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THE CHALLENGES OF EMPATHETIC PARENTING AFTER DIVORCE AND THE FOUNDATIONS OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

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Abstract

As well as the formation of general values, the formation of religious attitude, beliefs, and religious values is a lifelong process. An increasing number of studies show, however, that the foundations, on which the adult religiousness will be formed, are generally established in the very early childhood, and the child-parent relationship has a pivotal role here. In addition to the parents' authentic and deep religiousness, the quality of bonding in this relationship is an important factor that plays a decisive role in whether children will adopt parents' (religious) values and beliefs or they will be distance themselves from them or even reject them. Parenting is much more difficult in circumstances such as parents' divorce. Divorce always brings change which may cause the lower quality of the child-parent relationship. This article aims at illustrating the basic dynamics of the family relations and parenting which are relevant to the formation of social, interpersonal, and religious values, and at pointing out those aspects where complications are most probable to occur. In this context, divorce is a challenge that renders everyone involved highly vulnerable.

Key words: religious experience, parenting, child development, divorce.

Introduction

The family is a school of humanness. In a family, people grow and develop physically, psychologically, and spiritually. It is also the first space of evangelization, of individual's meeting with faith. For individual's optimal holistic growth, a family life should be as close to the ideal as possible: however, contemporary families often find themselves in a

vicious circle of violence and abuse, burdened by social and professional demands, alienation, pessimism etc.

Many families today face divorce, which is an extremely complex phenomenon, as a special challenge for interpersonal relationships and everyday life. Research shows that divorce (or the dissolution of a partnership) is one of the most stressful and psychologically challenging trials for the individuals and the family as a system. Ex-spouses have to deal with change brought up by divorce, and parenting, especially, has to face various challenges. If this dimension is seriously affected, the child's development is endangered in its very core, since the relations with parents from the first days of his/her life are crucial for his/her development.

1. Divorce and parenting

Family relations and parenting are certainly strongly challenged by divorce which is on the increase. The transitional period immediately following divorce is especially delicate. This is often a chaotic and stressful time for family members who experience many changes. Generally, this chaos also disturbs parents-children relationship and leads to weakened parenting strategies. Research shows that divorce generally leads to deterioration of positive parenting strategies (responsiveness) and to increase of negative parenting strategies (e.g. harshness). There are quite a few studies about how parents' divorce affects children. In the process of divorce, the children are the most vulnerable. The conflicts between ex-spouses are related to an increased rate of behavioural problems in children. If the conflict remains within boundaries and the children are not directly exposed to it, they are less affected. If, however, they are involved in the conflict, feeling trapped, they experience it as very troubling and stressful. Cooperative parenting of divorced parents is, of course, most desirable, but it only takes place in a minority of divorced couples. After divorce, which is supposed to bring relief after usually long-term conflicting relations, many couples remain highly conflicting; together with difficult emotional states this leads to inadequate types of parenting.

When parents divorce and if they persist in conflict, there is usually a decline in parent-child relationship. Children of divorced parents get less emotional support and practical help from their parents. Some studies do show that parents' divorce alone does not necessarily affect parenting, but it nevertheless often leads to worrying, exhaustion, and high levels of stress in parents; these factors affect both parenting and parental control. Divorce often brings about parenting which is less caring and, on the other hand, too protective.

Divorce also affects children's religious practice. Research shows that divorce is followed by decreased family religiousness; there is also an

increased probability of children abandoning their religion and being less religious in the traditional sense.

By abandoning religious practices, children are deprived of several good effects of religiousness in various domains: marital stability, sexual restraint, higher education and income, less crime and addiction, better physical and mental health, and higher levels of satisfaction in general. Weakened child-parent relationship that follows divorce is therefore a considerable risk factor for the development of various complications, and it affects the healthy development of children in general.

2. The importance of family relations for the child's development

A man is a relational being, ever embedded in the relational matrix that characterizes all dimensions of his being. A man as a person emerges from a relationship; he enters and co-creates relationships, develops and grows within them, suffers and transforms and continues his way towards eternity, expecting new relationships. In relationships, he is constantly provided with new materials for further growth and further relationships. In the background of a relationship there are always profound dynamics of family relations which began at his birth. The dynamics of these relations will dictate every new relationship, because they are engraved in the child's intrapsychic world, and are becoming the foundation for building new relationships, the one with God among them.

Each family is the first social environment that most decidedly influences and directs the growth of a young person. The family could be defined as an emotional-social system which is, apart from blood ties, connected with interpersonal affective bonds, its fundamental task being to create a warm and secure environment where each member is able to feel that s/he belongs, to fulfill her/his basic needs, and to become an independent, healthy, and self-confident person. In the family, the child gathers new life experiences, is educated and socialized. The goal of raising a child within family, if we only focus on external and most obvious aspects of parenting, is to teach the child family values, accept the child's points of view and regulate the child's behaviour. Numerous studies researching affective atmosphere of parenting show that children who live in emotionally warm families tend to leave their homes with higher self-confidence. Due to good experience at home, they feel less worried when looking for their life challenges. On the other hand, children living in emotionally cold families search for their place in world with much more fear and distrust. Family, parenting and relationships in child's earliest life period are irreplaceable, and for healthy development, child needs her/his parents who are her/his first and most important educators. All these traits are very important in the transmission of values.

3. Family and adopting values

A good society is based on the values of respect, solidarity, and responsibility towards oneself, others, and creation. The values are universal, fundamental, and slowly changing concepts which can be the guidelines for thinking and acting. One is supposed to recognize what is valuable and good; this recognition is followed by a desire for these values to be realized.

The values regulate individuals' lives, determining their thinking, feeling and behaviour. It is believed that a man is innately good, but the value system can only be built through relating to others and it is valuable for one to experience what others feel; in this process, family relations undoubtedly hold a special place since the values are transmitted transgenerationally. As the parent-child relationship is getting warmer and more open, the similarity between parents' and children's standards for values, religiousness, and ethics is greater.

In adopting values, the relationships with parents or primary caretakers are therefore of utmost importance. The emotional background of these relations is especially significant that begins to form during the first days of an infant's life. What an individual will adopt from another, generally also depends on emotional dynamics of transferring certain contents in a relationship. The transmission of values cannot be seen as a passive copying process where the contents are simply transferred from one individual to another; it is a complex process in which an especially important role is played by the emotional aspects of relevant relations which differ from person to person. Even in the most harmonious families the children adopt some beliefs, attitudes and values, but not all of them. When examining the transfer of values, we need to primarily consider deeper intergenerational affective dynamics and the consequent quality of interpersonal relations. From the standpoint of the quality of family relations and child-raising we can say that the parents' attitude towards the children and their mutual relationship determines the emotional atmosphere because of which the children will accept or reject certain values; and the parents' attitude towards these values is important, too.

When emphasizing the importance of a quality relationship, we primarily think of sensitive and empathetic parenting where the parents are in-tune, responsive, and attentive, where the child feels safe and is able to develop compassion and maintain the vividness of spirit. The parents have the innate responsiveness to the child, so that they can provide her/him with whatever the child absolutely needs in a given moment. A child who has her/his basic physical and emotional needs met in an adequate way will feel that s/he can rely on her/his parents. Basic trust and faith are formed on the basis of 'good enough' care, and they are a fertile soil for the mother's or father's values. Otherwise, in order to psychologically survive and preserve her/his self, the child is forced to resist everything that comes from the parents, perceiving it as threatening and dangerous.

With parents who are well-tuned, responsive, loving, attentive, sensitive, and at the same time standing up for what they believe in, children feel accepted; and they develop self-awareness and self-image based on these messages. Parents who seriously and respectfully embrace their child as s/he is and as s/he feels, who sense the child's distress although they may not see a sound reason behind it, and who at the same time maintain adequate boundaries give the child the sense of security in the outer world, as well as the feeling that s/he is seen and heard, 'made known', which is crucial for her/his self-esteem due to the feeling that her/his 'self' is authentic and real.

4. Family as the cradle of religious values

The family is one of the most important places for evangelization. In the growth of individual's religiousness, we can observe interwoven influences of various structures, the so-called 'agents of religious socialization': parents, peers, school, religious institutions, mass media, etc. Their influence is either direct, through explicit religious teachings and family religious practices, or indirect (e.g. the influence of school, vocation and spouse, cultural expectations, etc.). Research examining self-assessment of parents' influence on personal religiousness shows that young generation perceives parents as the most influential.

Parents most remarkably influence the religiousness of their children, both in their early years and later, in adolescence and young adult age. For teenage period, scholars have discovered three main factors that are supposed to predict religiousness in teenagers: understanding of how significant religion is for parents, positive family environment and religious traditions at home.

This influence can extend to young adult period.

Generally, we can say that various aspects of parents' religiousness / their religious values are reliable predictors of the extent to which teenagers and young adults will adopt and maintain the family religiousness.

As far as the influence according to gender is concerned, it is interesting that mothers, generally, have stronger influence on their children's religiousness than fathers; on the other hand, there is a tendency that same sex parents have more influence on their children (i.e. fathers on sons, mothers on daughters). Parents' influence is stronger in external forms of religiousness (e.g. going to church) than inner attitudes (e.g. towards Christianity). Findings regarding the extent of either parent's influence on religious development of their children generally differ; however, the majority of studies point out that mothers' influence is stronger than that of fathers. Usually mothers, not fathers, are those who take the primary role of child raising; besides, in Western cultures women on average estimate their religiousness higher than men. Women are also sup-

posed to feel more responsibility for child raising. For example, women will earlier feel the responsibility for taking children to church and introduce them to the basics of religious teachings. It therefore comes as no surprise that people typically perceive their mothers as those who have stronger influence on their religiousness. It is probably allowed to say that if the mother's faith 'dies', the child's faith 'dies', too.

It is not enough, however, that parents possess religious values which children will simply adopt. In transferring of religiousness, the quality of family relations plays a significant role, too. If family hurts, if family relations are not good and sincere, this also affects child's growing in faith. The increasing number of studies in psychology of religion shows that the foundations on which adult religiousness will form are mostly established very early in life. The quality of bonding in the early relations is a significant factor connected with whether children will adopt parents' (religious) values and beliefs, or they will be distanced from them or even reject them.

5. The relational basis of religious experience

As other individual's dimensions grow and develop, so does religiosity. Early years are not only decisive for emotional, social, moral, physical, and cognitive development but also for the development of religious or spiritual sense. Religious sense could be described as one's innermost, deepest feelings about God and transcendence. This is not about which religion one belongs to but rather what one feels in relation to the transcendental. These contents are profound, mysterious and extremely intimate, so that sometimes they cannot be even verbalized because they transcend us, but at the same time they are something utterly natural. Religious sense is not intellectual knowledge of spiritual dimensions and theological truths: it is an authentic inner sense of the existence of something transcendental, of somebody with whom it is possible to establish a relationship; this is the basis in which religious truths and other religious knowledge can be built and anchored.

The transcendental experience laid the foundation in the first years, from child's very birth. In addition to some predispositions with which an individual is born, the relationships very strongly determine the direction of one's development. On the basis of her/his relations with others, an infant begins to build her/his intrapsychic structure which enables her/him to establish relationships with individuals surrounding her/him. The awareness of her/himself as a person begins to grow in the child, which can be described as the 'psychological birth.' In the first months, the intrapsychic structure of self and human objects is formed in an infant, and so is the structure of God's image and the relationship with Him. Even at that early stage, in relations with others, the contents are

formed which will influence individual's later relationships, including the relationship with God.

The basis of religious experience are therefore formed within human context, i.e. the context of family environment. Child's experience of relations is the basic building material from which the child builds the images of self and others. In the beginning, these images are formed on the basis of the relationship with one's parents, and they end with child creating the internal intrapsychic image of divine much sooner than the institutional aspect of religion is at child's disposal. It is therefore quite clear that these basic processes take place before child's fifth or sixth year. Child's feeling about God, her/his intrapsychic image of God and the draft of later intimate relationship with God, i.e. the entire religious experience, is connected with child's parents in a very complex way. A child can experience parents as good or bad, and the intrapsychic image of God can correspond to that; or, this image may be totally opposite, so that God is entirely good and caring, while parents are experienced as uncaring, bad, and unloving. The opposite is also possible: parents are idealized and God devalued.

The period that is crucial for forming the ability of religious experience in child begins with her/his very birth, with the first three years being of utmost importance. Relations in this period are crucial for the development of the basic feelings of security and trust built on feedback through which the child feels recognized, i.e. seen, heard, and respected in her/his basic needs. With their responses, significant others (especially parents) let the child know that her/his feelings are understood, they take care of and calm her/him. Thus child's sense of self, self-esteem ('Am I worthy of being taken seriously?'), together with understanding what s/he can expect of others, is formed. This is the basis of perceiving God and the transcendental later in life. Even in the deepest, the most intimately religious experience the most important moment is when an individual can feel truly recognized, valuable and loved by God, regardless of what s/he is. This feeling of basic trust later creates the basis for experiencing an intimate and loving relationship with God.

The quality of the child-parent relationship (especially its affective aspect) is therefore an important mechanism which should be taken into account when we speak of the transmission of religious values within the family. Based on certain studies in this field it can be said that the lack of closeness and bonding obviously creates a gap in religiousness between parents and children. Young adults, for example, who reported warm and close relationships with their parents in their childhood, later showed less resistance to religious teachings. Others came to similar conclusions regarding the significance of parents-teenagers relationship for the transmission of religious values.

Myers concluded that the main determinants of adult religiousness in children are parents' religiousness, the quality of family relationships, and the traditional characteristics of the family structure. Among the family factors which positively affect the transmission of religious values, Jennings and Niemi pointed out non-conflicting atmosphere, connectedness within family, and parents' concordance regarding various values or attitudes.

6. Empathetic parenting and the parents' deep, authentic faith - the best 'recipe' for children to grow in faith

Research in psychology of religion showed that good bond, i.e. quality family relationships, or parents' religiousness alone do not guarantee authentically religious individuals nurturing healthy and authentic spirituality. One alone is not enough. In this context we should mention two hypotheses. The first one, the *correspondence hypothesis*, claims that children who had good bond with their parents generally follow parents' religiousness: their religiousness is not marked by dramatic breaks, it grows gradually from a very early age and is supported by a strong social network. This, of course, implies, that children will very probably follow their parents' attitude when parents do not nurture religious values. The second, the *compensation hypothesis*, relates to children who do not have good bond and quality relationship with their parents; as a rule, these children less often follow their parents' religiousness, seeking the opposite and distance from what comes from parents, because in this way, they feel safer; they often develop a less positive image of God, their religiousness often tends towards New Age spirituality, sudden twists in religious life, and tumultuous life reversals.

Even though adopting religious values is a complex process, according to the two hypotheses about the influence of parents' religiousness and the quality of the child-parent relationship based on the child's religiousness, we can roughly deduct the following scheme (Figure 1): the individual's (child's) religiousness will probably be more present if his/her parents nurture and live the authentic spirituality and have a good relationship with their child. In case that the relationship is good but parents do not have an alive and deep spirituality, the child will follow this pattern, and adopt a similar spiritual level. When the relationship is not good, however, the child will, due to being overwhelmed and because of his/her psychological need to survive, need to reject whatever comes from his/her parents, even their spirituality, even when this spirituality is alive, genuine, deep and authentic. In this case it is possible that the child will be nonreligious, or less religious than his/her parents, or religious in some other way. In case of a bad relationship and a lack of spirituality in parents, the outcome can be mixed: the child, who is actually

without a spiritual compass, will remain non-equipped for experiencing spiritual life, or spirituality (which is, however, often ambivalent, with typical searching for spirituality in different directions and resorting to New Age spirituality) and will become a safe haven who offers security and trust which was absent from his/her relationship with his/her parents.

		PARENTS' RELIGION	
		RELIGIOUS PARENTS	NONRELIGIOUS PARENTS
CHILD-PARENT BOND AND THE QUALITY OF RELATIONSHIP	GOOD BONDING (SECURE RELATIONSHIP)	+	-
	BAD BONDING (UNSAFE RELATIONSHIP)	-	-/+

Figure 1: Child's religiousness in relation to his/her parents' religiousness and the quality of the child-parent relationship

It could therefore be said that to form religious sense, the best 'recipe' is a combination of both warm and secure relationships and sincere faith of parents and educators from the earliest age. Trust and security is the soil from which mother's, father's, educators' understanding and beliefs can grow; hopefully, their spirituality is true and authentic. In the developmental process of a child having warm relationships, a basis is formed on which later in life a treasure of living faith develops, which does not consist of a mere sense of duty. This is only possible, however, if the individual has the foundation for experiencing God as something internal, not only as a superficial and external tradition. It can be said that in this process, transcendent God becomes immanent God.¹ In this union, God is alive, with the energy of a live person. Otherwise, God is perceived as dead and we often witness a paradox of imposing 'God' from without building such pressure that one is forced to turn his/her back to religion (or an institution) to feel alive again.²

¹ A. Belford Ulanov, *Finding space: Winnicott, God, and psychic reality*, p. 29-39.

² C. Gostečnik, *Psihoanaliza in religiozno izkustvo*, p. 361.