

*DAD, DO YOU STILL BELIEVE IN GOD?*¹

The Church in the Eyes of our Young People

Your Eminence, Father Ignatius,
Fellow pastors of both faiths,
Dear sisters and brothers, Christians.

I rejoice in this personal and heartfelt meeting of people who love Christ and have Him as Lord of their lives, even though with differences in the 'visible' perfection of this vision. Unfortunately, in the Church, as in natural families, there are different ... 'readings' of the parents!

Let us pray that Christ, beloved of us all, may unite the dispersed into one as He wants and as He told us in His prayer before his Passion.

I have been asked to share a few thoughts on how young people view or evaluate the Church.

What can I say about such a thorny and painful and depressing subject? I'm going to testify to what I think is going on.

I was born almost 67 years ago in a rural community near here, in the village of Yaltra near Edipsos, at a time when everything about religion or Church was still expressed on the basis of self-interest. As Buñuel says in his *Last Breath*, 'religion surrounded us suffocatingly!' Today, because of my age, I would have nothing to say (since I have no family), were I not a clergyman, who, by virtue of his position and competence, is concerned, as almost all clergymen are, with the existence and quality of the relationship of children with the Church.

Adolescence, we all know, is a period of questioning. Not even the Christian heritage of faith is spared from this questioning. But equally and at the same time, there can be in this period a personal opportunity to discover faith from within this 'turmoil of the nature of reprobates' as Euripides says.

In modern Greek families with two or three children above the age of ten, the invariable ritual of Saturday night grumbling is repeated monotonously in view of the children's participation or not in the Divine Liturgy the next day. The youngest children sometimes find in Church a place with peculiar conditions of impressiveness. If they find there also peers, they have companions in escape from family routine in an environment that at the same time is not a school.

¹ The question with which the French film *Grâce à Dieu* closes. It expresses the wonder, surprise or irony of the teenage son of the protagonist. The film adapts for the cinema a real-life incident in the life of a clergyman in Lyon during the historical sexual abuse scandal that resulted in the removal of the archbishop, Cardinal Barbarin, accused of mismanaging the process.

Older children are in a more complex situation. The annoyance of waking up to a morning that might offer itself to be lazy; failure to recognise the utility of such participation; the socially acceptable, by their standards, isolation in which they might well include God ('Of course there are other ways to tell God we love him', they throw at you wittily); the lack of interest, even of curiosity, since the Church today raises absolutely no interest in participatory presence: all these factors make the case a lost battle.

These days, for Christians and non-Christians alike, Sunday is a time for sports.

Here in Greece, and for the Orthodox, there is an additional, insurmountable obstacle: the incomprehensibility of the language of worship, which makes participation impossible and presence at it apparently meaningless. A tiny percentage of children respond by participating in Church events and sharing in the Eucharist. That is until they seek and demand an answer to their existential questions, a search that unfortunately is not always successful.

And all this is combined with their important psychological need to be part of something, in order to be affirmed. Of course we must take into account that today's young people live in a world where almost every issue is annihilated and devalued. Such a world does not leave much room for the development of the greatness which faith constitutes.

The young person will perhaps use the internet to review, out of curiosity, what his parents bequeathed to him to see if he will accept anything from his Christian past, and if so how. On what merits will he discern this? Fundamentally? Superficially? As a matter of life or simply as a matter of social behavioural conditions and adaptability? All possibilities seem open.

For a while the young may choose to move away from what (perhaps) their parents taught them for years, which is a critical point for both sides.

It must be said, though, that the Church does not easily accept adolescents. It often has trouble understanding and communicating with them. The position it imagines for them is a bit strange, because it tells them that they, the young people, are the Church of tomorrow, while in fact the young are the Church of today! The Church wants to accompany them for what they will become; while *they* want to be taken into account for what they are now!

To grow and mature in one's faith — let us not be afraid to state this — is to abandon the God of one's childhood. Have we not often built an image of almighty God that in children's soul is reduced to a disposition for reciprocal transactional 'dealings', not to say idolatrous demands, of the type: 'Help me do well in my exams!?' In adolescence, if we leave the young free from facilitating superstitions (praying for national exams and suchlike) they will understand that if they haven't done their homework, there is little point in asking for God's help!

The young person must realise that God is the opposite of almighty. He is weak, oppressed. He must abandon the almighty God of childhood fantasy and discover the God of Jesus Christ who comes when we least expect it, who suffers what he has suffered — the God who delivers and redeems.

Adolescence consists in learning to say 'I', even in matters of faith. Adolescence is a passage from childhood to the state of the 'I' of personality, that is, of a person-subject deliberately expressed. Young people must pass from the stage of the protected consumer to the stage of the actor, the responsible one. Are they wrong in this? Not at all! Their rebellion comes to remind us adults of what is really obvious: that faith is a personal and unique relationship with God.

Faith in God is a kind of struggle. Faith is not unprovable metaphysics, it is a constant overcoming of both reason and lack of reason. That is why it never becomes irrefutable certainty, it becomes irrefutable doubt. It is not a frenzy of self-convincing reason, but an awakening of reason's doubt of itself. Doubt is the dawn of faith and the criterion of its value-quality.

The depth of faith depends on the depth of the doubt which it seeks to overcome. Doubt is the deepest source of an honest faith; it is a necessary condition of the self-consciousness of faith. Doubt is not the opposite of faith, since faith is not simply the passive acceptance of the unbelievable, but the struggle between ego and doubt, when the ego stands before God. Faith has within it the doubt of faith, and only then is it alive and 'in the awakening': when it overcomes doubt by constantly forgetting itself.

Because of doubt, faith is vigilant, it knows that it is meant to go beyond stated ends and it understands the responsibility of its daring.

Faith is the only essential paradox in the world. It does not eliminate the questions of doubt but leads them to realisation, on their part, of their relativity. The reason of faith does not dissolve reason nor does it try to prove its truth to it (since faith is not of this world) but proves to it its identity and the limits of its jurisdiction.

It is not reason but 'rationalism' that denies faith. It is not faith but intolerance that is the enemy of reason. But rationalism and fideism are neither reason nor faith. Reason and faith are not opponents, they are competitors in the effort to overcome the goal. Reason prepares the appearance of faith and then teaches it its responsibility.

Faith helps reason rid itself of its inherent egoism. Reason is the 'manger' and at the same time the test of faith. (Sp. Kyriazopoulos)

This passage to personal faith is accomplished by practice. Adolescence is a turning point because it coincides with and formalises the first cigarette, the first coffee, the first glass of alcohol, the first loves and therefore the self-identification of each individual.

With these things adolescents manifest their need to create a personal space, which also makes possible any encounter with God. They say aloud what is silently on everyone's mind; and then we must be there to help them move from a personal faith to the faith of the community, knowing that we too have not believed because we have understood it all!

Parenting is crucial in this. Franz Kafka shows how this relation can mature or sever a relationship with God.

Later, as a teenager, I did not understand how you, who carried a hollow Judaism, could accuse me of not making efforts (which I ought to have made, if only to show my respect, you said) to develop something similarly hollow! For from what I myself saw, it was something trivial, an amusement or less than an amusement.

Four times a year you visited the synagogue, mingling with the most indifferent and not with the serious religious. You prayed according to the types and often surprised me by showing me in the book the passage which was being read at the time.

(Franz Kafka: Letter to his Father)

When Jesus sent the Apostles into the world he told them to go two by two, he wished to show that faith must be shared and that this is the only way it can exist. What adults can do is to suggest, to use examples, to point a way and learn to recognise an appeal.

After all, teenagers have their whole lives ahead of them to deepen this new closeness with God. 'There is always something we miss, we still haven't found the device that transmits faith!' as one priest used to say.

'The only way for your faith to be believed by others is certainly your own life. Since the end of sociological Christianity in Europe, the continent's Christians are very often converts, in the current sense of the term, because true faith is always a perpetual conversion and return' (St. Zoumboulakis).

In conclusion, let us look at three particular difficulties of the subject we are discussing.

On 30 June 1989, in a conversation with Jürgen Habermas (*The Dialectic of Secularisation*), the then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, later Pope Benedict XVI, listed the three major difficulties that prevent people and especially today's young from accepting, loving, and joining the Christian faith, difficulties that lead even the self-identifying faithful to lukewarmness:

a. The doctrine of creation, belief in God as the Creator of the world and of men.

β. The decline of metaphysics and the limitation of man to his empirical dimension.

This great spiritual event dynamites Christology itself: Christ is not believed in as God and

King of the world but merely as a historical person, an emissary of God. His resurrection seems empty of content.

c. The doctrine of eternal life and the Kingdom of Heaven. To most people these are unfamiliar words; and Christians, having a hard time believing in this, have turned the eschatological Kingdom into an expectation of merely a better and fairer society.

These are the things that today's man finds it difficult to accept: God as Creator; Christ as God; eternal life. He turns away from the Christian Churches, and faith is on account of them denatured among the Christians that remain.

The eyes of thinking young people look to the Church, to us who are ahead on the way to her, seeking 'answers' to these three painful questions.

In addition to this, sometimes unknowingly, when they are in a good and sincere mood, they want to flesh out what the Bible says. The Old Testament with its anathemas and its injunction '... to the Lord we shall drink to the Lord'; and the New with its 'following' of Jesus, whose face is set towards Jerusalem.

Let us strive to direct our own course well. That will be our chief testimony. Jesus said we are to be the light of the world, not just people who talk and talk about God.

May Christ illumine us so that our brothers and sisters, and our children, will arrive at seeing, wishing to journey with us 'to glorify our Father in heaven'.

Thank you for your patience.

Christ is risen!

FR. THEODOSIOS MARTZOUCOS

The above was a short introduction to an informal meeting of Evangelicals and Orthodox Christians in Agios Lavrentios Pelion, 30 May - 1 June 2024