknowledgment in front of others that ‘childhood is over’ and it is time to express gratitude to parents and relatives. Also, the adolescents should then acknowledge that they have received certain good (skills or values), that there are things for which they want to apologize, that they have decided to set off on a journey toward adulthood and that they want to invite certain people

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<sup>12</sup>For example, in the *Credo*, certain words are difficult for the young to grasp. Sławomir Kołata proposes that the truths of faith be expressed in the language of personalism which would make the *Credo* more intelligible (Kołata 2017, 201-202).

<sup>13</sup>Jerzy Bagrowicz has coined the term “spiritual gendarmerie.” According to him, reaching out to the young requires that we refer to their everyday affairs. He calls this model of catechesis for the young “confessional-dialogical” (confessional-diaconal). He also observes that “the young cannot be impressed by the kind of piety that would hinder their life goals (...) and personal growth” (Bagrowicz 2000, 265; Bagrowicz 2006, 102).

to accompany them. Last but not least, they acknowledge that they entrust their journey to God.

Usually, this rite of passage would take place at the age of around 12. Like the Jewish *bar mitzvah* and *bat mitzvah*, it may be an opportunity to express gratitude to God and read aloud an excerpt from the Holy Scripture. This may be attractive to a teenager since it is related to his/her maturation so that he/she may tell others: "I am no longer a child." Interestingly, adolescents express an interest in such a rite provided they could take part in preparing such a ceremony and invite their true bunch of friends on whose acceptance and understanding they can count (not some anonymous, random people). They also admitted that they were interested in building such a community for younger people who would also like to experience this rite. Thus, they might cherish a real community that is open to them and influence the ecclesial community whose valuable part they would become. As they said, they did not feel the need to get to know God. However, they found it interesting to learn that God would like to get to know them.

The major challenge for this paradigm of thinking of young people's formation is realizing that its subject is a person-in-growth, a person who is continually changing and is aware that these changes are difficult both for him/her and others. Adolescents are amid a developmental crisis: they are discovering their true identity while reorienting their lives. That is why it is crucial to initiate them as profoundly as possible into the experience of their own lives (and not teaching them theology/catechism). In their lives, it is God who takes the initiative to meet them and show them how they may live. Therefore, this paradigm is about encountering teenagers in their existential experience, in their *drama* of living, in the decisions they take, in doubts of which they vaguely speak, in their fears which they do not understand, in their dreams that they hide even before themselves. It is only with these fragments of their lives that we may together devise a plan for living with God. Therefore, the question is not about what to tell them about God but how to help them find Him in their lives. Christ came to such lives and world and only there one can meet Him and allow Him to be led further to a new life. One can see sacramental significance in all these situations, i.e., see God who is present there. When undertaken together, this journey guarantees that adolescents will feel noticed, appreciated and 'sent'. That they will no longer be alone and that they will be creators of their own lives.

## CONCLUSION

The above model of working with young people emphasizes individualized pastoral formation. Working with children boils down to the joy of being near Jesus, while working with adolescents means initiating them into their personal journey, being aware that this maturation leads, above all, to being of service to others (proexistence). Since the catechumenal model of transition to mature Christianity involves the experience of the sacraments of Christian initiation, the question is when

and how to give these sacraments. An individualized path means that one leaves aside the mass character of professing faith, being an anonymous follower for whom the process of initiation into the experience of the living God ends in failure. Christians should help his/her “infantile” faith die, which is possible when at the right time (i.e., when an adolescent is ready for this “death”) and place (i.e., in a credible community of faith) he/she receives the “rite” of confirmation, that is the rite of strengthening and sending. Therefore, preparing for confirmation is no longer a mass religious service, but is related to readiness to undertake a mission in the Church. Young people in their formative years are aware that to undertake an important task, they need the rite of confirmation. They also know that this will be an exceptional event – they will take responsibility for the maturity of their faith in a given task (its realization entails various trials and transitions and is the question of their whole being immersed in God presence). Has the pandemic had any impact on this? For now, it only shows that it is possible to become infected with coronavirus as well as the desire to grow in holiness.

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