

The protection of human life in the daily existence of Christian youth in the face of the civilisation of death

Ochrona życia ludzkiego w codziennej egzystencji młodzieży chrześcijańskiej w obliczu cywilizacji śmierci

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Abstract: The article addresses the protection of human life in the daily existence of Christian youth in the face of the civilisation of death. In view of the fact that to a large extent contemporary media and public opinion promote abortion as a human right and further attempts are being made to legalise abortion, it seems to be an urgent need to awaken in young people a sensitivity to the life of another human being and to show them the truth about the origins of human existence from conception to natural death, thanks to which they will be able to consciously opt for the civilisation of love. Pointing to Christ as the fullness of life, inviting young people to active participation in Him and recalling the examples of saints offering their lives for others are to encourage teenagers to follow in their footsteps. Pointing out the forms of personal commitment, creating the appropriate conditions for action, as well as accompanying them and taking them on in the wider pro-life work will not only enable young people to discover the sense of helping others, but will also become an important contribution to their personal and spiritual development.

Keywords: young people, abortion, conceived children, human and Christian values

Abstrakt: Artykuł porusza problematykę ochrony życia ludzkiego w codziennej egzystencji młodzieży chrześcijańskiej w obliczu cywilizacji śmierci. Mając na uwadze fakt, że w dużej mierze współczesne media i opinia publiczna lansują przerywanie ciąży jako prawo człowieka oraz podejmowane są kolejne próby legalizacji aborcji, naglącą potrzebą wydaje się być budzenie w młodych ludziach wrażliwości na życie drugiego człowieka oraz wskazanie im prawdy dotyczącej początków ludzkiego istnienia od poczęcia do naturalnej śmierci, dzięki czemu będą mogli świadomie opowiedzieć się po stronie cywilizacji miłości. Wskazanie na Chrystusa jako pełnię życia, zaproszenie młodzieży do czynnego w Nim uczestnictwa oraz przywołanie przykładów ludzi świętych ofiarujących swe życie za bliźnich mają zachęcić nastolatków do pójścia ich śladami. Wskazanie form osobistego zaangażowania, stworzenie odpowiednich warunków działania, jak również towarzyszenie im i podjęcie współpracy w szeroko rozumianym dziele pro-life nie tylko pozwoli młodym ludziom odkryć sens niesienia pomocy bliźnim, ale również stanie się ważnym przyczynkiem do ich osobistego i duchowego rozwoju.

Słowa kluczowe: ludzie młodzi, aborcja, dzieci poczęte, wartości ludzkie i chrześcijańskie



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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 observations related to perceiving the Church as a place where one can become mature.

No one needs to be convinced of the enormous potential of the generation of young people. Openness, energy, courage, ideals or spontaneity in action are just a few of the many characteristics with which we could describe them. Pointing out the right directions and appropriate life models can contribute to the extraordinary personal and social development of teenagers. In turn, if left to their own devices¹ they run the risk of adopting the reprehensible attitudes that, both in the dimension of their private lives and in their interpersonal relationships, will lead to impoverishment and, not infrequently, to problems and life tragedies. This is because “human beings are influenced by different patterns and models of behaviour depending on their position in the structure of a given situation or social system” (Stanowski 2011, 79). Both positive and negative values acquired from the environment orient the adolescent towards specific life values and influence the lifestyle he or she chooses.

John Paul II was well aware of this, and this is probably why he saw in young people the strength and hope of the Church. In his apostolic letter to the youth of the whole world *Dilecti Amici*, the Pope addresses these words: “You young people are the ones who embody this youth: you are the youth of the nations and societies, the youth of every family and of all humanity; you are also the youth of the Church. We are all looking to you, for all of us, thanks to you, in a certain sense continually become young again” (John Paul II 1985, 1). However, this fact does not escape the consciousness of individuals or entire groups of people whose aim is to promote disinformation about the dignity and value of human life by leading, still naively trusting, adolescents to live in a false image of themselves and of others.

This is achieved, among other things, by promoting unlimited sexual freedom, changing the model of the traditional family into partnerships or homosexual relationships, the widely developed lie

¹ By “leaving them [teenagers] to their own devices”, I mean the problem of both family upbringing, which is very much lacking today for a number of reasons, e.g. a broken family and the absence of either parent, emigration, the lack of a parent's physical presence at home, or the lack of adequate time owed to young people. Another question is the issue of free, often unrestricted access to the Internet and leaving teenagers without adequate control. In such a situation, adolescents assimilate all kinds of harmful content often without realising the dangers of it.

about the origins of human life and the fight for the “right” to abortion, or the promotion of a hedonistic lifestyle (see Mroczkowski 2014, 14-39; Póltawska 1995, 155-202). Aware of these threats and the battle that is being waged for the lives and futures of entire generations of still minors, a number of efforts are being made to protect them. The Catholic Church, too, is not passive in the face of this state of affairs and is making efforts to address the needs, concerns and anxieties faced by today’s young people and is seeking the most appropriate ways to recommend them for the future.

1. IDENTIFYING THE PROBLEM

A deep analysis on the mystery of human life was submitted by the Church at the Second Vatican Council when it adopted the pastoral constitution on the Church in the modern world *Gaudium et spes*. It reflects on the situation of the human being in general, but with a fundamental consideration of their condition today. The fundamental issues addressed by the Council Fathers included the question of the person’s temporal life, their dignity or contemporary social and political problems. And although many years have passed since the end of the Council, the concerns and worries of humanity detailed then remain relevant. Of the many appeals made to the world today, one concerned respect for the human person. The bishops gathered at the Council called on all of us to “absolutely consider every neighbour without exception as another self.” They also stressed that “whatever is opposed to life itself (1), whatever violates the integrity of the human person (2), and whatever insults human dignity (3) – all these things and others of their like are infamies indeed. They poison human society, but they do more harm to those who practice them than those who suffer from the injury. Moreover, they are supreme dishonor to the Creator” (Second Vatican Council 1965, 27)².

² Acts that can be attributed to the above groups of unspeakable behaviour are: (1) genocide, abortion, euthanasia, wilful self-destruction; (2) mutilation, torture inflicted on the body or mind, and attempts to coerce the will itself; (3) subhuman living conditions, arbitrary imprisonment, deportation, slavery, prostitution, the selling of women and children; as well as disgraceful working conditions, where men are treated as mere tools for profit, rather than as free and responsible persons.

1.1 . The civilisation of death

It is not without reason that the phenomenon of abortion is referred to as the third world war, which is taking its “toll” considerably greater than the previous wars combined. According to statistics made available by the World Health Organisation, approximately 73 million unborn children die each year through abortion, which amounts to approximately 200 000 interventions per day (*Abortions worldwide this year 2023*).

From the beginning, the Catholic Church has proclaimed the truth of the inviolability of every human life. Although in the early centuries there was a difference as to the understanding of the moment of animation of the fetus conditioning the consent or not to abort a pregnancy (see Smolinska 2018, 79-85), the perception of human life being a creature of God has always been sacred and inviolable. It is also in this spirit that we read the teaching of the Catholic Church today. The Constitution *Gaudium et spes* leaves no doubt on this point. It reads that “therefore from the moment of its conception life must be guarded with the greatest care while abortion and infanticide are unspeakable crimes” (Second Vatican Council 1965, 51). The concern of both the Church and all people to cease abortion is of significance because “the future of humanity lies in the hands of those who are strong enough to provide coming generations with reasons for living and hoping” (Second Vatican Council 1965, 31).

Although abortion is not a new phenomenon, its particular intensification occurs in the 20th and 21st centuries. On the one hand, it is linked to the legalisation of abortion in the Soviet Union in 1920 and, on the other hand, to the anthropological crisis and the shaken faith and sensitivity to God of modern human being (cf. John Paul II 1995, 22; 38). The lack of a clear purpose in the lives of many young people, the confusion of their sense of purpose, and the array of information capturing abortion as a legitimate human right make minors easily succumb to the suggestions and even manipulations of some media circles promoting abortion as a fundamental human right, while its prohibition as some form of restriction leading to hell, above all for women (Budnik 2016, 87-92). A survey conducted earlier this year by IBRIS for the Ordo Iuris Institute shows that in the 18-29 age group, when asked the question “Do you support a ban on abortion, with preservation of the life of the mother if it is endangered?”, as many as 55% of respondents answered “Definitely not” and 32% indicated the answer – “Rather not”

(Gęsiak 2023). Thus, it can be assumed that if the survey also included respondents under the age of 18, the group opposing the abortion ban would, if not larger, remain at a similar level (approximately 87%).

Is it necessary to be concerned about existing trends? It seems that they are to be looked at calmly and observed closely. According to the Stefan Batory Foundation's report on the issue – “Youth 2020 – in search of identity” – “although Polish society participates in gender emancipation processes with some delay, it demands the recognition of the equality of all regardless of gender identity choice or, finally, the full acceptance of civil rights as superior to various ideologies or political orientations” and that the emergence of movements such as the “All-Poland Women's Strike” or the “Black Protest” “has changed the nature of the building of a new awareness of women” (Sajkowska 2021, 47-47). Such phenomena should be a cause for concern, since any action in favour of a freedom which does not recognise the dignity of another human being, especially a defenceless child conceived, undermines the basic understanding of the concept of freedom. This, in turn, may have disastrous consequences for individuals (degradation of conscience, lack of discernment as to what is good and what is evil, indifference to others, etc.) and for society as a whole in the future.

1.2 . Factors threatening the development of the young generation

Referring to No. 27 of the Constitution *Gaudium et spes*, John Paul II pointed out that these disturbing phenomena threatening human life have not only not disappeared, but have transformed themselves into new forms, thus spreading their influence. The Holy Father mentioned here, among other things, the progress of science and technology, the cultural situation, state legislation, modern medicine and the moral crisis of man (John Paul II 1995, 4). It is the weakening of the condition of the human spirit expressed in the disappearance of sensitivity to God that has caused a modern human being to fall into the trap of practical materialism. In turn, it gives rise to attitudes such as individualism, utilitarianism and hedonism (John Paul II 1995, 23).

Although these phenomena in themselves do not pose a threat to children conceived, they direct the life of the individual towards an attitude of having rather than being. The aim of the person's existence becomes his or her own well-being, and indifference to the fate of others develops. Many succumb to the

fashion of a “quality of life” characterised by excessive egocentrism, which subordinates everything to one’s own feelings, directed towards one’s own comfort, pleasure, fulfilment, while rejecting any kind of obligation or sense of duty towards fellow human beings. Moreover, the deeper dimensions of human existence, i.e. spiritual, religious or relational, are also marginalised. The human being alienates themselves from others, the ability to build relationships both with God and with others disappears in them. The whole of life and experience is reduced exclusively to corporeality, in which even sexuality “is deprived of its personal dimension and is treated instrumentally” (John Paul II 1995, 23).

Sketching a panorama of these phenomena makes us all aware that the young generation faces a huge task in protecting itself from these dangers, while adults face the need to manage them wisely. Negligence in upbringing occurring at some stage of life can result in a person not only forgetting, but never learning, that “he or she is more than he or she is” and facing, as it were, himself or herself. Years ago, the eminent psychologist and philosopher Erich Fromm warned that an excess of goods and their overabundance result in human passivity in the face of the challenges of the world, that boredom overtakes the individual, that he or she begins to create artificial needs, negating the actual state of reality, which consequently leads to the undermining of the existing social order, the rejection of any form of religiosity and, ultimately, may also give rise to a desire to transcend the “impossible limits of human development.” Fromm concluded as follows: “human beings waste their lives when they pursue goals that are inconsistent with each other and fail to see that they conflict with and exclude each other” (Fromm 2022, 13-54). Is this not the danger facing today’s youth?

2. EDUCATION FOR LIFE ACCORDING TO THE CRITERIA OF THE “CIVILISATION OF LOVE”

It seems a matter of course, then, that a concrete attitude must be taken towards such dangers, for otherwise everyone subjected to the “elements of this world” runs the risk of falling into spiritual corruption, which, as Pope Francis teaches, is worse than the fall of a sinner. According to the Holy Father, spiritual corruption consists in “a blindness of comfort and self-sufficiency, with which, in the end, everything seems acceptable: deception, slander, selfishness and many subtle forms of self-centredness” (Francis 2018, 165). An attitude of indifference, fear or withdrawal can make modern people unable to resist the temptations of this world and succumb to them. Therefore, heeding the very timely words of

saint Paul to Timothy – “preach the word, be urgent in season and out of season, convince, rebuke, and exhort, be unfailing in patience and in teaching” (2 Tim 4:2) – it is necessary to make every effort to prevent young people from being lost by forming the right attitudes in them and educating them to live their values in a spirit of Christian love.

2.1. Shaping appropriate values and attitudes

Nowadays, life shows that it is much easier to talk about the need for integral education than to do it in practice. This is for several reasons. First of all, upbringing is not confined to a single action of the individual, but commits to a continuous process of guidance which is a kind of educational process. Upbringing consists of “a totality of endeavours aimed at forming a person physically, morally, religiously and mentally and preparing him or her for life among others: in the family, in the homeland, in the world” (Sikorski 1998, 657).

Moreover, the system of human values is a correlation of many factors both internal and external occurring in the life of an individual. The changes taking place within both spheres of human existence are so rapid nowadays that people’s living conditions are undergoing a dramatic transformation. This forces repeatedly to take alternative paths of solution, which are sometimes risky and uncertain (Smyła 2020, 52-53).

This is the result of the social changes that are taking place in front of our eyes. The laicisation of society, the change in attitudes towards the traditional role of marriage and the family, the transformation of social roles, the disappearance and rejection of authority among teachers in favour of celebrities and influencers who have a considerable influence on the thinking process, or finally the uncontrollable influence of the Internet on the perception of the world, of others and of oneself (see Adamski 2021, 167-186; 234-279).

The Christian, however, does not fall down, but rises anew each day and turns to the One in whom all things are possible, to the One who strengthens – Christ (cf. Phil 4:13). He or she also benefits from the help of their neighbours – near and far – in their journey of personal growth. Among the many guidelines necessary in the process of transformation and entering the path of development leading to

the fullness of humanity, it is important to become aware of one's feelings and to discover the defence mechanisms at work in the human being. The individual must also develop the ability to accept themselves and others, to verbalise their feelings and to be able to use the various moments of daily life as a pathway for development. The following can be mentioned here: moderation, awareness of duty and the need to dream, a balance between work and rest, making the most of successes and failures. Irreplaceable, however, is the interpersonal encounter, maintaining a living bond with loved ones, seeking authority, submitting to the guidance of teachers or, finally, personal commitment, kindness and charity (Wieczorek 2019, 33-99).

In addition to humanly developed techniques for learning the right attitudes and values, there are also those that the Church points to and encourages. These are first and foremost prayer and works of charity. In addition, undertaking fasting, resisting temptations or self-limitation are the simplest way to achieve an inner freedom aimed at "recreating in oneself the likeness of God, working out a genuine humanity, and this to the measure not only of the human being, but of God" (Muszala 2022, 112-128). This, on the other hand, is the path leading to the acquisition of the fullness of humanity – the harmonious development of personality both in the temporal (physical, psychological) and spiritual (eternal) dimensions. For these realities are not only not mutually exclusive, but on the contrary complementary.

2.2. The right to life as a fundamental value

Considering this issue – the right to life as a fundamental value – it would be worth asking at first why there is all the jurisdiction if life is denied to those to whom it is addressed? Who would it actually serve? After all, the task of the Church, being "the defender of authentic human values" (Paul VI 1968, 18), is not only to remind and instruct about the sanctity of human life, but also to expose the truth that every human being, despite the struggles and uncertainties he or she may experience, when showing "sincere openness to truth and goodness can, by the light of reason and under the influence of the mysterious action of grace, recognise in the natural law inscribed in the heart the sacredness of human life from conception to the end, and come to the conviction that every human being has the right to expect absolute respect for this his or her essential good" (John Paul II 1995, 2). Admitting the validity of this

thesis, as it were, guarantees the preservation of interpersonal peace and lays the foundations for harmony and proper coexistence. This, in turn, does not only apply to believers, but to all people equally.

This is known, for example, by the doctors who undertake to save the lives of children conceived in their mothers' wombs. The condition thus expresses the truth that life is a fundamental value and to which everyone is entitled from the moment of conception. If not only prenatal examinations, but also full treatment (which should not be confused with medical experimentation) carried out under double anaesthesia is subsidised by the National Health Fund, then the argument attributing to unborn children the full right to life, the possibility of being born and the right to a dignified life after birth (*Treatments in the womb* 2023) remains unquestionable. Since the human being under the mother's heart is not being saved in such a case, one would have to ask – who would doctors be treating then?

A similar situation applies to aborted and stillborn babies. Rev. Jan Dziedzic, reflecting on this issue, writes: “The corpse of an aborted and stillborn child should be accorded the same respect as the corpse of an adult. There can be no doubt that the same respect as any dead person is also due to the corpses of embryos, human fetuses or prematurely born children” (Dziedzic 2021, 132). The above cases provide an important argumentation in the conversations undertaken with teenagers and give the idea that both the Church and various state institutions and their representatives treat conceived children with seriousness and respect. Hence the clear conclusion that they should be entitled to life from the first moment of existence.

2.3. “Fullness of life” in Christ

The discord that exists in the hearts of many who reflect on the origins of human life has its foundation nowhere else but in humanity's relationship to God, from whom all creation originates and for whom all things exist (1 Cor 8:6; Rom 11:36). In disregarding this truth, a person condemns themselves to wandering in search of the meaning of their existence and, as it were, blindly pursues happiness. For this reason, the Church defends life from conception, since she knows that “the human being is called to a fullness of life” that transcends the dimensions of earthly existence, which is directed towards participation in the life of God Himself (John Paul II 1995, 2). This fullness applies both to children

threatened by abortion and to those who distance themselves from the fullness of life in Christ by spreading the “civilisation of death.”

At the very beginning of his pontificate, Pope John Paul II pointed out that “the human being remains incomprehensible to themselves, their life is meaningless” if they do not experience Love, if they do not find their participation in it. In uttering these words, he spoke of Christ – the Redeemer of the human being. In Him only can the lost individual of today find oneself (John Paul II 1979, 10). Every human being – the most “concrete” and the most “real” – has been chosen by God and destined for the fullness of life in Christ already at the moment when he or she was conceived under his or her mother’s heart (John Paul II 1979, 13). Therefore, if we wish to speak of educating the young generation to live in accordance with the criteria of the civilisation of love, moreover, to live in the fullness of their humanity, then in addition to developing appropriate attitudes and general human values, it is necessary to show them the way to God and to encourage them not to be afraid to open the door of their heart to Christ. For this living encounter and experience is essential, because, as Pope Benedict XVI writes: “At the beginning of being Christian there is no ethical decision or some great idea, but instead there is an encounter with an event, with a Person who gives life a new perspective and thus, a decisive orientation” (Benedict XVI 2006).

3. PERSONAL COMMITMENT AND WITNESS OF LIFE

One who has genuinely experienced Christ cannot remain indifferent to the affairs of fellow human beings. A beautiful testimony of this attitude is left to us by the apostles Peter and John, who, when confronted by the pharisees and scribes, clearly state: “for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:20). The proclamation of the Gospel is the pressing need of our time. But alongside proclamation, there can be no lack of witness. For this reason, Paul VI, in *Evangelii nuntiandi*, left the following message for the Church – “Man of our time listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he listens to teachers, it is because they are witnesses” (Paul VI 1975, 41). It is important that all people, especially the younger generations, heed this call and follow it.

3.1. Servants of life

In Polish, the expression “servant” has pejorative overtones. It can evoke not only a certain aversion to serving, but also cast a bad light on the reality of service understood as a selfless gift of self. However, the examples of life that holy people have left behind over the centuries and the heroic nature of their attitudes not only do not deter from looking at their profiles, but can arouse a desire to imitate them.

Pope Francis, in his Exhortation *Christus Vivit*, writes: “The heart of the Church is also full of young saints who devoted their lives to Christ, many of them even to dying a martyr’s death. They were precious reflections of the young Christ; their radiant witness encourages us and awakens us from our lethargy. The Synod pointed out that «many young saints have allowed the features of youth to shine forth in all their beauty, and in their day they have been real prophets of change. Their example shows what the young are capable of, when they open themselves up to encounter Christ»” (Francis 2019, 49).

They were various saints – boys and girls – who left a beautiful testimony of life. To name at least a few: saint Sebastian, saint Francis of Assisi, saint Joan of Arc, blessed Andrew Phû Yê, blessed Karolina Kózkówna or blessed Carlo Acutis, and many others. History also teaches us that there were also those who sacrificed their lives to save the conceived child. Saint Joan Beretta-Molla gave her life so that the child under her heart could be born. But also Agata Mróz, the Polish volleyball player, gave witness to a love greater than death when she decided to sacrifice her life in order to give birth to the child she was carrying in her womb. Aware of the risks of childbirth and the necessity to refuse medical treatment, she rejected the abortion suggested to her. This year marks the 15th anniversary of her death. And finally, the blessed Ulma family from Markowa near Rzeszów – beatified for their heroic act of love in saving Jews during the German occupation. In the litany to blessed Joseph and Wiktoria Ulma with their children, martyrs, we pray such invocations: blessed Joseph – guardian of conceived life, and blessed Wiktoria – servant of life, and blessed Child under the heart of the Mother – pray for us (Jastrzęski 2023, 56-57). Witnesses and servants of life who, out of love for Christ, gave their lives for their fellow human beings. Here are examples to inspire.

3.2. Indispensability of personal testimony

Nevertheless, nothing can replace personal testimony. And although it is the most difficult to bear, because it expresses the Gospel message that only the seed that dies yields a rich harvest (Jn 12:24), it is not impossible to fulfil. At the same time, it must be remembered that the affirmation of being a witness and servant of life is not accomplished only through martyrdom or great, extraordinary deeds, but is fulfilled by faithfully following the guidance of Jesus in everyday life in small things (cf. Lk 16:10).

Today, young people have a full range of possibilities for personal commitment to save the lives of children conceived. The first of these is always to pray for the unborn, as well as for the parents of these children, doctors and all those who promote the “civilisation of death.” An example of such a commitment is the work of the Spiritual Adoption of the Conceived Child, which consists in praying a decade of the rosary every day for nine months for the intention of one child, whose name is known only to God, in order to save it from abortion (Filipiuk 2020, 83-92).

Other forms to which young people can be encouraged include, among others, involvement in the activities of Polish movements, foundations and associations working for the defence of life, e.g. PEROŻ or Pro-Right to Life, as well as personal support for single mothers’ homes, places where so-called “windows for life” function, giving public testimony by taking part in the March for Life, sharing one’s talent articulated in the words of a song or presented in a particular work of art (Filipiuk 2020, 92-100). One should not narrow down all possibilities of personal involvement to those mentioned here, but open oneself to the action of the Holy Spirit, who will show each individual the direction in which he or she should go. However, will He find an open heart and a will ready to cooperate?

CONCLUSIONS

Paraphrasing the words of the eminent educator and social activist Janusz Korczak, it can be said that “children and adolescents cannot think «like adults», but they can, as children, reflect on serious adult issues. It is their lack of knowledge and experience that forces them to think differently” (25 *Golden Thoughts of Janusz Korczak* 2023). This quotation even emphatically expresses the truth of the situation of today’s world, when young people, bombarded with all kinds of information on abortion from the

world of the media and often deprived of a solid foundation of upbringing in the family home, follow blindly, as it were, the fashion of today promoting abortion as a human right.

Nevertheless, soundly educating them about the dangers of participating in abortion, as well as pointing out to them the witnesses to life and the practical tasks they can undertake during their adolescence, can become an extraordinary contribution to their personal development. Involvement in life-promoting works and drawing closer to Christ, who is the “fullness of life,” is an excellent way of leading young people to maturity and the fullness of humanity. Will parents, guardians, educators and pastoral workers reach out to them in the right way and at the right time during their adolescence and lend a helping hand by showing them the right paths and enriching them with beautiful examples? It is to be hoped that they will, and that the efforts made today will bear fruit in the future.

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