

## Review

# Development of prayer in adolescence and youth

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**The study was designed to address the following research question: what does the development of prayer look like in adolescent and youth? The study presented the specifics of prayer from adolescence to early adulthood. At every stage prayer takes on a different form; however the same characteristics can appear in neighbouring or more distant phases. Features signifying more mature religiousness can disappear both temporarily and permanently. Nevertheless, the development of prayer communication is not sudden, it is gradual and fluid. Sometimes one form of prayer is maintained while new ones are formed.**

**Key words:** Development, prayer, adolescence, youth

## INTRODUCTION

Prayer is defined as every attempt to contact a different reality. In Christian view prayer is considered to be a personal meeting with God which is carried out in the form of a dialogue. Although the nature of this dialogue is bound to be religious, such a contact is dependent on psychological processes, which differ in various stages of development.

Developmental psychology distinguishes in the ontogenesis some periods of religious development. Prayer is regarded as a component of religiousness. In the development of his positive relationship with God, man progresses from the pre-religious period (up to about 15 months of age), through the period of first manifestations of religiousness (2–3 years of age), the period of magical religiousness (from 3.5 to 6.5 years of age), authoritarian-legal religiousness (from about 7 to 11 years of age), autonomic religiousness (from 12 to 17 years), authentic religiousness (from 18 to 25 years of age), stable religiousness (from 25 to 40 years of age), mature religiousness (from 40 to 65 years of age), up to the period of eschatological religiousness (from about 65 years of age) (Walesa, 2005).

This study is an attempt to answer the questions: how prayer develops in adolescence and youth, according to age, as well as which psychological factors favour this development and which of them hinder it. In order to answer the questions, we are going to analyse the deve-

lopment of prayer from adolescence to young adulthood.

## The prayer in the period of adolescence

At this stage of human development the main task is “to become an adult”, to acquire abilities and skills not only in the biological sphere of life, but also in its intellectual, social, moral and religious aspects. Growing up is mainly connected with mental changes: the skill of hypothetic-deductive thinking is typical of young people. They freely move around the world of possibilities, revealing an inclination to speculate “what would happen if...”. An adolescent often feels more secure with what is hypothetical – with the imagined worlds, dreams and plans for the future – than with the mundane reality (cf. Vasta et al., 1992; Pichon and Saroglou, 2009). The cognitive functions are improving, apperceptions are becoming more accurate and more detailed, importance of observation increases. Furthermore, growing up is the time of intense emotional and social maturation. It is the period when a young person experiences many frustrations, fears, conflicts but also all that allows him to believe in ideals as well as in his own power and strength (cf. Smrtnk–Vitulic, 2009).

Adolescents question their parents’ authority, look for new patterns of behaviour, confront the values they have

learned at home with what is handed down to them by extra-familial circles. The loosening of the emotional bonds with their mothers and fathers enables them to develop independence and freedom for establishing social contacts, as well as the sense of their own identities. In this period, the young person experiences an identity crisis, which involves an attempt to find their own place in the society. They are looking for an answer to the questions: "Who am I?" and: "Who should I be?" Fighting for their identity, they sometimes surprise the people around them, and even themselves, with the eccentricity of their behaviour. Although they sometimes ostentatiously manifests their autonomy "outside", quite paradoxically, "inside" they needs guidance and support (cf. Erikson 1968; Ryzd, 1999).

In the period of growing up, young people reveal a strong need to identify with their peer group. In fear of rejection, they tend to comply with the norms which are obligatory in it, sometimes to quite a significant extent.

The time between 12 and 17 years of age is the period when the formation of the manifested autonomous religiousness takes place. Most of the hitherto principles of the religious life are still accepted, but already in the internalised form. Some of them are gradually reformulated or rejected. At this age, the prayer assumes the form of an internal dialogue with God (Walesa, 2008). To the young people's minds, prayer is: "a system of communicating with God", "persisting in God's presence, which is something beautiful", "addressing God", and sometimes "a form of faith profession" (Granat, 1998 p. 97).

At the age of 12 to 13, prayer is a value which manages the plan of the day. During such a relation adolescents assesses their day and plan the next one. Sometimes 14- and 15-year-olds pray for the success of their first serious religious accomplishments such as entering a religious community. When a teenager reaches 16-17 the prayer contributes to fulfilling various needs and gradually becomes a pleasure (Kulpaczyński, 2000).

Moreover, at this age adolescents object to automatic forms of praying, that is mechanical, mindless reciting of formulas, especially when they resemble texts memorized in childhood. Thus, it is advisable to suggest casual, personal praying, both verbal and in mind.

The prayer in the period of adolescence depends on a series of educational-developmental factors, such as, for instance: (1) emotional ambivalence, (2) identity crisis, (3) disintegration of the child's image of the world, (4) influence of the peer group (Murawski, 1989).

When analysing the significance of emotional ambivalence, we should notice that young people are very often involved in the activities of various religious movements. At first they are very enthusiastic, even euphoric about them, then, as time passes, their attitudes change into indifference, or even discouragement. A young person can pray eagerly for some time because he is just experiencing positive emotional states. However, when the emotional charge changes into the opposite, negative

one, they pray less and less systematically, and sometimes they stop completely. The adolescents who experience difficulties related to ambivalence when praying should be reminded that the quality of a prayer does not depend on the person's mood at a given moment.

Young people, who, looking for their own identities, reject the hitherto authorities, criticize the religiousness of adults and question the forms of their religious life, regarding them as unauthentic and insincere. An individual growing up refers to praying formulas handed down to them by their parents and catechists with distrust and suspicion. Having rejected them for some time, they usually "come to like" the traditional prayers, such as the "Our Father", "Hail Maria", "Beneath Thy Compassion", etc. A young person wants to be absolutely sure that the prayers they have known since their childhood are expressed by them in an authentic, sincere way, with an internal conviction that they are their own praying expressions.

The developmental changes of adolescences lead to disintegration of the child's image of the world. In the religious life it is manifested by a critical attitude towards praying. The young person asks about the essence and sense of praying, about the place of God in the prayer, and whether this dialogue brings any actual effects, whether it changes anything in man's life. When certain factors act successfully (the influence of the environment and the individual's own activity), an individual gradually discovers God in such a prayer, as the Person, Creator, Lord, Father, Source of Love (cf. Kulpaczyński and Tatala, 2000).

As has already been said, a person growing up is susceptible to the influence of the group. Usually, the negative aspect of these influences is highlighted. However, it is worth remembering that such susceptibility can bring positive effects, when a person gets involved in the activities of movements offering positive values to young people. It can be the case with, for instance, groups of a religious character. Some of them practice various forms of praying, therefore helping to maintain a bond with God. The adolescents experiencing a prayer crisis, after establishing contacts with such a group, often overcome their own difficulties and acquire new skills in praying (the prayer of adoration, meditation on God's Word, a prayer dance) (cf. Bowker and Rublin, 2009).

In this period, as in other ones, there is a possibility of distorting the prayer. A young person can pray only in the moments of extreme exultation or nervous breakdowns.

Besides, there is still a risk of coming to a halt at the stage of infantile-childish prayer. If an adolescent has not experienced God's presence when praying, he runs the risk of stopping at the stage of saying the prayers in the formula prayer stage. As it has already been indicated, religious groups undoubtedly stimulate the development of young people's praying. However, there are cases of inappropriate approaches to prayer within them, such as highlighting its experiential aspect (cf. Francis and Evans

1995).

### **The prayer in the period of early adulthood**

The period of early adulthood begins when a young person passes his final examinations at secondary school (gets a “maturity certificate”), that is at about 18 years of age, and ends at about 24 years of age, when he graduates from the university (gets a university diploma). This age interval is devoted to the proper recognition of the world and sense of reality. The individual experiences a metamorphosis, progressing from focusing on the world of his own emotions to opening up to social matters. This, consequently, leads to choosing a partner for life, assuming the role of a father or mother, starting a career. Many studies stress the fact that the main task for this period of life is, above all, achieving the ability of forming intimate relationships with other persons and taking responsibility for them (Walesa, 2008).

The features of thinking, typical of this period, enabling the person not only to solve problems, but, above all, to discover them, can be described by means of the following terms: relativism and dialectical thinking (Gurba, 2000; Pichon and Saroglou, 2009).

Young adulthood is the period of overcoming the emotional chaos which is typical of adolescence. Feelings are slowly stabilizing and higher emotions (aesthetic, patriotic, moral and religious ones) are developing. Parallel to the formation of higher emotions, the attitude towards the world of values takes its shape. The individual reveals their ability to become deeply involved in accomplishing tasks related to the assumed axiological system, and these tasks are much more realistic than they were in the period of adolescence.

Between about 18 and 24 years of age, with the formation of an outlook on life, the authentic religiousness takes its form. It enables young adults to find their places in the world, constitutes a point of reference when they make decisions, and the source of their ultimate justifications. Authentic religiousness results from successful solution of religious conflicts, which take place in the cognitive, emotional-motivational and behavioural sphere. On the basis of authentic religiousness, a person is motivated to pray by a strong desire to maintain the intimate bond with God, the need of believing and trusting Him, regardless of circumstances occurring in human life.

A young man at the age of 18–19 usually discovers the depth of prayer. This is the time when they reach a phase of mature prayer in its development, having accomplished the previous stage of childlike, infantile prayer. They stop treating prayer as a magic formula which is useful in achieving purposes, but begins to talk to God with trust.

The prayer of young adults indicates an advanced stabilization. The individual has certain preferences concerning praying, improves the forms of prayer in which they feel fulfilled, contented with establishing contact with

God. At the same time they give up the ways which disagree with their psycho-religious predispositions and predilections. The contact with God may depend on their character and personality traits. For instance, an introvert needs privacy, isolation, peace and quiet as ideal conditions to make the prayer happen, whereas an extrovert prefers common prayer, with accompanying singing, playing music, clapping hands, etc. It is obvious that an introvert can also pray in a group, in a community, and an extrovert can pray on his own. In each of them, the difference lies in the proportions in which certain kinds of prayer occur (cf. McKinney and McKinney, 1999).

Expanding the range of prayers is a consequence of the fact that the individual has entered new social roles. In this period praying becomes more conscious and voluntary. It begins to focus on the problems of one’s own family, neighbourhood, matters of the whole country (unemployment, flood, alcoholism, drug-addiction), as well as those of the whole world (wars, terrorism, consumption-centered lifestyle, globalisation). If a young person is involved in the life of the Church, he also prays for the Pope’s intentions, for vocations for ministry, monastic orders and convents, for the sanctity of families, etc.

If, in the period of young adulthood, the individual has not assumed a real attitude towards God, that is, their authentic religiousness has not developed; they are subjected to regression in prayer development, or even to its periodical decline. However, the hunger for the supernatural, which exists in human nature, urges them to look for ways of contacting God, which can assume various forms of prayer.

### **Development of prayer – practical conclusion**

The presented paper was an attempt to approach the problems of praying in the light of developmental psychology. It is focused on the interaction between prayer and its psychological conditionings.

The analyses we have made allow drawing the following conclusions:

1. Prayer supports the development of adolescents, helps to gain practical experience as well as wisdom.
2. Prayer makes adolescents more sensitive to another people’s needs, helps to create strong and deep interpersonal relationships.
3. Adolescents subconsciously miss a perfect community in which everybody understands each other, supports and accepts each other. Religious movements and other religious associations are the harbinger of such a community. Their environment also aids to strengthen bonds with both God and other people.
4. The development of conscious prayer in the adults through religious communities helps to prevent egocentrism, even the loss of contact with God.
5. At every developmental stage, it is advisable to show in-

terest in emotions and experiences, especially in those of religious character, as they can be shaped to stimulate an individual to turn to supernatural reality in his prayer.

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