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THE RIGHT TO CHRISTIAN EDUCATION IN THE CONDITIONS OF A DIGITAL CULTURE

Abstract. Contemporary man encounters digitality on a daily basis, which affects his life at specific stages of development. This applies above all to the period of childhood and youth, when one is naturally subjected to educational processes. *The Directory of Catechesis* points out that this influence is so significant that it allows us to speak of a new culture, changing language, shaping mentality and introducing a new hierarchy of values. An important feature of the new culture is its global reach, because digitality by its nature crosses the borders of countries and continents, and geographical distances lose their importance. The ecclesiastical legislator, while respecting the right of every person to attain full personal development, declares in Can. 217 CCL/1983 the right of all the faithful to receive an integral Christian education. It is a continuous process that should be adapted not only to age, but also to the mentality of the faithful, which is significantly influenced by the new digital culture. The article answers the question of how to guarantee the right to a Christian education in the conditions of a digital culture. Duties on Church pastors ensue from this right of the faithful to carry out the mission of proclaiming the Gospel in the conditions of a digital culture, with particular emphasis on the postulate of humanization of language.

Keywords: right to a Christian education; Directory for Catechesis; digital culture; humanization of language.

The Second Vatican Council devoted a separate document to issues related to Christian education, issuing the declaration *Gravissimum Educationis*.¹ The conciliar inspiration naturally influenced the preparatory work and the

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¹ Sobór Watykański II, “Deklaracja o wychowaniu chrześcijańskim «Gravissimum educationis» (28.10.1965),” *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* [dalej *AAS*] 58 (1966): 728–739.

promulgation of the Code of Canon Law in 1983.² In Can. 217 KPK/83, the Church legislator declared the right of every faithful to receive a Christian education,³ understood as a continuous process, adapted to the age and mentality of the pupil. These last two characteristics of a Christian education particularly justify the issues of how to receive and thus guarantee the right to a Christian education in changing cultural conditions.

The new *Directory for Catechesis*,⁴ approved on March 23, 2020, should be considered an important stage in the dynamic renewal taking place in catechesis. The document systematizes the teaching and practical experience related to catechesis, taking into account the key importance of the process of maturing in one's faith, which is largely influenced by modern man's mentality, shaped by cultural conditions.⁵ The *Directory* recognizes the problem of the digital culture, recognizing it as one of the possible cultural scenarios for catechesis in the Church.

If catechesis means faith education, which by its very nature is not possible without dialogue between the Church and modern man, the question of how to guarantee the right to a Christian education in the conditions of a digital culture is justified. It accompanies a modern man who uses digital tools on a daily basis. As Pope Francis recalls, this "has had a profound impact on ideas of time and space, on our self-understanding, our understanding of others and the world, and our ability to communicate, learn, be informed and enter into relationship with others."⁶ A deeper reflection, as well as a logical conclusion to be drawn from the above statement, can be found in no. 359 of

² "Codex Iuris Canonici auctoritate Ioannis Pauli PP. II promulgatus (25.01.1983)," *AAS* 75(1983), pars II: 1–317 [dalej KPK/83].

³ Javier Hervada states that Can. 217 refers to Christian formation in the Church, i.e., the entitlement of the faithful that exists vis-à-vis the Church hierarchy and the Church's educational institutions. It should be distinguished from the civil rights pertaining to the state, where a state education system exists. Cf. Javier Hervada, "Księga II. Lud Boży. Część I–II," in *Kodeks Prawa Kanonicznego. Komentarz*, ed. Piotr Majer (Kraków: Wolters Kluwer, 2011), 211.

⁴ Papieska Rada ds. Krzewienia Nowej Ewangelizacji, *Dyrektorium o katechizacji (23.03.2020)* (Città del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2020) [further: *Directory*]. file:///C:/Users/Asus/OneDrive/Desktop/Directory-for-Catechesis-Study-Edition.pdf, accessed 30 January, 2020.

⁵ Luciano Meddi, "Considerazioni sulla proposta catechistica del nuovo Direttorio. Punti consolidati, intuizioni da verificare e nuove prospettive," *Salesianum* 82 (2020), 4: 852–853; Carl-Mario Sultana, "A Pastoral Reading of the Directory for Catechesis," *Roczniki Teologiczne* 68 (2021), 11: 44–46.

⁶ Franciszek, *Posynodalna adhortacja apostolska „Christus vivit” (25.03.2019)* (Città del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2019), 86. Cf. https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20190325_christus-vivit.html, accessed 24 January, 2023.

the *Directory*: “The digital, therefore, is not only a part of the existing cultures, but is asserting itself as a new culture: changing language, shaping mentalities, and restructuring value hierarchies.”

1. ACHIEVING CHRISTIAN MATURITY

In Can. 217 of the Code of Criminal Procedure/83, the church legislator declares that the faithful have the right to a Christian education that will prepare them accordingly to reach human maturity. In Can. 1136, the elements of a versatile upbringing are closely defined, those that can ensure the development of a mature personality: physical, social, cultural, but also moral and religious education. In both canons, the elements of upbringing are necessary to achieve natural maturity, which is the goal of raising every human person.

Guaranteeing the right to a Christian education requires responding to the problem that the Spanish theologian, Juan Luis Lorda, noticed. According to the author, the modern, post-Enlightenment concept of an education, also projecting onto the concept of a Christian education, is characterized by a gradual shift of educational goals towards the transmission of knowledge, especially in the fields of the natural and exact sciences. Thus, it has confused upbringing with education understood as the transfer of knowledge about specific sciences, displacing the moral aspect involving the formation of virtues.⁷

Modern Church documents direct the orientation of Christian education towards goals consistent with the doctrine known from classical sources.⁸

⁷ Juan Luis Lorda, “Antropología de la formación cristiana. La formación de los sacerdotes en las circunstancias actuales,” in *XI Simposio Internacional de Teología de la Universidad de Navarra*, ed. Lucas F. Mateo-Seco i in. (Pamplona: Servicio de Publicaciones de la Universidad de Navarra, 1990), 939.

⁸ St Clement of Alexandria, in the second of his great treatises on Christian formation, gives Christ the title of Pedagogue, portraying him as an “educator in virtue.” According to Clement, Christ the Pedagogue educates, which in practice means “improving the soul” and “bringing it into a virtuous life.” Cf. Klemens Aleksandryjski, “Protrepticus”, in *Patrologia cursus completus. Series graeca*, t. 8, ed. Jacques Paul Migne (Parisiis: Garnier 1857–1891), 112. In turn, St Thomas Aquinas states that the goal of an education is striving „ad perfectum status hominis in quantum homo est, qui est status virtutis”. Tomasz z Akwinu, *Scriptum super libros Sententiarum magistri Petri Lombardi episcopi Parisiensis*, t. 4, ed. Marie Fabien Moos (Parisiis: Lethielleux 1947), lib. IV, dist. 26, q.1, a.1.

Pope Francis, in his apostolic exhortation *Gaudete et exsultate*, stated that the faithful achieve personal maturity with the attainment of holiness:

We are all called to be holy by living our lives with love and by bearing witness in everything we do, wherever we find ourselves. Are you called to the consecrated life? Be holy by living out your commitment with joy. Are you married? Be holy by loving and caring for your husband or wife, as Christ does for the Church. Do you work for a living? Be holy by labouring with integrity and skill in the service of your brothers and sisters. Are you a parent or grandparent? Be holy by patiently teaching the little ones how to follow Jesus. Are you in a position of authority? Be holy by working for the common good and renouncing personal gain.⁹

The Holy Father indicates the specific attitudes that should be formed in the process of upbringing so that a Christian reaches the maturity of a human person.¹⁰ From the Pope's teaching in the above exhortation, the following goals of a Christian education can be identified: 1) living one's vocation joyfully; 2) faithfulness in the married life; 3) doing one's work honestly and undertaking it as a servant; 4) witnessing to the Christian life; and 5) concern for the common good and selflessness.

How can the above goals towards Christian maturity be achieved in the conditions of a digital culture? What are the risks involved?

2. EDUCATIONAL RISKS ASSOCIATED WITH DIGITALITY

The scope of the right to an education, guaranteed in Can. 217, includes both a supernatural education, aimed at the knowledge of God, and a natural education, which ensures that the educated person participates in the achievements of broadly understood culture.¹¹ The large-scale introduction and use of digital tools has brought about profound and complex changes, with its cultural, social and psychological consequences.¹² In broad terms, the *Directory* considers cultural participation and digitality as causing changes in

⁹ Franciszek, *Adhortacja apostolska „Gaudete et exsultate” o powołaniu do świętości w świecie współczesnym 19.03.2018* (Città del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2018), 14.

¹⁰ Archbishop Rino Fisichella stated explicitly that “holiness is the key word to use in the presentation of the new *Directory for Catechesis*,” Rino Fisichella, “Wstęp,” in *Dyrektorium*, 13.

¹¹ Cf. Jan Dyduch et al., *Komentarz do Kodeksu Prawa Kanonicznego. Księga II: Lud Boży*, t. II, 1 (Poznań: Pallottinum 2005), 34 n.

¹² Cf. *Dyrektorium*, 359.

the existing language, mentality and hierarchy of values. This results in individual participation in cultural phenomena, assimilating its content, using its goods, being subject to its norms and patterns, but also creating new values and reproducing and processing existing ones.¹³

There is no doubt that many phenomena related to digital culture do not serve the goals of a Christian education. The Church preaches the Gospel in a society that leans toward secularism. It carries out its mission at a time when the logic of the market drives the activities of media outlets, which are often caught up, as Mónica Codina puts it, “in a game of political and economic servility.”¹⁴ The same dangers apply to digital culture as a whole, in which communication in the service of humanity, communicating true theological and anthropological information, such as the unity and indissolubility of marriage, is seriously hampered. For many consumers of the digital culture, the value is to “consume” information without regard to its truthfulness.

Christian education is a constant discovery of truth and bringing it out into the open. In his method of educating, Socrates imitated a mother-midwife, helping his pupils to “give birth to the truth.” It was a long and painful process, but achievable for a man who was seeking the truth and wanted to find it. This Socratic inspiration in the field of education was taken over by Christianity.¹⁵ The logical consequence, therefore, is the rejection of distorted or incorrect ways of thinking and seeing reality in an incomplete way.

The starting point for a Christian education is the concept of the person. A person enjoys a unique status, rights, respect and dignity.¹⁶ A right arising from human nature is the right to education, and this means the right to know the truth. The *Directory* addresses the problem of rapid and uncontrolled dissemination of untrue information. Closed information circuits in digital culture facilitate the spread of false information, creating a distorted vision of reality. This can lead to abandonment of caring for one’s inner life, loss of identity, cynicism as a response to emptiness, gradual dehumanization, and closing in on oneself. A negative phenomenon, affecting the marital life, among others, is the spread of pornography, qualified as cyberbullying by the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelization.¹⁷

¹³ Andrzej Tyszka, *Uczestnictwo w kulturze. O różnorodności stylów życia* (Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1971), 54.

¹⁴ Mónica Codina, “Iglesia, política y opinión pública: comunicación institucional y comprensión de una realidad,” *Doxa Comunicación* (2006), 4: 186–187.

¹⁵ Jan Niewęglowski, “Zarys wychowania chrześcijańskiego,” *Seminare. Poszukiwania naukowe* 26 (2009): 267.

¹⁶ Sobór Watykański II, *Deklaracja o wychowaniu*, 1–2.

¹⁷ *Ididem*, 361.

Authentic saints built their perfection on the foundation of obedience to the Church and her hierarchy, in the areas of both doctrine and morals.¹⁸ In the conditions of a digital culture, the subject towards which obedience is shown is changing, and this has consequences on the level of Christian education and the pursuit of holiness. As the *Directory* notes, people, especially the youth, enter into a relationship with a machine and, in an attitude of trust, expect a response from it. This threatens us with by creating a new “sort of universal pseudo-religion [...] that legitimizes a new source of authority and has all the components of religious rituals: from sacrifice to fear for the absolute, all the way to subjection to a new unmoved mover that receives but does not give love.”¹⁹

Ramiro Pellitero Iglesias noted the urgent need to humanize the digital culture. He stated that the digital culture must be seen as a means for humanization, not as an end in itself.²⁰ Recognizing this problem is also important in terms of guaranteeing the right to a Christian education. Where should we begin the process of humanizing the digital culture?

The digital culture should be adapted to the needs and capabilities of modern man, but in accordance with the principles of humanism. The guiding principle of humanist philologists was concern for the purity of language and the idea of returning to the sources, prescribing the study of works in the original. All fields of philological and philosophical research were referred to as *studies humanitatis* (humanistic studies), i.e., proper to man. The humanization of the digital culture should begin precisely with language, recognizing its dependence and creative value with regard to the audience’s age and mentality. The *Directory* draws attention to the risks involved:

The art of storytelling, which uses the principles of rhetoric and a language of its own adopted from marketing, is considered by the young as more convincing and compelling than the traditional forms of discourse. The language that has the greatest hold on the digital generation is that of the story, rather than that of argumentation.²¹

¹⁸ Marek Chmielewski, “Święci pragną świętości,” *Tarnowskie Studia Teologiczne* 29 (2010), 2: 9.

¹⁹ *Dyrektorium*, 366. file:///C:/Users/Asus/OneDrive/Desktop/Directory-for-Catechesis-Study-Edition.pdf, accessed 30 January, 2020.

²⁰ Ramiro Pellitero Iglesias, “La aportación de la perspectiva Cristiana en el actual momento educativo,” *Roczniki Teologiczne* 67 (2020), 11: 36.

²¹ *Dyrektorium*, 363. file:///C:/Users/Asus/OneDrive/Desktop/Directory-for-Catechesis-Study-Edition.pdf, accessed 30 January, 2020.

Specific consequences follow: “the moral norm is at risk of being perceived as authoritarian, while narrations become truths that obstruct the search for the true and the good.”²²

3. EVANGELIZATION AND EDUCATION THROUGH THE LANGUAGE OF ARGUMENT

Christian education requires the use of all possible means of evangelization, so that people living in the conditions of a digital culture do not remain on the margins of religious life. “Digital natives”²³ are not only addressees of the Gospel message, but can themselves become active participants in the proclamation of the Gospel through the digital culture.

A necessary condition for the effective evangelization of digital culture is its humanization, specifically, as a starting point, the humanization of language. The Christian vision of education implies a personalistic approach, i.e., recognizing the person as the goal of education. It is necessary to recognize the dynamics of the interaction that occurs between the educator and the educated, because education demands an encounter between two people, which is increasingly moving into the virtual world.²⁴ This encounter should lead to an informed faith experience, an introduction to the community of the Church and familiarity with the role that the Church fulfills by the will of Christ. Even if this takes place in the conditions of a digital culture, it cannot be based on the marketing language of storytelling, despite the fact that, from the point of view of communication, it reaches young audiences better, especially through the Internet. The language used in the process of a Christian education must be the language of argument. Both the language and the arguments used should be guarded by the Church hierarchy. The Church's shepherds should orient their actions to the power of argumentation, given its niche in the digital culture and the decadence of the power of ecclesiastical authority in the digital world.

New, previously unknown forms of communication through the digital culture can become an effective tool for education. The *Directory* sees the need not only to use new technologies for evangelization and education, but

²² Ibidem, 364.

²³ This is how the *Directory* defines people born in the digital age, those who consider technology something natural, not having any difficulty with using and interacting with it. Cf. *Dyrek-torium*, 362.

²⁴ Cf. Niewęglowski, *Zarys wychowania*, 269.

also, and above all, to become “an evangelizing presence on the digital continent.”²⁵ As already mentioned, new forms of communication are redefining the concept of presence, extending it into the virtual world. However, all forms of presence in the virtual world require the humanization of language.

In handing on the Good News, shaping a mature personality and leading someone to holiness, all possible means of interpersonal communication should be used, because ultimately, the most important thing is that “the word of the Lord continued to spread and grow” (Acts 12:24). Modern multimedia technology makes it possible to share texts, sounds and images at a distance. It has become possible to disseminate the Good News around the world in its text, audio and video versions. In each of these cases, it is necessary to show the indissoluble connection among the text, sound and image with the person of the Proclaimer of the Word of God, Jesus Christ.²⁶ This, in turn, presupposes care to hand down the Good News while preserving the already formulated postulate of humanization of language, understood as “returning to the sources.”

In practice, this means excluding Scripture, Tradition and the Magisterium of the Church from the linguistic forms functioning in the digital world. “Digital natives” find it easier to express themselves through slogans understandable to their peers. While the prudent use of “meme language” by a youth pastor creating the interpersonal bond necessary in the educational process can be considered useful, the impassable limit is the communication of the Good News through humanized language tailored to the content being communicated, based not so much on a story, but more on argumentation. Evangelizing the world of digital culture must be exempted from two rules that apply to this culture and are described by researchers: 1) the expansion of colloquialisms enforced by communicative attractiveness,²⁷ and 2) saving effort (intellectual, articulatory, mechanical) in creating a message, which results in its trivialization and simplification by distorting the content.²⁸

²⁵ *Dyrektorium*, 371; cf. Sultana, *A Pastoral Reading*, 53.

²⁶ Cf. Henryk Sławiński, “Trwała wartość słowa pisanego w multimedialnym świecie i upowszechnianie Dobrej Nowiny,” in *Dobra Nowina w środkach społecznego przekazu*, red. Henryk Sławiński (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Benedyktynów, 2020), 42.

²⁷ Cf. Jacek Warchała, *Kategoria potoczności w języku* (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2003), 137–138.

²⁸ Cf. Danuta Jastrzębska-Golonka, “Wartościowanie leksemu fajnie w odczuciu współczesnego użytkownika języka,” *Poznańskie Spotkania Językoznawcze* (2007), 31: 154.

4. CONCLUSIONS OF A LEGAL-CANONICAL NATURE

It is believed that the first statement of the Church referring to the Internet, which was then a new and small-scale phenomenon on a global scale, was included in John Paul II's message for the XXIV World Day of Social Media of January 24, 1990.²⁹ This statement took place seven years after the promulgation of the current Code of Canon Law, initiating the formation of the Church's doctrine on the matter of digital culture in its broadest sense. It also has a significant impact on the reception of the Code's provisions on social media, with particular emphasis on the duties of the Church's shepherds in this matter (Canons 822-823) and other canonical provisions (Canons 831 and 1369).

In his message, the Holy Father pointed out, even then using the phrase "new culture," that its emergence creates an opportunity for the Church to inform the world of its Creed and clarify its position on every problem more quickly. The Church's educational activity is one of the most important tasks in the service of the human person. The peculiarity of this mission is not only to assist in the development of a person in the broadest sense, but also to lead them to communion with God. Canon law should secure the just fulfillment of this mission to every believer in the conditions of a digital culture. The purpose of Church law is not what is common to all legislation, the preservation of due order in community life and activity, with a view to defending subjective rights and the good of individuals and the community as a whole. Church law is also oriented towards the salvation of souls, which is difficult to imagine without guaranteeing the right to a Christian education in the Church community.³⁰

Years before the emergence of the digital culture, the Holy See defined mass media publishers as means or devices through which words, information or ideas can reach not only an individual, but also the collective and entire human community.³¹ This definition includes new technologies that

²⁹ Jan Paweł II, "Orędzie na 24. Światowy Dzień Środków Społecznego Przekazu Misja Kościoła w erze komputerów (24.01.1990)," in *Jan Paweł II – orędzia na Światowy Dzień Środków Społecznego Przekazu. Konkordancja*, ed. Dariusz Sonak et al. (Lublin–Olsztyn, 2015), 139–141.

³⁰ Cf. Zenon Grocholewski, "Specyfika prawa Kościoła katolickiego. Referat wygłoszony z okazji otrzymania tytułu doktora honoris causa Uniwersytetu im. Adama Mickiewicza w Poznaniu, dnia 7 maja 2004," *Poznańskie Studia Teologiczne* 17 (2004): 26.

³¹ Cf. Consilium Instrumentis Communicationis Socialis Praepositum, "Instructio pastoralis *Communio et progressio* ad Decretum Concilii Vaticani II de instrumentis communicationis socialis rite applicandum de mandato eiusdem Cancilii exarata (23.05.1971)," *AAS* 63 (1971): 593–656.

create the digital culture. The Church's shepherds should strive to use the means of social communication (Can. 822 § 1) in the conditions of a digital culture, because "the Church is called to reflect on the specific way of seeking the faith that characterizes young people living in the digital age, and then to consequently update her ways of proclaiming the Gospel and adapt them to the language of the younger generation."³² Canon 822 § 2 imposes an obligation on pastors to instruct the faithful that they are obliged to cooperate so that the use of social media is animated by a human and Christian spirit. The proper reception of this norm in the conditions of a digital culture should involve humanizing the language used in the digital world.

As already mentioned, humanizing the digital culture should aim to evangelize it. Canon 822 § 3 obliges all the faithful, especially those who in any way participate in managing or use social media to assist in the Church's pastoral activity so that it can fulfill its tasks. This means that, in the conditions of the digital culture, in which every Internet user becomes an active creator of the media world, the faithful should be reminded of their responsibility for the Church's mission, including the educational aspect. According to Can. 823 § 1, the Church's shepherds should ensure that the faith and morals of the faithful do not suffer through the publication of inappropriate content and irresponsible use of the media. The volume and speed of the transmission of information by those connected online in all parts of the world clearly makes it impossible to respond to every abuse in this matter.

However, it seems that the teaching of pastors in this area and briefing the faithful on the digital culture are insufficient. Issuing the *Directory* should become an inspiration in reinvigorating this activity, since the duty and, at the same time, the right normalized in Can. 823 § 1 belongs to the bishops, whether individual or gathered in particular synods or Bishops' Conferences, with regard to the faithful entrusted to their care. With regard to the entire people of God, it is entrusted to the supreme authority of the Church (Can. 823 § 2). The long-awaited Apostolic Constitution *Praedicate evangelium*,³³ reforming the Roman Curia, should be considered a way out of this demand. From the start, the document emphasizes that the curia is to play a servant role to all evangelizing activities of the pope and the local Churches, but especially the activities of bishops.

³² *Dyrektorium*, 370; cf. Meddi, *Considerazioni sulla proposta catechistica*, 855–858.

³³ Franciszek, *Konstytucja Apostolska „Praedicate evangelium”* (19.03.2022), <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/it/bollettino/pubblico/2022/03/19/0189/00404.html>, accessed 10 May, 2022.

The faithful should not write anything for journals, pamphlets or periodicals that openly combat religion or good morals, unless there is a just and reasonable cause (Can. 831 § 1). The same obligation applies to the faithful for whom the place of publication is a digital medium created to combat religion or good morals. In addition, the provision requires the permission of the local ordinary when the thing concerns the clergy or members of religious institutes. In addition, the revised Book IV of the Code of Canon Law/83 retains the provision previously found in Can. 1369 that a person, by means of social media, “utters blasphemy, gravely injures good morals, expresses insults, or excites hatred or contempt against religion or the Church is to be punished with a just penalty.”

According to Can. 831 § 2, it is the task of the Bishops’ Conference to issue regulations on the requirements to which clergy and members of religious institutes must conform in order to speak on issues of Catholic doctrine or morals in the social media. Contemporary documents on clergy appearances in the media take into account the broader digital culture.

The use of the language of argument by the Church’s shepherds and Catholic educators in the humanization of language should be supported by the Church’s activities and the high level of her educational institutions, especially universities and Church faculties. Their purpose is to conduct research in theological and theology-related disciplines and to train students in these disciplines as future educators who will evangelize the digital culture (cf. Can. 815).

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