

Religious education – formation of young people for life*

In the context of the year 2016, proclaimed in the Romanian Patriarchate as *Solemn Year of Religious Education of the Christian Orthodox Youth and Commemoration Year of Saint Hierarch Martyr Anthimos of Iviria and of Church Typographers*, the Theological-Educational Department of the Patriarchal Administration, in cooperation with *Patriarch Justinian Faculty of Orthodox Theology, University of Bucharest*, organises the International Congress of Theology *Religious Education of Young People in the Context of Current Secularisation* (Bucharest, 3-7 September 2016). This academic event brings together representatives of state institutions, hierarchs, priests, experts in educational sciences from Romania and responsible persons for religious education of youth, delegates from sister Orthodox Churches.

The International Congress of Theology takes place after the *Meeting of Orthodox Youth from All Over the World* (Bucharest, 1-4 September 2016), in order to offer to the guests of the Congress the opportunity to come to know and analyse the conclusions reached by the young people gathered in Bucharest.

The Congress represents an opportunity for: sharing the experience of the participants regarding religious education of young people in an international context; knowledge of the educational projects carried out by sister Orthodox Churches; identifying current challenges and educational perspectives in finding solutions to improve the means of the young people's information and formation for an integrative education; increasing the awareness of the importance and necessity of a specific mission of the Orthodox Church, in the spiritual formation of the younger generation; development of common educational projects both nationally and internationally; capitalizing on the cooperation between Family, Church and School for religious youth education.

In the context of current secularisation, when traditional values are weakened and education is subject to changes of paradigm, young people need support from Family, Church and School, since only through proper orientation and by promoting authentic models they will be able to discern between current challenges and future perspectives.

* Message of His Beatitude Daniel, Patriarch of the Romanian Orthodox Church, on the occasion of the International Congress of Theology *Religious Education of Young People in the Context of Current Secularisation* (Bucharest, 3-7 September 2016).

In the educational field, the Romanian Orthodox Church played a significant role throughout the history of the Romanian people, helping to organise and enrich education and national culture. The Romanian school was founded in the church porch and continued to exist and develop in close connection with the Church.

In what follows, we shall present aspects of religious education in Romania related to: *Religion courses; undergraduate theological studies; graduate and postgraduate theological studies; educational and catechetical programs and projects; youth activities.*

I. *Religion as School Subject*

Religious education in schools provides *a spiritual integrator horizon, a binder that relates to and integrates knowledge from other school subjects in order to form together an enlightening and edifying spiritual landmark for life, lived in communion of love and co-responsibility for the common good.*

In most European countries, Religion courses are taking place in the public educational system, having a recognised and appreciated role in society. In our country, until the adoption of the *Law on Public Instruction* (25 November /7 December 1864), the Romanian education took place almost exclusively within the Church and, by this law, the Religion school subject played an important role in primary, secondary and high school education.

Decree on Education Reform of 1948 took Religion out of school. The difficult years of communist dictatorship, with its humiliating atheism imposed in state schools, against the will of a religious people, *have taught us not to yearn at present for culture without faith, science without spirituality, matter without spirit, knowledge without communion, philosophy without hope and, in particular, school without soul, namely education without religion, especially at the age of existential questions and spiritual formation of young people.*

After the fall of communism in 1989, "moral-religious Education" was reintroduced in primary and secondary schools, beginning with 1990-1991 school year (*Protocol signed in 1990 by the Ministry of Education and Science and the State Secretariat for Religious Denominations*).

Concerning this school subject, the Romanian Constitution approved by national referendum of 8 December 1991 states: *The State ensures freedom of religious education, according to specific requirements of each religious denomination. In public schools, religious education is organised and guaranteed by law* (art. 32, paragraph 7).

Religion subject retains until today its compulsory character in the school curricula. In 2014, following the publication of Decision no. 669 of the Constitutional Court of Romania, enrolment for attending this course is done freely by a written request of the a student over 18 years old or of a parent or legal tutor in the case of an underage pupil. Consequently, at the beginning of the year 2015, 2,167,485 applications were recorded in the *Integrated Information System of Education in Romania*, out of a total of 2,371,697 pupils, namely a percentage of 91,39%.

In support of Religion school subject, in 2015, the *Association of Parents for Religion Courses* and the *Association of Religious Teachers* were set up, while the Romanian Patriarchate has elaborated the document *Strategic Plan for Improving the Quality of Religious Education*. In developing cooperation towards supporting and improving Religion courses, at the national level, 5,642 *partnerships between parishes and schools* were signed, in which various school and extracurricular activities were conducted.

One of the biggest challenges for religious education is linked to the need of developing a unified didactic and religious system, corresponding to the set of spiritual values and the suitable manner of their communication. In this sense, *school curricula and manuals for the Religion subject are periodically revised*. The new Orthodox curricula *for primary schools* were drafted by the Ministry of Education and Scientific Research, in collaboration with the Romanian Patriarchate, in the period 2012-2014; at present, *new curricula for secondary schools* are prepared. At the same time, in the process of selecting manuals, organised by the Ministry of National Education and Scientific Research in the years 2015 and 2016, new *manuals for primary schools* were agreed upon by the Romanian Patriarchate and approved. These manuals are available both in print and in digital versions.

With the coming into force of the new curricula for Religion, *auxiliary teaching materials for primary schools* were published at *Basilica Publishing House* of the Romanian Patriarchate for the assistance of pupils and teachers of Religion.

The Religion subject has always had within the public school system an important role in shaping skills and moral and social attitudes. Therefore, *religious education cannot be absent from the Romanian school curricula, precisely because the study of religion meets national and local Romanian community needs in preserving the richness and spiritual identity and in transmitting perennial values to the young generation*.

II. Undergraduate theological studies

Placed in continuation of religious education in the School and the Church, *the theological seminary* anticipates the extended and specialised training in the theological faculties. *The general knowledge gained in theological seminaries* by following the common subjects set *gives pupils the chance to attend any university in Romania.*

In 1803, Metropolitan Veniamin Costachi founded *the first Orthodox theological seminary, in Moldova, at Socola Monastery near Iași.* Later, Orthodox seminaries were established in: Bucharest, Buzău and Argeș (1836), Râmnicu Vâlcea (1837), Huși (1852) and Roman (1858).

During the communist period, from 1948 to 1989, the theological education has been marginalised; thus, until 1989, six theological seminaries functioned: Bucharest, Buzău, Neamț Monastery, Cluj, Craiova and Caransebeș.

The fall of the communist regime in December 1989 brought about *the reintegration of the pre-university theological education in public schools system.* The enthusiasm of the 1990s and the freedom that the Church began to enjoy determined that, in addition to existing theological seminaries, those which were dissolved were re-established and new ones set up.

At present, within the Romanian Orthodox Church there are *28 Orthodox theological seminaries and 7 theological high schools,* with the following specialisations (for the vocational domain): *Orthodox Theology, Cultural Heritage and Religious Tourism Guiding.*

The Theological Seminar aims to help the formation of competencies and skills *facilitating the access of the young people to culture, civilisation and information, in accord with authentic Christian moral values.* In the overall context of a secular education that often emphasises the intellectual formation at the expense of the spiritual and moral formation, *the theological education correlates intellectual formation with spiritual formation, with liturgical experience and practice of faith.* Remaining faithful to its own religious traditions and assuming the concrete problems of contemporary world, the theological education proposes solutions oriented towards perennial values, as lights of the life in the eternal love of the Most Holy Trinity.

III. *Graduate and postgraduate theological education*

The theological institutions of higher education are designed to cultivate personal vocation of the young person aspiring to a spiritual and academic training. The graduates of theology in Romania are called to become ministers at the holy altars, teachers of Religion, social workers, church painters, and restorers of sacred art.

At present, *within the Romanian Patriarchate there are 11 faculties of Orthodox theology in the following cities: Bucharest, Constanța, Târgoviște, Pitești, Iași, Sibiu, Alba Iulia, Cluj-Napoca, Oradea, Craiova, Arad and 4 departments of theology in some faculties in Galați, Baia Mare, Timișoara and Caransebeș. In these faculties/departments of theology there are the following specialisations: Pastoral Theology, Didactic Theology, Social Theology, Sacred Art, Religious Music, and Educational Sciences. At the same time, the university theological education organises master and doctoral courses.*

Through partnerships signed between the Romanian Patriarchate and various educational institutions from abroad, Romanian students who are studying theology benefit also from *opportunities to study overseas*. At the same time, young people from abroad have the opportunity to study at Faculties of Orthodox Theology in Romania.

The Romanian Patriarchate aims to highlight the importance and necessity of religious and theological education, by periodically organising *national and international congresses and symposia*.

A true theological education requires a careful nurturing of some edifying spiritual landmarks for life and living models of holiness, especially through participation in the liturgical life and the social mission of the Church. *The faculties of theology are also designed to analyse and promote possible solutions to the challenges and existential problems of today, such as the phenomena of secularisation, globalisation, migration, environmental crisis, economic, social and moral crisis of the society, etc.*

IV. *Educational-catechetical projects and programs*

Beginning with 2005, the Romanian Orthodox Church has intensified its *educational-catechetical activities with children and youth, by initiating programs, projects and competitions at local, regional or national levels*. One of these programs, *Christ offered to children*, has become, since 2008, by the Decision of the Holy Synod of the Romanian Orthodox Church, the National Catechetical Program for children and youth.

In order to develop this national program, *guides of biblical catechesis* (for children aged 6-17 years old) and *catechist guides* were published. These catechetical tools were distributed in parishes from all dioceses, while priests and teachers/catechists were trained to use them and how to organise catechetical activities at parish level.

In order to intensify the activities and to identify the best solutions for implementing the National Programme *Christ offered to children*, annually (since 2008) a *National Congress is organised with the participation of diocesan inspectors, responsible people for catechetical activity at regional level and experts in education sciences.*

Since some children participating in that program are *at risk of school abandonment*, there was a need to develop a project aiming to prevent and correct early school leaving. Thus, since 2009, the Romanian Patriarchate, in partnership with *World Vision Romania* Foundation and Metropolitanate of Moldova and Bucovina, conducted in four stages the *Choose School!* educational project.

Choose the School! project, funded by the European Union, through the Sectorial Operational Programme for Human Resources Development, was aimed at *providing equal opportunities to education for a total of 30,929 pupils and develop remedial-corrective actions for a number of 418 persons who abandoned school.* The project was implemented in *3,309 parishes.*

Within the project, *103 Choose the School! educational centres were set up*, equipped with tools, office supplies and necessary material in conducting educational activities with children and young people in the disadvantaged areas of the country. *An educational curriculum* was developed, consisting of 7 modules adapted to the training needs of the education system and of the labour market. On this basis, actions/courses of *after school* type were developed, where groups for reading and mathematical ability were organised. *247 training sessions for priests and teachers were organised*, counselling and information services for parents/tutors of pupils who are at risk of early school leaving were offered, aiming at raising their awareness of the importance of education. *Several contests with prizes for all children enrolled in the project were organised and free camps for 11,793 children were conducted.* *33,488 prizes* were awarded in competitions organised in all four phases of the project, with a total value exceeding 4,000,000 lei (approximately 1 million euros). There were also offered: *11,793 prizes within the creative camps; monthly financial aid for 2,075 families with difficulties in supporting their children; subsidies for 418 children and youth participating in the Second Chance program.*

Moreover, *two virtual educational platforms* were set up: www.alegscoala.ro and www.alegscoala.ro with information about the activities undertaken in the project both at general level and in each individual centre, *an interactive map and an on-line discussion forum*. Following the research conducted within the project by professors from the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences of *Babeş-Bolyai University* in Cluj-Napoca, *the complex and integrated psychological study regarding risk factors of school abandonment* was published, presenting the impact of the activities on children who are beneficiaries of the project.

Specialised studies and reports confirm that the flexibility of *Second Chance* type programs, in which School, Family, and Church should be involved, *significantly reduce risk factors and increase the chances of reintegration of children being in school abandonment*.

The world of childhood, with its values, provides students with opportunities to create in different areas, to develop their imagination, skills and talent. Through the project *Choose the School!*, we intended to understand this world of the children, to better know the concerns, interests and aspirations of the current generation of children and young people and offer the chance that these may be highlighted and valued.

V. Youth activities

The Romanian Orthodox Church, through the infrastructure available to it, offers to the young people the necessary space and opportunity to develop their capacity of active participation assumed in a creative process, with a finality well defined in the formation of their personality. Through youth programs organised by the Church, they have the chance to know each other better and to be aware of the cultural heritage and rich specific traditions of the Romanian Orthodoxy space, but also universal. Because this process of self-discovery, development and interpersonal knowledge is realised with the support and guidance of the Church, the young people come to understand the importance and role of the Church in everyday life.

At the level of the Romanian Patriarchate, the intensification of youth activities represents a priority, with the following objectives: *to provide a favourable framework for personal development of young people, as members of the Church, where they learn to communicate, interact and develop harmoniously; to provide alternative methods of leisure, promoted by contemporary society; to encourage social responsibility among young people; to involve the youth in coordinating voluntary activities in dioceses from which they come; to form teams*

of young people who would develop youth programs under the guidance of diocesan centres; to familiarise young people with the specifics of each area of Romania.

With the blessing of the Holy Synod of the Romanian Orthodox Church, in our country operates the *Association of Christian Orthodox Students in Romania* (ASCOR) and the *Romanian Christian Orthodox Youth League* (LTCOR). In some dioceses, there are also well structured youth organisations, such as the *Association of Orthodox Youth* present mainly in Transylvania and Moldova. At the level of dioceses, *multiple youth activities*, with specific partnerships in this regard, are implemented and deployed. A special role is undertaken by *the youth camps, organised at some monasteries* in Romania (Caraiman, Tismana, Buciumeni, Durău, Putna, Sâmbăta de Sus, Oașa, Nicula, Rohia, etc.).

In conclusion, the aspects presented highlight different ways of organising religious education in the Romanian Church and School, as well as the importance of integrative education of children and young people, with the perspective of their spiritual and practical formation, as young people who participate in Church life and in society. Of course, all the activities presented until now need continuity and continuous improvement.

We thank the participants in this International Congress of Theology having the conviction that it will contribute to a better understanding of the importance and role of the youth religious education in the context of current secularisation, as light for the life in the Family, in the Church and in society.

† DANIEL

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