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International Conference: Educating Young People for the 21st Century

The international scientific conference “Educating young people for the 21st century” was held on 17 October 2017, in the Pope St. John XXIII conference hall in the Major Seminary in Tarnów. The conference was organized by the research fellows of the Department of Pedagogical and Catechetical Studies of the Faculty of Theology, Section in Tarnów (WTST) of the Pontifical University of John Paul II in Krakow (UPJPII) in collaboration with the staff of the Department of Pedagogics of the Institute of Humanities of the State Higher Vocational School in Tarnów (PWSZ). The event was held under the auspices of the Polish Familiology Association. It was the fourth conference organized jointly by the academics of the two universities. This edition of the conference was attended by over 100 persons: graduates, PhD candidates and students – WTST (clerics and laypersons), students of Preschool and Early Education with the English language – PWSZ, students of Nursing – PWSZ, as well as teachers and others interested in the subject.

Rev. Prof. Józef Stala, on behalf of the organizers, welcomed all the guests, in particular, the speakers and the authorities of the Department of Pedagogics of the Institute of Humanities of the State Higher Vocational School in Tarnów. The introductory speech was delivered by Rev. Prof. UPJPII. Dr. Hab. Marek Kluz – the vice-dean of WTST, who drew attention to the fact that today’s world offers new, vast perspectives of activity and self-actualization of a person. However, on the other hand, the pursuit and conquest of areas of the material world have led to the emergence of new problems of a moral nature. People feel confused and defenceless., What is more, by having no role models and father

figures in terms of morality they lunge towards the extremes or let themselves be manipulated. This threat is particularly significant in the case of young people since they lack life experience, which is a key determinant of wisdom.

The motivation behind organizing this international scientific conference, devoted to the upbringing of a person, was to raise awareness of the existence of various problems, challenges and threats that the youth of today are facing. Therefore, Rev. M. Kluz congratulated Rev. Prof. J. Stala and Prof. Elżbieta Osewska – the chief organizers of the event. As the Vice-dean stressed, in his introductory speech: “We are in need of good guides, those who are “armed” with the truth about the person and who will defend young people against accepting something that, today, gives the appearance of good”.

The opening lecture – “Young people’s spirituality: The importance for teachers to understand the complexity of the spirituality of many young people today”, was given by Prof. Graham Rossiter (Australian Catholic University, Sydney). The professor pointed out that the present young generation, both in Western Europe and Australia, does not treat religion as the foundation for establishing the goal and meaning of life. Under such circumstances, Catholic religious education needs to search for new perspectives and accounts of education and the youth in order to prepare them for functioning in the 21st century. It is insufficient to indicate that young people’s spirituality is increasingly more subjective, individualistic and secularized. It is necessary to find new ways of meeting the young person. The starting point may be to get a better understanding of how today’s young people form their own identity, hierarchy of values and meaning of life.

The second paper – “Education as accompanying: from superficiality to spirituality”, was presented by Prof. E. Osewska (the State Higher Vocational School in Tarnów). Professor E. Osewska reminded that sudden economic, political, social, cultural, ethnic, linguistic, technological, educational and religious transformations influence the young generation of Europeans. Despite their effective participation in the cultural and technological revolution the youth still experience difficulties related to challenges posed by the present-day culture. Under such circumstances, what young people need in particular is to have contact with their teacher, educator who will accompany them in their passage from childhood to adolescence and, later on, from adolescence to adulthood. A lack of father figures, a community, a stable point of reference, and diverse civilization threats instil insecurity, fear and confusion in the lives of young people. Thus, it is essential for teachers to be patient, prudent, to communicate wisely,

to listen to the voices of their charges, to learn the history of their lives and to accompany them on their way to personal and religious maturity responsibly.

In her lecture – “What are the big concerns for 21st century teenagers?”, Dr. Marisa Crawford (Our Lady of the Sacred Heart College, Sydney) addressed the matter of anxiety and its forms, experienced by teenagers living in the 21st century. Loneliness, fear of judgements of their peers, excessive ambitions, as well as, occasionally – apathy, passiveness and indifference, feeling threatened, a need for long-standing relationships and, at the same time, the fear of rejection, feeling lost in the post-modern society are only some of the problems that young people of today are confronted with. Young people attempt to satisfy their need of happiness and love by purchasing new products and gadgets., However, possession of them does not bring the expected outcome; hence the necessity of posing questions and looking for answers concerning the appropriate education and religious formation of youth in the 21st century.

In the subsequent paper – “The World Youth Day generation”, Rev. Prof. J. Stala (the Pontifical University of John Paul II in Krakow) emphasized that the life of people changes, new generations come and go. After the John Paul II generation, who knew the Polish Pope, and has remained influenced by Him, a new generation is growing – the WYD generation, whose members perhaps had a chance to meet him, or not, but still take part in consecutive WYDs. The World Youth Day is not a one-time event, it is something more. Such a several-day meeting with other young Christians and the Pope strengthens their commitment, joy, zeal, enthusiasm but, most importantly, their faith and love of Jesus Christ and neighbours. By sharing the living faith and love, the WYD Generation wants to bear witness, to transform their surroundings, to create the new present and future!

In his paper – “Young generation in the Czech Republic”, Dr. Mariusz Kuźniar (Czech Episcopal Conference) stressed that Czechia is one of the most secularized countries in Europe and an increasing number of young people struggle with the phenomenon of alcohol and drug abuse; however,, there still exist highly committed groups of young people. About six thousand young pilgrims from the Czech Republic participated in the last year’s World Youth Day in Krakow. Their goal was not only to meet youth from all around the world and the Holy Father Francis, but also to deepen their faith in order to bear witness to faith in their own country. It seems that the World Youth Day proved that there are more devoted Catholics in Czechia than expected. The majority of them live in the regions of Moravia, Brno, Olomouc and Ostrava.

After the presentation of papers, the speakers were asked questions by the conference participants, then, a lively debate ensued, which was followed by a summary of the proceedings given by the moderator of the conference – Rev. Prof. J. Stala, who acknowledged the significance and topicality of the issues that had been discussed and considered.