

## **The formative character of religious education at pre-school level**

*“Neither the consumerist society nor the technologised society lay emphasis on education”*

In elaborating this study, we will proceed from a biblical text, which does not seem to visibly pertain to education, but which unambiguously asserts the role that the child occupies in relation to God, since the days of the Mosaic tradition and especially after the Coming of the Son of God, the source of the ultimate revelation of the Father on earth. The passage we are referring to is from Book 17 of the Gospel of Matthew and begins with a reference to the demand from the leaders of the time that Jesus and his disciples pay the two-drachma Temple tax. The Gospel relates that, arrived in Capernaum, the Saviour’s native area, the collectors of the Temple tax approached Peter and told him: “Doesn’t your teacher pay the temple tax?” ‘Yes, he does,’ he replied. When Peter came into the house, Jesus was the first to speak. ‘What do you think, Simon?’ he asked. ‘From whom do the kings of the earth collect duty and taxes – from their own sons or from others?’ ‘From others,’ Peter answered. ‘Then the sons are exempt,’ Jesus said to him. ‘But so that we may not offend them, go to the lake and throw out your line. Take the first fish you catch; open its mouth and you will find a four-drachma coin. Take it and give it to them for my tax and yours.’” This brief dialogue reveals how Jesus commits to and passes on the paradigm of human relations, as the concrete attitude towards authorities and fellow human persons.

One of the taxes the Jewish people were required to pay was the Temple maintenance tax. Seeing that Peter was the eldest in the group, the tax collectors concluded that he was the one responsible for the group’s social obligations, yet they did not overlook Jesus’s authority: “Doesn’t your teacher pay the temple tax?” They acknowledge the Saviour’s divine power, despite His younger age, but they intend to reach him indirectly, through Peter. It is known to them that the Saviour is the first born of His Mother. However, before Peter tells him what the collectors have asked him, Jesus asked him whom the taxes should be collected from, from one’s sons or from strangers (“the kings of the earth’s subjects”). By doing this, Christ solves two apparently contradictory unknowns: He makes Himself known as king of heaven and earth, by His *a priori* knowledge of things, but also accepts to obey, although he has been denied the right of son of the people of Israel, who should not be asked to pay any tax. By his subsequent decision, he reveals Himself as the master of creation and the lover of humankind: “But so that we may not offend them, go to the lake and throw out your line. Take the first fish you catch; open its mouth and you will find a four-drachma coin. Take it and give it to them for my tax and yours.” Not for the other apostles though. The Saviour continues his *lectio divina* in chapter 18: the problem did not lie in the tax itself or in the money, but in the effect of His act. He is careful not to offend anyone. The others

had not been asked to pay and this is why the Saviour asked that the payment be made for Himself and Peter only, thus seeking to rid the disciples of the sin of envy and vainglory. Vanity was an issue even among them, which was understandable due to the fallen human nature. Apparently, Peter was a favourite, yet the course of events shows that God's actual "favourites" were others, i. e. children: "At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked: 'Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?'" Having realised that on earth much depended on preference and context, the disciples wanted to get confirmation that at least in the kingdom of heaven they will enjoy some glory or some importance. Jesus calls a child and has him stand among them and tells them: "I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 18: 1-6).

Faced with the feelings of vanity and glory of the mature disciples, the Saviour offers an actual example, the child as a term of comparison and resistance to passions. Few realise that when praised, children do not take pride in themselves, when punished, they do not remember the wrong, when reprimanded they do not look for hypocritical excuses, and they do not feel envy but want to share and enjoy everything around them. St John Chrysostomos in his commentary on this text states that Jesus wanted to rid his disciples of these two passions: envy and pride. Pride distorts the human person. The prideful human person is more at risk than the ignorant one as he wants it to be known how important he is. He can never commune, because he never feels equal to the others, but rather more important and better than them. The prideful person does not treat properly even those close to him or the loved ones or those who love him since pride makes him disdainful. He has a difficult family life because he always wants to be given credit for certain virtues he does not possess but which he claims to have, which he has not earned or gained, but wishes they were recognised. This is the reason why the Saviour is so straightforward, giving the child as an example for humility in the face of the temptations of pride and vainglory.

Moreover, the Lord says that those who humble themselves must not be despised and will be called great in the Kingdom of God. He adds: "Whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me. But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and be drowned in the depths of the sea." Christ does not pronounce a sentence, but rather warns, He does not pass a verdict, but prevents. He does not say "a milestone will be tied around his neck" but that "it would be better for that one", because the spiritual effect of corrupting a pure and humble soul is so serious that the person would not deserve to live reasonably.

Christ therefore shows that He does not mean to offend those who collect the taxes and the potential financial controllers and also that those who are most exposed to being corrupted are the

little children. In the depths of the sea there are pearls and there are dead souls. Each will take or receive according to the extent to which they caused a little child to sin. Beside the urge not to cause the little ones to sin, in verse 10 Jesus also says: “See that you do not look down on one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven.”

The Son of Man has come to seek and deliver the lost ones, He has made a sacrifice coming down to save one among the little ones. It is all the more serious then when one regards with contempt the person for whose salvation the Son of God Himself humbles Himself. Corruption or causing one to sin can occur at institutional or personal level, here and now, yet its effect is not simply a temporal one. When such corruption was part of party politics few felt responsible. In a context of freedom however not only are one’s expectations higher, but also one’s responsibilities in the face of God, and the corruption one would cause is so grave that it cannot be expressed metaphorically.

### **The Children of the City**

Taking a leap in time to tackle the issues of pre-school education itself, as it is practised nowadays in the educational system, against the background of a young democracy, we will focus on the modern urban environment, where there are born, raised and educated the little children that Christ was talking about almost two thousand years ago. There are two features of the post communist urban milieu on which every study should be based: the relatively low average age of the population and the vertical development of urban architecture, initiated by the policy of the communist regime. Taking into account these two specific features we can outline the environment in which many children live and the mission of the Church in the work of evangelising the little children and not only.

Most city dwellers were born and raised in the villages and then determined to migrate and acclimatise to the cities being built in the period of fast industrialisation during communism. The work places and houses were granted by the regime, according to random criteria. That is why nowadays in a typical apartment block there live people of various backgrounds: university teachers, lawyers, doctors, skilled and non-skilled workers, unemployed and retired persons. The limited available space and the pluricultural feature generate *volens nolens* a silent tension related to the cohabitation norms determined by each person’s level of education. The areas destined for shared use are far from promoting a good image and the relations between the inhabitants are merely conventional in most cases.

The urban religious communities have heterogeneous membership, made up from people who settle in the new environment by moving to an apartment in a previously unknown area.

Beyond the threshold of one's door, the new inhabitant sees a group of strangers and for this reason the scope of human connections is limited, confined to friends and relatives who visit occasionally. Built vertically, without adequate open areas, overpopulated, lacking aesthetic sense, the housing estates in Romanian cities have become huge parish communities which, from a pastoral point of view, cannot be properly served. Daily realities show that the size of the parish is one of the most crucial factors in establishing the quality of the missionary and pastoral work. We cannot imagine a parish with 5,000 families where the shepherd of souls has the actual time to know and teach everyone.

The communication with the priest of new comers or of those who have just left is non-existent; there are few cases in which such movements are made known to the parish priest. That is why pastoral work is chiefly directed towards those who are already close to the parish, to the local church and who have appropriate religious education. Inevitably we come to the issue of the feeling of personal "belonging" to the parish community. The English specialists in urban mission have put the terms "believing" and "belonging" side by side and have concluded that the greatest problem of modern people is not that they do not believe but rather that they do not feel that they belong to a certain community.

Obviously in cities the religious options are greater, ranging from the preference for a certain place of worship, a serving priest or the spiritual background of the service (existence of a choir, quality of singing, personal experience in the liturgical space, quality of the sermon, etc) to the decision to abandon one's faith and become a member of another, Christian or non-Christian, community. The lack of the feeling of belonging seems to be one of the main reasons why some Christians choose to separate themselves from their original Church. When they do not feel at home in the parish they move to, they either reject it or they accept the missionary "offer" of derived denominations, where they feel like they are welcome.

In the urban milieu there is also conspicuous religious ignorance, even among intellectuals, against the background of the atheist education of the majority of the population. People accept more easily the information provided by the media.<sup>1</sup> They shape their religious views depending on the information they hear on the radio or see on TV or read in daily newspapers, which is produced either by people unfamiliar with the subject, by journalism novices, or by some who promote certain groups' interests. Television, the icon of modern man (which is also strangely positioned in many homes to the east), has fateful effects especially on children and young persons. Whereas in the past the traditional Romanian Christian came out as a person following a set of moral rules, for whom prayer was a constant preoccupation, the Romanian of today falls asleep in front of the TV

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<sup>1</sup> In an interview, Ms. Anne Graham, the daughter of the great American preacher Billy Graham stated that modern people easily accept what newspapers say but are questioning the Bible.

taking to his subconscious, overnight, the turbulence and the terrifying images of the crimes, the monsters and the debauchery of late-night broadcasts.

The city also ‘provides’ a wide array of subhuman activities, the most prevalent among them being pornography and drug trafficking, targeting children in schools and young persons. There are few people who see pornography as a form of exploitation of man, a subjugation of human nature, which treats the human person as an animal being, deprived of dignity and freedom, who accepts any “service” for money, promoting pathological exhibitionism as a form of natural sexuality. This “symbol of freedom” has caused that in Romania films of this type have been made with and by minors, as actors and directors. Instead of the image of God and temple of the Holy Spirit, the modern person proposes that the body become an instrument of pleasure and anomaly.

In their turn, drug trafficking and consumption are increasing alarmingly, a social phenomenon leading to the suspicion that sometimes the public authorities are not detached from the huge amounts being trafficked. Highschools and student campuses are the preferred venues for consumption, and the results are ever more apparent: family dramas, debilitated children, failed young persons, mentally deranged by overdoses. The urban areas seem to want to make up for lost time and catch up with such countries as the Netherlands where cafes officially sell light ‘stuff’ for normal consumers.

On top of all these issues, in the cities social problems prevail: unemployment, street children, poverty, disabled children, child abandonment, and alcoholism. On the one hand, these problems are caused by the lack of education and on the other by the declining economy and also society, as the latter is not able to deal with these dramatic realities. Some of these problems are closely related to the sectarian proseylitism, which seeks to exploit the difficult moments in the lives of Orthodox Christians and to offer them support in exchange for “conversion” to other faiths, called Christian, yet known all over the world as free Churches and sects. They seek to solve some social problems, with considerable foreign funding, the assistance provided from abroad out of sincere sympathy for those in suffering (disabled, poor, abandoned children) being used and presented by the local representatives of such communities in order to convert the beneficiaries to their faith. Afterwards they report these activities to their foreign hierarchy as being the “fruits of their missionary work”.

This is in summary the social and cultural mosaic of the post-communist urban society, which the Church must deal with. The object of this presentation is not the work of establishing the infrastructure for mission (churches, parish centres, educational centres, transport and logistics for community activities, etc), which is the field of the consecrated clergy and of the faithful who can offer sponsorship.

Most children are nowadays born and raised in such circumstances. What all responsible parents want is to provide their offspring with education attuned to the times we live in, quite a difficult task given the changes that the society is undergoing. To a certain extent, we have become part of the European process of education about which a specialist recently declared: “The field of education is required to reflect and prepare the children for a life we cannot even imagine, which is constantly transforming before our eyes, and this process has been unfolding since the beginning of the century (20st author’s note)”<sup>2</sup>, yet Christian precepts cannot be the object of the modernisation of the education system.

### **The first seven years**<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Françoise Dolto, *Ce să spunem copiilor (What should we tell the children)* (translation by Delia Șepețean Vasiliu, Trei Publishing House, Bucharest, 2005) p. 19.

<sup>3</sup> For further information refer to Dima, Silvia, *Cei șapte ani de-acasă (Seven years of home)* (Didactics and Pedagogics Publishing House, Bucharest, 1999) and Prof. Ani Răducu, Diac. Nicu D. Octavian, Diac. Valentin Bădescu, Pr. Sorin Filip, *ÎNDRUMĂTOR, elemente de educație religioasă pentru învățământul preșcolar (A Guide: Elements of Religious Education for the preschooling education)* (vol. I and II, Grafika Print, Bucharest, 1999).

One cannot declare about any person that they are wholly atheistic or areligious, because a person is part of a social complex, if not a religious one at least one based on myths and superstitions, manifested in various ways in the people's personal lives, even if they ignore them deliberately or are not aware of them. If the foetus receives the potential information even before birth, the elements that form the basis of education are laid in the first years of life, known in the Romanian traditional wisdom as one's seven years of domestic education / in the family. Given the life and work conditions of the modern man, these seven years are no longer confined to the home but also include occasionally the nursery and almost without exception the kindergarten. Taking into account the fact that approximately 40% of the intellectual abilities of the human person develop in these first years of life, kindergarten plays therefore an irreplaceable role in forming one's behaviour. Being present in this period in the daily life, both public and private, religion will be assimilated later on as a united whole along with the other teachings and skills, as a constitutive element of human life. Neither the Christian thinkers nor the Church Fathers exclude this age from their writings, recommending to parents that they are careful to educate their children from the earliest age, because then their soul can be easily shaped, taking on the first outlines of the virtues that will emerge later. St John Chrysostomos says: "Therefore, if we place limits from an early age we will not need to use such great force; to the contrary, habit will become law."<sup>4</sup> According to the interpretation of a contemporary theologian, St John proposes a few criteria for healthy education: that education must be done at the right time, that is very early, just as painters lay the paint on the canvas while it is still wet and able to be processed; education must involve good judgment and wisdom, just like birds do not teach their young to fly in one day, but tactfully and wisely accompany them to the appropriate height; education must be done with love, mercy and good humour, which means that corrections, discussions and reproaches must be made with love, in order to guarantee their usefulness; education with love must not be prohibitive but positive, by showing to the child the alternative to the visible evil; education presupposes the art of story-telling, to which the child is highly receptive; education must be sincere and realistic, that is able to prepare the children for the world of today, showing them what is good and also what is bad in this world where they are called to live; education involves the agreement between teachings and deeds on the part of the educator, and the lack of agreement can cause disappointments and disillusion to the young ones; finally, the children must be properly monitored and reprimanded in such a way as to contribute to the assimilation of knowledge and the realisation of the significance of education.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> St John Chrysostomos, *Omiliile and cuvântări despre educația copiilor* (*Homilies and addresses on the Education of Children*) (translated by Rev. Marcel Haneș, Marineasa, Timișoara, 2005) pp. 93-94.

<sup>5</sup> Metropolitan Hierotheos Vlachos, *Psihoterapia Ortodoxă (Orthodox Psychotherapy)* (translated by Prof. Ion Diaconescu and Prof. Nicolae Ionescu, Sofia, Bucharest, 2001), pp. 168-174 *passim*.

From a pedagogic point of view, in order to meet the educational requirements, children must go through a process of uniformisation and equalisation of their opportunities, given their varied educational and social backgrounds, and this process is achieved in kindergarten. The Church has benefited from the reintroduction of religion in the national curricula, received enthusiastically at first, yet the results of this are below expectations, on the one hand due to the methodology of teaching, on the other hand because of the family environment that does not encourage active religious life. This is why the Church has begun to organise religious education in kindergartens too, bearing in mind that basic behaviour takes shape at primary age. At this stage what is important is not the transmission of certain information, but rather the creation of an environment that can favour the access to the triggers of religious sensitivity, an environment that should be as close as possible to the actual one, of the home or of the church. The presence of the liturgical objects such as the icon, the candleholder, the holy water, the communion bread, the candles, and sacred music all play a role in sensitising and in creating a different environment to the usual one, from home or the daily life. Such experiments were made earlier on and they proved that, ever since a very early age, children are highly receptive to religious activities, such as: keeping quiet in a sacred space, taking care not to touch certain sacred objects, lighting candles, reserved walking and movement in the spiritual area. Pedagogues state that all these induce feelings of gratitude, inner joy and a sense of one's personal importance.

Children are thus attracted by everything solemn, majestic, out of the ordinary. For example, they are impressed by priestly vestments, by the shining decorations, by kneeling, the kissing of the icons and the sign of the cross, which they imitate and will get to know better as they grow older. Children can be integrated in the Church before they are fully conscious and can imperceptibly assimilate certain information about religious things in astonishing manner, if the frequency of their participation in the communal religious life is not meteorical. Children will take on whatever they are passed on, without distinguishing between good and evil, thus adopting everything as being good. The only thing they perceive as bad is "naughtiness", which they perceive depending on the strictness of the adults. It has been noted that the children who have received a religious education since early on in their lives develop a remarkable resistance to difficulty, endurance in overcoming life problems and exhibit such virtues as self-control, courage and philanthropy. Above all, they unconditionally acknowledge that God is the giver and sustainer of life, the reason why cultivating faith is essential from an early age.<sup>6</sup>

Some have objected that children come to Church because there they get to do less common things, such as lighting candles. By the same token, the opponents claim, they could learn arithmetic, by counting the lit candles, say from one to ten, without instilling any religious feelings

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<sup>6</sup> Maria Montessori, *The Discovery of the Child* (transl. by M. Joseph Costelloe, S.J., Ballantine Books, New York, 1967) p. 299.



connected to that simple act. The difference in objectives is however considerable: while the child needs less than a week to learn to count, and afterwards will get tired of lighting candles to count them, in the religious feeling of the gesture he will preserve the same sacred feeling each time he lights a candle, all through his life, knowing that he does it in the name of God, out of a spiritual and not arithmetical motivation.

### **A pilot programme**

The general objective of religious education is to form a powerful personality, whose life values correspond to the teaching of Christ the Saviour and passed on by the Church throughout history, to this day. More specifically, the religious classes inculcate into children such feelings as love and attachment to God, care for the loved ones and selflessness. Teachings are transmitted in more accessible ways, such as games that are symbolic of life, whose aim is to foster love for one's fellows, the respect for parents and adults, openness to goodness and concern in the face of any evil, integration in the Church's Christian tradition by respecting religious feasts, and cultivating the desire to know the religious preoccupations that are part of the daily life.

As far as preschool children are concerned, the teaching of religion should be done in interactive manner, by images, music, poetry, wordplays, which are all essential activities in the children's life. To this one must add such practical activities as confession and personal prayer, which eliminate the feelings of anxiety that the child experiences under the impression of daily life, through the public life or the media. Although the specialist literature indicates the damaging effects of TV broadcasts or of information technology inappropriately used by children, many parents and educators prefer television because it can make children "stay put" and can even represent a sort of educational alternative. According to Dr. Dmitri Avdeev, the negative effects of technology can be observed at different levels and the information transmitted has overwhelmingly negative consequences. Children suffer from hypnomania, or increased sensitivity to suggestions, reduced ability to memorise, intestinal dysfunction due to prolonged inactivity and the "invasion" of the private space by film characters and tv superstars and pop stars.<sup>7</sup>

One mistake that is repeating in the countries of the former communist bloc, after it was made in the 1960s, is to teach religion as an abstract discipline. In the public education system, where religion is obligatory, it has become a discipline among many others. In kindergartens,

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<sup>7</sup> Dr. Dmitri Avdeev, *Nervozitatea la copii and adolescenți (Nervosity at children and teenagers)* (translated by Adrian and Xenia Tănăsescu Vlas, Sofia Publishing House, Bucharest, 2005) pp. 79-80. Cf. Judith Lazar, *Televiziunea la originea violenței tinerilor?*, in *Violența. Aspecte psiho-sociale (Violence: Psycho-Social Aspects)* (Gilles Ferreol and Adrian Neculau (eds.), Polirom, Iasi 2003) pp. 179-188.

religious or civic education is done only where the priest comes of his own will or where there are initiatives at the level of dioceses.<sup>8</sup>

In Iasi, such a project was initiated at the the former daycare kindergarten no. 17, now ‘St. Nicholas’, and kindergarten 26, now ‘St. Paraskeve’. Designed as a pilot project, inspired by the Church and developed using its own funds, *Religious education at preschool level* began in 1997, benefiting from the cooperation and openness of the staff of the daycare kindergarten no 17 and of the officials in charge of preschool education at the District School Inspectorate. The concrete activity was carried out through ‘St. Nicholas’ Ecumenical Institute, with the blessing of His Eminence Daniel, the Metropolitan of Moldavia and Bucovina. The statement he made at the beginning of his inauguration sermon on the occasion of the consecration of the project is now well-known: ‘The kindergarten is the most serious school in the formation of a human person!’ The project did not focus exclusively on the children while at the kindergarten, but on their own living and formative environment, taking into account the fact that society is undergoing major transformations. The project involved, on the one hand, religious education for each group, according to the curricula, in agreement with the appropriate pedagogic requirements, and on the other, the design of a *Guide for the religious formation of the preschool child*, using adequate audio and visual materials, syllabi and lesson plans, conceived by skilled educators, graduates of the Faculty of Theology, with wide-ranging input from teachers experienced in didactic activity at this level. There were also practical activities, obligatory for the age in question: visits to monasteries, constant communion and familiarisation with the sacred space, celebration of the patronal feasts, charitable activities with active involvement of the children, participation in the major moments of the Church year: the Nativity of the Lord, the Resurrection of the Lord, and others.

The *Report* for the year 1999 of the programme *Religious Education at Preschool Level* pinpointed three main objectives of the newly initiated activity: a). The need to improve the quality of personal relations within the family, where the teachings in the religious education classes should be lived out. The parents are called to cooperate with the kindergarten and to continue in their private life what is learnt in the institutional community; b). The need for kindergarten educators to possess essential notions of religious education and apply, in their interaction with children, the norms of Christian conduct, thus exerting a beneficial influence upon them and becoming role models, a most important aspect at preschool age; c). The need for parents to listen to and encourage children when they show an interest in aspects of daily Christian life: private prayer, the

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<sup>8</sup> In public kindergartens educators teach certain notions of moral and civic education, but they expect the priest in the respective parish to get involved in a more professional and constant manner. In private kindergartens religion is only taught if they have a denominational statute. The others are preoccupied by fashionable subjects such as: PC use, English, ballroom dances, karate, a. o. The information was collected by the author, using the site [www.gradinite.ro](http://www.gradinite.ro), and through private discussions with representatives of polled kindergartens.

desire to attend Church celebrations, selflessness and sympathy for the needy or their colleagues, the demand that they share in the Holy Communion, and others.

The chief idea behind these objectives is that in order to achieve its intended goal, the education received at kindergarten must be accompanied and cultivated by responsible persons (educators and parents) by their own example. Many parents tend to treat children as dolls, going as far as to try to “lower themselves” to their level of understanding, overlooking the fact that the little ones are at the same level as their elders, the only difference being that they do not have sufficient information. For this reason they should be treated as grown-up persons: “It is certain that language heard from very early on and offered with love can carry a being to its future. Yet there is a period of latency between that particular moment and fulfilment itself. Just as the seed sown in the soil, which we don’t see until it starts shoots.”<sup>9</sup>

Beyond the advice that the educators and parents must give to children, there is a list of activities that the parents are called to practice in order to teach children by their own example, activities which do not differ from those of “grown-ups”. We are briefly indicating these recommendations, which, it should be noted, begin with the religious example and end with the life of prayer: go to church together, talk to your children about human relations, go shopping together, go to the cinema together, never refuse a recreational walk, practise together any activity, visit your ill friends, tell your children stories from your own childhood, speak to them about failure and how one can learn from them, explain to them the financial situation of the family, talk to them about death, travel to monasteries, pay a visit to an orphanage, visit a museum once in a while, talk about career, do physical work out, go to the bookshop, tell them why and how the car is maintained, teach them the value of work, pray together.

In contemporary Europe, the desire for material welfare leads to neglecting the family, to postponing or even the refusing to have children, so that France, for instance, has initiated a national programme of ‘linking the generations’ by encouraging families to have at least three children. The tragic events of recent years (floods, hurricanes, tsunami) show that in the face of the unbridled nature and of the “signs of times” there are no rich or poor countries and that each can be brought down to its knees. That is why the economic situation is not an argument that can support the fight against life. The faith in God and the care for His creation must become normative for the formation of the child in the spirit of faith, to preoccupy the Christian family and society, regardless of whether they are post-modern or self-sufficient.

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