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Pedagogical principles of culture in Pope Francis' exhortation *Gaudete et exsultate*

Francis characterizes contemporary culture as: nervous and violent anxiety that distracts and weakens us; negativity and sadness; hedonism; consumerist and egoistic acedia; individualism; and many forms of false spirituality devoid of encounter with God, prevailing in the contemporary religious space. In many speeches, he calls it a "culture of exclusion". The Pope's response to the threats and limitations of modern culture is based on the pedagogical principles found in the exhortation *Gaudete et exsultate*. The aim of this article is to analyse the teachings of Pope Francis in order to show the need to renew thinking and attitudes in the face of various challenges that arise in religiously, culturally, and politically diverse societies, in the context of the family's educational duties.

Keywords: family, Francis, culture, pedagogical principles.

During his pontificate, Francis has already published three encyclicals – *Lumen fidei* in 2013, *Laudato si'* in 2015, *Fratelli tutti* in 2020 – and five exhortations: *Evangelii gaudium* in 2014, *Amoris laetitia* in 2016, *Gaudete et exsultate* in 2018, *Christus vivit* in 2019, and *Querida Amazonia* in 2020. Although in all these documents one can find elements of Francis' teaching on culture, the theme is outlined clearly

and in great detail in the exhortation *Gaudete et exsultate*, which is a manifesto of the call to holiness in the modern world.

Francis characterizes contemporary culture as: nervous and violent anxiety that distracts and weakens us; negativity and sadness; hedonism; consumerist and egoistic acedia; individualism; and many forms of false spirituality devoid of encounter with God, prevailing in the contemporary religious space¹. In many speeches, he calls it a “culture of exclusion”. He describes it in the following words: “There is no place in it for an old man or for an unwanted child. There is no time to stop with the poor on the side of the road”². Individuals and groups pushed to the fringes of social life, considered incompetent, inferior, and stigmatized by negative characteristics, should be able to access education, vocational training, employment, housing, medical care, and care benefits. The “culture of exclusion” will be deprived of its reason for existence when it is replaced by circumstances conducive to participation in social life, real access to resources, goods, institutions, and social systems is available, and the poverty of deprivation processes subsides and social rights are respected. Then we will witness the transformation of the “culture of exclusion” into the “culture of encounter”.

The Pope’s response to the dangers and limitations of contemporary culture is based on pedagogical principles, which can be found in the exhortation *Gaudete et exsultate*. They are important from the perspective of teaching religion at school. The purpose of this article is to analyse the teachings of Pope Francis, which will reveal the need to renew thinking and attitudes in the face of the multiple challenges that arise in religiously, culturally, and politically diverse societies.

Endurance, patience and gentleness

The first of them speaks of vigilance and the fight against their own aggressive and self-centered inclinations³. Inner perseverance and renunciation of selfishness keep us from being carried away by the violence that permeates social life, weaken vanity, and make gentleness of heart possible. Therefore, let us not complain about the mistakes of

¹ Cf. Francis, *Apostolic exhortation Gaudete et Exsultate on the call to holiness in today’s world*, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20180319_gaudete-et-exsultate.html, No. 111 (abbreviation: GE).

² Franciszek, 28. *Światowy Dzień Młodzieży w Rio de Janeiro*, <https://www.ekai.pl/swiatowy-dzien-mlodziezy-w-rio-de-janeiro/>.

³ Cf. GE No. 116.

others; let us try to remain silent in the face of the faults of our brothers and sisters and avoid verbal violence that destroys and damages. Let us not look down on others, putting ourselves in the role of merciless judges who constantly try to instruct others.

This principle also speaks of the need for humility, which can only take root in the heart through humiliations. Francis stresses that this does not mean walking around with eyes lowered, not saying a word, and fleeing the company of others⁴. At times, precisely because someone is free of selfishness, he or she can dare to disagree gently, to demand justice, or to defend the weak before the powerful, even if it may harm his or her reputation.

In order to achieve the goal of education, it is necessary that the whole process be constantly accompanied by the virtue of patience, the task of which will be to master and overcome discouragement and stimulate positive action. Pope Francis' proposal is in line with the teaching of his predecessor Benedict XVI, who claimed that

it is becoming ever clearer that only moral values and strong convictions and sacrifices make it possible to live and to build the world. [...] In the end, in fact, love alone enables us to live, and love is always also suffering; it matures in suffering and provides the strength to suffer for good without taking oneself into account at the actual moment. [...] Here too, of course, we are in need of patience, but also active patience in the sense of making people understand: You need this⁵.

Joy and a sense of humor

This rule is based on joy, which brings deep security, serene hope, and a spiritual fulfilment that the world cannot understand or appreciate⁶. It is worth emphasizing that Christian joy is usually accompanied by a sense of humour. In this respect, Francis refers to the examples of St. Thomas More, St. Vincent à Paulo, and St. Philip Nereus⁷. A bad mood is not a sign of a happy person. We often receive so much that sadness can be a sign of ingratitude. We can get so caught up in ourselves that we are unable to recognize offers of help and gifts.

The Pope is not concerned, however, with the consumerist and individualistic joy that is present in certain contemporary cultural

⁴ Cf. GE No. 119.

⁵ Benedykt XVI, *Spotkanie z duchowieństwem diecezji Aosta*, "L'Osservatore Romano" 1 (10)/2005, p. 37.

⁶ Cf. GE No. 125.

⁷ Cf. GE No. 126.

experiences⁸. Consumerism only bloats the heart. It can offer occasional and passing pleasures, but not joy. A real joy is lived in communion, which shares and is shared, since “there is more happiness in giving than in receiving” (Acts 20:35). Fraternal love increases our capacity for joy since it makes us capable of rejoicing in the good of others.

The papal encouragement to an attitude of joy can also be found in the encyclical *Laudato si'*. In his encyclical, Francis proposes the development of temperance and the capacity to rejoice in having few material goods⁹. It is about the conviction that “less is more”. It is a return to that simplicity that allows us to stop and appreciate the little things, to be grateful for the opportunities that life affords us, and not to succumb to sadness for what we lack. This requires avoiding the dynamics of domination and gathering wealth just for pleasure. It is not easy to develop joy and a sense of humour if modern man becomes self-sufficient and excludes God from his life, allowing the place of God to be taken by his own ego, and if he finally believes that he himself can determine what is good and what is bad.

In *Laudato si'*, Pope Francis calls for a certain attitude of heart, experiencing life with serene attentiveness, being completely present to everyone without thinking of what happens next, an attitude of self-gift offered each and every moment as the gift of God¹⁰. One expression of this attitude is the ability to stop and give thanks to God before and after meals. The Pope proposes to return to this precious custom and to experience it profoundly¹¹. That moment of blessing reminds us of our dependence on God; it strengthens our feeling of gratitude for the gifts of creation. Prayer before and after meals acknowledges those who, by their labours, provide us with worldly goods. Also, one cannot overestimate the role of reaffirming our solidarity with those in greatest need.

Boldness and passion

To explain this pedagogical principle, the Pope uses the biblical word *parrhesia*. It is boldness – an impulse to evangelize and to leave

⁸ Cf. GE No. 128.

⁹ Cf. Francis, *Encyclical letter Laudato si' on care for our common home*, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html, No. 222 (abbreviation: LS).

¹⁰ Cf. LS No. 226.

¹¹ Cf. LS No. 227.

a mark in this world¹². The ability to lead a life open to God and to others and the freedom to speak out complete the meaning of the word. Francis emphasizes that we are constantly tempted to flee to a safe haven. It can have many names: individualism, spiritualism, living in a little world, addiction, intransigence, the rejection of new ideas and approaches, dogmatism, nostalgia, pessimism, and hiding behind rules and regulations¹³.

Sometimes it is difficult for us to leave the already familiar area, which is at our fingertips. Deceitful habits tell us that our attempts to change things do not make sense, that we cannot do anything in a given situation, that it has always been the case, and that we have managed to survive anyway. This principle is therefore about waking up, shaking off our numbness, liberating ourselves from inactivity, challenging ourselves to not succumb to habits, and opening our eyes and ears, and especially our hearts, to the change that happens around us.

This teaching echoes the teaching of St. John Paul II, who reminded the faithful that “the process of education ultimately leads to the phase of self-education, which occurs when the individual, after attaining an appropriate level of psycho-physical maturity, begins to educate himself on his own. In time, self-education goes beyond the earlier results achieved by the educational process”¹⁴. Thus, what counts above all is to lovingly instill in the child the processes of maturation in their freedom, learning, comprehensive development, and the cultivation of true autonomy.

In community

By distinguishing this principle, Pope Francis points out that every act of isolation makes our fight against concupiscence and the snares and temptations of the selfishness of the world difficult¹⁵. The common life, whether in the family, the parish, the religious community, or any other, is made up of small everyday things. They have an impact on the culture, too. Here it is worth recalling three key phrases: “please, thank you, I am sorry”, because the right words, spoken at the right time, protect and nurture love. Only a community whose members

¹² Cf. GE No. 129.

¹³ Cf. GE No. 134.

¹⁴ John Paul II, *Letter to Families “Gratissimam sane”*, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1994/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_02021994_families.html, No. 16.

¹⁵ Cf. GE No. 140.

care for small, loving details and one another can create an open and evangelizing environment.

Community education should be a space for dialogue. Unfortunately, more and more often, the modern world offers us imitations of dialogue. These are: bilateral monologue (two people speak, but what they say does not interest the other person at all), teaching (one of the interlocutors speaks as a teacher, and the other is supposed to listen like a student), and information (one of the interlocutors reports some pieces of information that are unknown to the other side)¹⁶. Authentic dialogue requires mutual openness, modesty, and humility, associated with the willingness to correct what has been proven wrong in the discussion. Dialogue in the community requires honesty, the opposite of which is a lack of integrity in presenting one's own position, as well as taking advantage of the weaknesses of the interlocutor. Dialogue requires trust in the other person and systematic correction of oneself in light of his or her thoughts. Finally, dialogue requires respect for others, tact, culture, tolerance, and pluralism¹⁷.

Marian Śnieżyński notes that "the task of the school is to create the conditions to ask questions and to teach this art so that this skill serves development and is increasingly educational"¹⁸. Educational dialogue presupposes consent to ask questions. The preparation of children by parents for dialogue becomes an inalienable necessity and is inextricably linked to the educational process. Educational dialogue teaches us a culture of conversation, unleashes faith in finding answers to troubling problems, mobilizes us to ask questions, teaches responsibility for the word, unleashes intellectual anxiety, produces social bonds, and undoubtedly helps in seeking and answering life questions.

In constant prayer

The last principle of the pedagogy of culture proposed by Francis in *Gaudete et exsultate* is expressed in prayer and adoration. It is worth talking about it when modern man often finds it difficult to withstand the experience of being closed to the immanence of this world. Therefore, some moments spent alone with God are necessary. The Pope emphasizes that trust-filled prayer is a response of a heart open

¹⁶ Cf. N. de Martini, *Odnova rodziny*, Warszawa 1997, p. 21.

¹⁷ Cf. J. Mastalski, *Samotność globalnego nastolatka*, Kraków 2007, p. 314.

¹⁸ M. Śnieżyński, *Zarys dydaktyki dialogu*, Kraków 1997, p. 7.

to encountering God face-to-face, where all is peaceful and the quiet voice of the Lord can be heard in the midst of silence¹⁹.

In his exhortation *Amoris laetitia*, Pope Francis reminded the faithful that “moments of family prayer and acts of devotion can be more powerful for evangelization than any catechism class or sermon”²⁰. Pope Francis believes that an effective education of children and youth must take place within the space of prayer. Education in prayer means helping to establish contact with God and initiating and participating together in prayers of thanksgiving, praise, apology, and supplication. Parents should also develop prayer skills with their loved ones, peer group, and ecclesial community²¹. Introducing a child to the world of prayer requires purposeful pedagogical interactions. It is necessary to promote the development of dialogue and creative prayer in order to show the child that prayer brings joy to life, helps to overcome all difficulties, and allows children to discover the closeness of Jesus, who is a true and unshakable support for all men²².

Conclusion

Broadly defined, education is an extremely topical issue that affects both individuals and societies living in a global village of civilizational transformations. The modern world, with its indeterminacy and liquidity in the sphere of principles and values, hinders the educational process. Parents and educators are burdened with an extremely difficult task because, by not keeping up with the pace of change, they face changing trends, ideologies, and generational desires. For years, Poles have pointed to family as the greatest value²³. The pedagogical principles of culture presented, important for the modern teaching of

¹⁹ Cf. GE No. 149.

²⁰ Francis, *Post-synodal apostolic exhortation Amoris laetitia. Christian married couples and all the lay faithful on love in the family*, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20160319_amoris-laetitia.html, No. 288.

²¹ Cf. M. Borda, *Antropologiczne podstawy przyszłego autonomicznego życia wiarą w nauczaniu religii dzieci w wieku przedszkolnym*, in: *Edukacja małego dziecka. Wychowanie i kształcenie – kierunki i perspektywy zmian*, vol. 10, ed. E. Ogrodzka-Mazur, U. Szuścik, B. Oelszlaeger-Kosturek, Cieszyn-Kraków 2017, p. 184.

²² Cf. A. Solak, *Człowiek i jego wychowanie. Zagadnienia wybrane*, Tarnów 2001, p. 75.

²³ K. Walancik-Ryba, *Family in Poland. Social and Legal Contexts*, Berlin 2021, pp. 70-73.

religion in schools, are the answer of Pope Francis, who promotes “the culture of encounter” over “the culture of exclusion”. He points out that “today we put the culture of encounter first, or everyone loses”. What is this “culture of encounter”? “It is not the culture of selfishness and individualism that often prevails in our society, but the culture of solidarity and encounter”, the Pope explained, visiting Favela Varginha in Rio de Janeiro on July 25, 2014²⁴. He said that it is only when we are able to share with others that we become truly rich, and the measure of the greatness of a society depends on the way it treats the poorest.

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²⁴ Franciszek, *Spotkanie z mieszkańcami faweli Varginha*, “L'Osservatore Romano” 8-9 (354)/2013, p. 6.