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## WHO IS A CHILD AND WHO CAN A CHILD BECOME: RECALLING THE EDUCATIONAL AND PRO-SOCIAL ACHIEVEMENTS OF FATHER FRANCISZEK BLACHNICKI

**S u m m a r y:** The subject of the study described in this article is primarily the perception of a child by Father Franciszek Blachnicki (1921–1987), the founder of the Light-Life Movement, the Crusade for the Liberation of Man, and the Christian Service for the Liberation of Nations, among others. Based on an analysis of the works of this educator and theologian, his vision of childhood is also outlined. The research results have been supported by an appropriate structure for the article, which describes the methodological basis, places the research problems among the disciplines and subdisciplines of science, provides the basic concepts, and portrays Blachnicki in a broader historical context. The article also resolves research problems concerning his perception of a child and childhood (following the teachings of the Catholic Church) and his educational, pro-social and ethical suggestions addressed to contemporary people and found in his works.

**K e y w o r d s:** Franciszek Blachnicki, Light-Life Movement, oasis, child, oasis worker, childhood

### Introduction

The research subject results from the author's belief in the extraordinary, supererogatory achievements of Fr. Franciszek Blachnicki, who is mentioned alongside such figures as John Paul II and Stefan Wyszyński. He is rightly considered one of the destructors of the communist system and a man who had the greatest achievements

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in the field of the unconventional religious education of children and young people. After the communist authorities liquidated pre-war Catholic youth associations, such as Catholic Action and the Sodality of Our Lady, this promoter of modern democracy founded the Light-Life Movement (initially referred to as the Oasis of the Children of God), initiated the Temperance Crusade, the Human Liberation Crusade, and the Independent Christian Social Service and Christian Service for the Liberation of Nations (particularly of Central and Eastern Europe). He also founded the Institute of the Immaculate Mother of the Church in Poland and the Maximilianum publishing house in Carlsberg, which published works that popularized the assumptions of the movement and other initiatives, especially pro-social ones and those popularizing sobriety.

The patriot was persecuted for his consistent faith, arrested many times, and finally murdered for his courage to bear witness with his life. He somehow calls on his successors to come to terms with the past and allow truthful people to have a say. Learning about his fate and legacy is not only an opportunity for a researcher to explore interesting thematic threads but also the honour of writing about a charismatic man, endowed with great moral and spiritual strength, which constructively transformed an individual and a community.

The research subject described in this article is how this educator and theologian perceived a child. Based on the analysis of Blachnicki's works, his vision of childhood is also outlined. The following research problems have been formulated: How did Franciszek Blachnicki perceive a child (what expresses the specificity of their psyche) and the period of childhood? What tips did he give to his contemporaries regarding the religious, ethical and educational formation of children and young people? The theoretical goal of the study is to develop pedagogical knowledge regarding the specificity of a child and childhood, and the constructive process of upbringing according to Franciszek Blachnicki. In turn, the practical goal is to make it easier for future generations to use the presented approach to a child and their religious education and childhood to better cope today with the objective difficulties of moral, social and civic education. The study used hermeneutic methods: semantic fields and contextual and intertextual interpretation.<sup>2</sup> The selection of appropriate methods made it possible to conduct the study in an organizationally efficient way, highlighting the cognitive and utilitarian importance of this inter-generational cultural transmission.

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<sup>2</sup> See Jean Grondin, *Wprowadzenie do hermeneutyki filozoficznej*, trans. Leszek Łysień (Kraków: Wydawnictwo WAM, 2007); Włodzimierz Lorenc, *Filozofia hermeneutyczna. Inspiracje, klasycy, radykalizacje* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2019); Andrzej Przyłębski, *Hermeneutyka. Od sztuki interpretacji do teorii i filozofii rozumienia* (Poznań: Zysk i S-ka Wydawnictwo, 2019); Werner G. Jeanrond, *Hermeneutyka teologiczna. Rozwój i znaczenie*, trans. Maria Borowska (Kraków: Wydawnictwo WAM, Księża Jezuici, 1999); Bogusław Milerski, *Hermeneutyka pedagogiczna. Perspektywy pedagogiki religii* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe ChAT & Bogusław Milerski, 2011).

The research problems have been located among scientific disciplines and subdisciplines, showing the interdisciplinary nature of the study. The article is addressed to representatives of pedagogy, psychology, sociology, history, theology and philosophy (including ethics). The problems discussed here can be classified as core issues in general pedagogy, educational theory, the history of education (and the history of pedagogical thought), school pedagogy, religious pedagogy, and social pedagogy. The scope of philosophical pedagogy, philosophy of education and biographical studies<sup>3</sup> are also areas of knowledge presented in this article.

The basic concepts in this article are 'a child', 'childhood' and the term 'oasis', defined later in the text. A child is a person from conception to puberty (adolescence), under 18 years of age, who does not yet have the right to actively participate in political life, make decisions on public matters, marry without the consent of their parents, or make independent decisions on financial matters.<sup>4</sup> Childhood is a psychological, developmental, educational and socio-historical stage in human life. In a broader sense, it covers the period from birth to adulthood, and in a narrower sense, from birth to adolescence. As the sum of a child's experiences, it forms the foundation that supports the periods that follow. Childhood always takes place in specific biological, socio-cultural and religious conditions that influence the quality of life of a given person.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See *Badanie biografii. Źródła, metody, konteksty*, eds. Ryszard Skrzyniarz, Elżbieta Krzewska, Wioletta Zgłobicka-Gierut (Lublin: Wydawnictwo Episteme, 2014); *Wzory i wzorce osobowe w biografistyce pedagogicznej*, eds. Ryszard Skrzyniarz, Magdalena Gajderowicz, Tomasz Wach (Lublin: Wydawnictwo Episteme, 2013).

<sup>4</sup> See Jadwiga Izdebska, "Dziecko jako wartość". In: *Encyklopedia aksjologii pedagogicznej*, eds. Krysztyna Chałas, Adam Maj (Radom: Polwen – Polskie Wydawnictwo Encyklopedyczne, 2016), 322. See also Urszula Chęcińska, "Dziecko i sztuka we wczesnej edukacji. *Ars longa, vita brevis*". In: *Dziecko i sztuka w kontekście wczesnej edukacji*, ed. Urszula Chęcińska (Szczecin: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Szczecińskiego, 2018); Tomasz Bilicki, *Dziecko i wychowanie w pedagogii Jana Pawła II. Na podstawie jego encyklik, adhortacji, wybranych listów i przemówień* (Kraków: Oficyna Wydawnicza Impuls, 2005); *Dziecko i dzieciństwo. W kręgu pytań i poszukiwań teoretyczno-badawczych. Praca zbiorowa*, ed. Katarzyna Segiet (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Książka i Wiedza, 2007); Katarzyna Segiet, *Dziecko i jego dzieciństwo w perspektywie naukowego poznania i doświadczenia rzeczywistości. Studium pedagogiczno-społeczne* (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, 2011); Barbara Smolińska-Theiss, *Dzieciństwo jako status społeczny. Edukacyjne przywileje dzieci klasy średniej* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Akademii Pedagogiki Specjalnej, 2014); Franciszek Ziemiński, Wiesława Korzeniowska, Bronisława Dymara, *Dziecko w świecie tradycji* (Kraków: Oficyna Wydawnicza "Impuls", 2002).

<sup>5</sup> See Jadwiga Izdebska, "Dzieciństwo". In: *Encyklopedia aksjologii pedagogicznej*, 305. See also Philippe Ariès, *Historia dzieciństwa. Dziecko i rodzina w dawnych czasach*, trans. Maryna Ochab (Gdańsk: Marabut, 1995); *Wymiary dzieciństwa. Problemy dziecka i dzieciństwa w zmieniającym się społeczeństwie*, eds. Jadwiga Bińczycka, Barbara Smolińska-Theiss (Kraków: "Impuls", 2005); *Oblicza dzieciństwa*, ed. Dorota Kornas-Biela (Lublin: Towarzystwo Naukowe Katolickiego Uniwersytetu Lubelskiego, 2001); Maria Szczepka-Pustkowska, *Od filozofii dzieciństwa do dziecięcej filozofii życia. Casus władzy (i demokracji)* (Kraków: Impuls, 2011).

## Franciszek Blachnicki: main biographical facts

Franciszek Blachnicki was born on 24 March 1921, during the Third Silesian Uprising in Rybnik, the sixth and youngest child of Józef Blachnicki and Maria, née Müller. Franciszek's father was employed as a nurse in the hospital of the pre-war Bracka Company. This work provided family members with a decent income but forced them to move to Orzesze, among other places, in 1923. Franciszek spent his early childhood there and attended the then-six-year-old primary school. Franciszek's family was a typical Silesian family: religious, patriotic and using a dialect. His mother and older siblings took care of him.<sup>6</sup>

In 1929, the family moved to Tarnowskie Góry, where Franciszek began studying at a public primary school in Jana III Sobieskiego Street. A year later, he was transferred to the Exercise School at the Karol Miarka State Male Teachers' Seminary. He graduated from this school in 1933 with good results. However, due to his lack of interest in the teaching profession, he moved to the Prince Jan Opolski State Boys' Junior High School, which was famous for forming socio-political elites. This school was transformed into a four-year general secondary school, where Franciszek studied classical subjects. He was most interested in philosophy (including ethics). During this period, he also became involved in the activities of a scout organization as a team leader, because he was fascinated with scouting's methods of character development. At that time, his religious practices had the characteristics only of acquired, not internalized, religiosity. In that period, his faith was shaken.<sup>7</sup> Even by his early youth, he was a very responsible person: he did not drink alcohol, did not smoke cigarettes, and did not engage in fleeting romantic relationships. He was characterized by restraint, moderation and prudence.<sup>8</sup>

In 1938, he passed his final high school exams and intended to study political economy. Before that, however, he had to complete military service, and although the military authorities postponed it, he volunteered to join the army. He began his service in the Junack Labour Corps in the quarries in Zakopane and then completed the reserve cadet course in the 23<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division in Katowice (he obtained the rank of platoon reserve officer cadet). In June 1939, Franciszek returned to Tarnowskie Góry, where he began serving in the 11<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment and defended Poland's independence in the September Campaign.<sup>9</sup> After the Soviet aggression against Poland, the Polish army was surrounded by Soviet troops near

<sup>6</sup> See Tomasz P. Terlikowski, *Franciszek Blachnicki. Książd, który zmienił Polskę* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo WAM, 2021), 16–22.

<sup>7</sup> See *ibid.* 23–28; Agata Adaszyńska-Blacha, Dorota Mazur, *Ks. Franciszek Blachnicki. Biografia i wspomnienia* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo "M", 2016).

<sup>8</sup> See Terlikowski, *Franciszek Blachnicki*, 32, 141.

<sup>9</sup> See *ibid.*, 31–34.

Tomaszów Lubelski. On 20 September 1939, he was captured by the Germans,<sup>10</sup> but escaped and returned to Tarnowskie Góry, where he immediately became involved in underground activities within the Polish Partisan Organization and the Union of Armed Struggle. In June 1940, he was arrested by the Gestapo and imprisoned in the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp, where he stayed for almost 14 months.<sup>11</sup> On 30 March 1942, a trial took place and he was sentenced to death for conspiracy activities against the Third Reich.

During his stay in the B-1 ward for convicts in Katowice, an event occurred that had a decisive impact on his later attitude. After spending several months on death row, he was pardoned – the death sentence was changed to ten years in prison, to be served after the end of the war. This is the only known case of non-execution during World War II. In the convict ward, he experienced conversion and decided to devote himself to the service of God. Franciszek was also kept in prisons and camps in Racibórz, Rawicz, Börgermoor, Zwickau and Lengenfeld. On 17 April 1945, he was liberated from the last camp by the American army. Thanks to his sister Adelaide, who found him after the liberation in Lengenfeld, he returned to Tarnowskie Góry on 20 July 1945. On 6 August, he applied for admission to the Higher Silesian Theological Seminary in Krakow. There he turned out to be one of the most talented students.<sup>12</sup> On 25 June 1950, Franciszek Blachnicki was ordained a priest by Bishop Stanisław Adamski in the pro-cathedral in Katowice. He worked in the following parishes: Tychy, Borowa Wieś, Łaziska Górne, Rydułtowy, Cieszyn and Bieruń Stary.

In his pastoral work, he primarily developed parish groups of altar boys, thanks to which the method of closed children's retreats was created. For over a year (1955–1956), he stayed in Niepokalanów, where he studied the methods of the spiritual activity of Father Maksymilian Kolbe. In 1956, he started working in the pastoral department of the Diocesan Curia in Katowice as a member of the editorial board of the weekly *Gość Niedzielny* (Sunday Guest). On 8 October 1957, he started a social anti-alcohol campaign, the Sobriety Crusade, which in 1958 was called the Temperance Crusade.<sup>13</sup> He also wrote texts on this topic for the weekly *Tygodnik Powszechny*.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> See Adam Wodarczyk, *Prorok żywego Kościoła. Ks. Franciszek Blachnicki – życie i działalność (1921–1987)* (Katowice: Emmanuel, 2008), 51–52.

<sup>11</sup> See Robert Derewenda, "Działalność społeczna Ks. Franciszka Blachnickiego". *Roczniki Humanistyczne* 2 (2015): 219–220.

<sup>12</sup> See Adam Wodarczyk, "Ksiądz Profesor Franciszek Blachnicki (1921–1987) – wychowawca dzieci i młodzieży, promotor odnowy duchowej i ekumenizmu". In: *Znajomość, koleżeństwo, przyjaźń. Dynamizm ewoluowania więzi emocjonalnej*, ed. Alicja Żywczok (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Akademickie Żak, 2014), 150–151; idem, "Ruch Światło-Życie, osoba założyciela, historia ruchu i rozwój w diecezji katowickiej". *Śląskie Studia Historyczno-Teologiczne* 27–28 (1994–1995): 343–357.

<sup>13</sup> See Wodarczyk, "Ksiądz Profesor Franciszek Blachnicki", 152; Franciszek Blachnicki, "Trzeźwość czy wstrzemięźliwość". *Niepokalana Zwycięza* 2 (1958): 1.

<sup>14</sup> See Terlikowski, *Franciszek Blachnicki*, 141.

In 1960, the authorities liquidated the Temperance Crusade headquarters, and a year later Blachnicki was arrested and imprisoned for several months.<sup>15</sup> Despite this, in 1961 he started studies at the Catholic University of Lublin, where he was then employed from 1964 to 1972. The culmination of his intellectual effort was his habilitation (post-doctoral) thesis entitled “Ecclesiological Deduction of Pastoral Theology,” which he defended at the same university in 1973. He received a habilitated doctorate in pastoral theology, which was not recognized by the then-state authorities.<sup>16</sup> This fact is proof of the political persecution he experienced. In 1976, he was appointed National Pastor of the Liturgical Service. In 1979, he initiated another sobriety campaign called the Human Liberation Crusade, and a year later he implemented the great evangelization plan *Ad Christum Redemptorem*. In 1980 and 1981, he established the Independent Christian Social Service. He left for Rome a few days before martial law was declared in Poland.<sup>17</sup> Ultimately, he settled in the Polish ‘Marianum’ centre in Carlsberg, Germany, where he died suddenly on 27 February 1987.<sup>18</sup> The official cause of death was pulmonary embolism, but an investigation conducted from 2020 to 2023 proved that he was murdered (poisoned with mercury), probably by a married couple, Mr and Mrs Gontarczyk, placed among his closest collaborators by the First Department of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Polish People’s Republic. He died shortly after receiving information that people around him were agents of the communist services. Proceedings are currently underway to confirm the identity of the perpetrator(s) of this crime.

On 9 December 1995, the beatification process of Fr. Franciszek Blachnicki began, and on 1 April 2000, his remains were transported from Carlsberg to Poland.<sup>19</sup> They were placed in the Good Shepherd Church in Krościenko. Poles are grateful to Blachnicki for his testimony of martyrdom and virtues, and they await with hope the beatification of the Servant of God and then his canonization.

<sup>15</sup> See Franciszek Blachnicki, *Świadectwo niepokornego* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Światło-Życie, 2012).

<sup>16</sup> See Marek Marczewski, *Posługa zbawcza Kościoła w ujęciu ks. Franciszka Blachnickiego* (Lublin: Polihymnia, 2000), 81.

<sup>17</sup> Franciszek Blachnicki, Zbigniew Kiernikowski, *Moria, Mara i Nebo. O duchowych doświadczeniach księdza Franciszka Blachnickiego w ostatnich latach jego życia*, ed. Dorota Franków (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Światło-Życie, Instytut Niepokalanej Matki Kościoła, 2020).

<sup>18</sup> See Gabriela Janikula, “Pedagogiczne aspekty misterium cierpienia ks. Franciszka Blachnickiego”. In: *Człowiek chory i umierający. Możliwości wsparcia i formy pomocy*, ed. Jan Stala (Kraków: Uniwersytet Papieski Jana Pawła II w Krakowie Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 2014), 99–124.

<sup>19</sup> See Franciszek Blachnicki, *Myśli, wyznania, testament*, eds. Agnieszka Oleszczuk, Andrzej Wojnowski (Lublin: Wydawnictwo Archidiecezji Lubelskiej “Gaudium”, 2020), 304.

## Franciszek Blachnicki's perception of a child – a human being

### A child as a bundle of energy

In his works, Franciszek Blachnicki draws attention to the child's lively psyche, prone to mobility and learning about the world, which he observed during religion lessons, among others. He expresses this in the following passage:

During my first contact with children, I noticed [...] that we actually dealt with religious training, not religious formation. For example, when I had two or three thousand children attending a church mass and I had to direct the prayers of these children, I felt a bit like a wild animal tamer in a circus. It was difficult to control this mass, and it was hard to talk about religious experience, concentration and personal prayer. It was the same during catechesis. The children came after a whole day at school and were like a herd of wild horses. In fact, the idea was to tame them somehow, to make them listen to what was being said to them. This, of course, gave no satisfaction. I came to work in pastoral care after spending several years in the concentration camp in Auschwitz. It was in Auschwitz that I saw how shallow traditional Christianity was. People acquire [...] manners: this is appropriate, that is inappropriate, but under camp conditions, what is really inside a person and what is not there comes out. I even saw honourable people [...] change when that outer shell fell away. This is what led me to reflect on the fundamental shortcomings. I have always associated it with the concept of life. I saw that for many people, Christianity and religion were not life itself, but a certain number of habits. And life was defined by other values. Something else determined joy and sadness; religious values had little influence on this. I saw it all [...] in children and adolescents. That is why I started looking for some form of education possible under the conditions of the communist system [...]. Within a few years, I managed to develop [...] a system of altar boys' pedagogy, which was – one could say – the education of certain elite groups based on the liturgy [...]. These facts are related to the creation of retreat oases.<sup>20</sup>

In this excerpt, the author extremely accurately describes children as a bundle of energy or a herd of wild horses but also perceives their educators (here, catechists) as tamers of wild animals in a circus. Although some comparisons might be considered too blunt, it must be admitted that they are suggestive and reveal the insight of the observer and moderator of large and small children's groups. Regarding the process of religious education, he emphasizes that it is insufficient to develop manners or the habit of attending services and religion/catechesis classes in children. The current educational training should be replaced with appropriate

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<sup>20</sup> *O chrześcijaństwie konsekwentnym i o polskiej teologii wyzwolenia mówi Ksiądz Franciszek Blachnicki*, ed. Grażyna Wilczyńska (Krościenko: Wydawnictwo Światło-Życie Instytutu im. ks. Franciszka Blachnickiego, 2001), 8–9.

character formation. A young person needs conditions that first favour their physical and mental activity, and then circumstances that give rise to their moral and spiritual commitment. The types of activities mentioned were developed thanks to the appropriate service (e.g., a liturgical service), constructive play, recreation in the natural environment, giving up stimulants and, above all, helpfulness (children's love of doing so-called good deeds every day).

Blachnicki's careful observations regarding the character of children came true during his closed retreat for altar boys aged 11–13 in the Katowice diocese (in Kokoszyce). At that time, Father Blachnicki had 120 altar boys under his care, who, as he said, were a bundle of energy, not inclined to long silences or reflection on serious topics. Even then, he was convinced that it was necessary to make the boys' lifestyle 'rich', 'lush', giving them a sense of the fullness of life, and undoubtedly attractive.<sup>21</sup> Only if the children perceived the retreat in such a way would this educationally and organizationally difficult undertaking have a chance of success. The formation of altar boys, carried out in accordance with Blachnicki's educational concept, brought unexpected results in the following years. Permission to express their spontaneity within the framework of religious education made the children feel at ease, clearly differently than at school,<sup>22</sup> and liberated from irrational constraints. In such conditions, their sense of freedom was better developed, so that they could free other people from anxiety, fear and the corset of incorrect morals. This movement of the successive internal liberation of children and young people later resulted in the social maturity of adults and political transformation in Poland.

## A child as the initiator of a counter-revolution

The Light-Life Movement was (and still is) considered a movement shaping the attitude of consistent Christianity, therefore it was not without reason that it was then expected that children and young people who had undergone oasis formation<sup>23</sup> would be sensitive not only to the issues of defending faith or the good of others,

<sup>21</sup> See *ibid.*, 9, 10; Katarzyna Sadowska, "Ministrantura w posoborowej pedagogii Franciszka Blachnickiego (wprowadzenie do problemu)". *Biuletyn Historii Wychowania* 2 (2020): 181–197.

<sup>22</sup> See Franciszek Blachnicki, *Ewangelia wyzwolenia* (Krośnice: Wydawnictwo Światło-Życie Instytutu im. ks. Franciszka Blachnickiego, 2001); Franciszek Blachnicki, *Wolni i wyzwalający*, ed. Piotr Kulbacki (Poznań: Inicjatywa Wydawnicza "Jerozolima", Fundacja Przeciwdziałania Uzależnieniom "Dominik", 2001); Franciszek Blachnicki, *Wyzwoleni w Chrystusie. Podręcznik rekolekcji parafialnych* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Światło-Życie, 2009); Wojciech Danielski, *Wyzwoleni, by wyzwalać*, ed. Grażyna Wilczyńska (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Światło-Życie, 2014); Grażyna Wilczyńska, *Wolny dla... Ks. Franciszek Blachnicki – założyciel Ruchu Światło-Życie* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Światło-Życie, 2018); Alicja Żywczok, "Przeciw zniewoleniu człowieka i narodów. Aksjologiczny aspekt posłannictwa Sługi Bożego księdza Franciszka Blachnickiego". *Paedagogia Christiana* 2 (2023): 55–91.

<sup>23</sup> Oasis is a specific method of closed retreat, lasting about two weeks, which, unlike traditional retreats, can be briefly summarized as an experiential and existential retreat. See Franciszek Blachnicki, *Co to jest Oaza* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Światło-Życie, 2014), 9; *idem*, *Ruch Światło-Życie jako pedagogia Nowego Człowieka* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Światło-Życie, 2018).



but also to other aspects of human activity, including social and political ones. The communist authorities were then afraid of all forms of collective solidarity, particularly the creation or reactivation of communities, associations and movements such as this. Accusations were therefore levelled against the oasis movement, which was called a “forge of counter-revolutionary cadres.”<sup>24</sup> The propaganda of the Polish People’s Republic also created the social image of Father Blachnicki as a shepherd and theologian of counter-revolution.

Franciszek Blachnicki expressed his opinion on this matter quite diplomatically, but firmly:

[...] the oasis movement [...] was not intended as a reaction against the communist system. By definition, it never had any political goals. The regime’s propaganda [...] simplified this by talking about conspiratorial, oppositional or even subversive education. On the other hand, the confrontation of these two systems results from the very nature of things. The communist system [...] is based on lies and intimidation. The point is that people do not have the courage to speak the truth [...] the power of the system is based on this. No totalitarian power, particularly a communist one, has [...] legitimacy to rule. This is usurper power. To justify its claims to legitimacy, such authorities create [...] an ideology, an entire system of propaganda [...]. This system must be lying. A lie can only be enforced at the price of fear and anxiety. However, we educate a person who shows Truth or Light as the main value to which life should be subordinated. Therefore, we must overcome the fear that prevents us from bearing witness to the Truth. So, we are at the opposite pole. Although the movement does not have any formal principles for fighting the system, it creates a moral and spiritual force that is the radical antithesis of what the communist system is based on [...]. If we consistently follow [...] the path of Christianity [...] implemented [...], we cannot omit any manifestation of human life [...], we cannot ignore it [...] indifferently.<sup>25</sup>

While it is difficult to consider children (belonging to the so-called Oasis of the Children of God<sup>26</sup> or to groups of altar boys) as counter-revolutionaries, the appropriate formation of their character and personality was important.<sup>27</sup> What counted was the courage to profess faith and bear witness to the truth, to take solidary service activities within the diakonia,<sup>28</sup> and to preserve Christian life and national identity. This could make them become people who would radically transform the socio-political realities in the country and abroad, especially in the

<sup>24</sup> *O chrześcijaństwie konsekwentnym*, 13.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 13–14.

<sup>26</sup> See Franciszek Blachnicki, *Oaza Nowego Życia I stopnia. Podręcznik* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Światło-Życie, 2006); idem, *Oaza Nowego Życia II stopnia. Podręcznik* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Światło-Życie, 2008).

<sup>27</sup> See *Szkice o kształtowaniu osobowości*, ed. Janina Kostkiewicz (Rzeszów: Wydawnictwo Wyższej Szkoły Pedagogicznej, 1997).

<sup>28</sup> See Franciszek Blachnicki, *Jedność i diakonia. Wybór tekstów*, ed. Ewa Kusz (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Światło-Życie, 2009); Dariusz Cupiał, *Na drodze ewangelizacji i ekumenii. Ruch Światło-Życie w służbie jedności chrześcijan* (Lublin: Redakcja Wydawnictwa Katolickiego Uniwersytetu Lubelskiego, 1996).

countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Promoting the spirituality of communion<sup>29</sup> and developing a sense of unity with other members of the oasis movement was intended to foster the development of forgiveness and reconciliation skills among children and young people, as well as subsequent harmony and peace among compatriots. Building the children's sense of unity in professing faith, as well as feelings of hope and love, served primarily so they could participate in the Creator's saving plan and one day achieve final unity<sup>30</sup>: become a community of the redeemed.

### A child as a gift and a solace in good times and bad

A child, as a gift from God, is called to make a gift of themselves.<sup>31</sup> They become so not only for their parents but also for siblings, other family members and the wider community. It is worth starting the analysis of the concept of a child as comfort for their parents by citing four variants of the concept of 'solace' and 'comfort':

1. Solace is something that comforts someone in a difficult situation. Here are sample sentences that reflect this understanding: She found solace in the company of friends; He sought solace from the priest.
2. If you find solace in someone, you can count on their help, benefit from them and enjoy their presence. Sentences reflecting this understanding include: When he was at home, she found little solace in him; A wise boy, he will be a solace; Grandparents wish parents solace from their children.
3. If you have/are a hundred comforts with a child, they bring surprising joy and, sometimes, problems. An exemplary expression reflecting this understanding of solace is: They had a hundred comforts with this little boy.
4. You can call your child a solace, as in the sentence: She did various jobs to raise her solace.<sup>32</sup>

The fourth variant requires special cognitive attention. Finding themselves in a difficult existential, emotional or any other situation, parents or guardians often point to their offspring as solace, and thanks to whom they managed to survive difficult times, return to a state of balance, and overcome the inconveniences and hardships of life. In such conditions, children not only motivate their parents to make an effort, but also maintain their hope for a better tomorrow, arouse positive emotions in them, and prevent them from giving up the fight, feeling hopeless or sinking into despair. This perception of a child is also related to the evangelical descriptions of children as 'hope', the 'future' and 'light of the world' found in

<sup>29</sup> See Blachnicki, *Jedność i diakonia*, 8.

<sup>30</sup> See Franciszek Blachnicki, *Kto ma uszy do słuchania...* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Światło-Życie, 2009), 97.

<sup>31</sup> See idem, *Kim jest człowiek* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Światło-Życie, 2010), 43.

<sup>32</sup> See *Inny słownik języka polskiego PWN. P-Ż*, ed. Mirosław Bańko (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2017), 104.

Blachnicki's works. The metaphor of light is one of the most important biblical metaphors in the priest's thoughts, which is also present in the name of the Light-Life Movement that he initiated for children and young people.

A child, as a person who brings comfort to other people, also has the right to seek solace whenever they need it. They also have the right to express their natural inclination to cheerfulness, the joy in life and maintaining good spirits. Moments of joy, contentment and satisfaction are supports on the path of a person's inner development. Blachnicki explains it as follows:

At the beginning of our inner life, God gives us such supports and aids [...] because we are still weak [...]. Then come some emotional experiences, ups and consolations [...]. When God then takes away all these comforts, aids and supports, we slowly have to rely on faith alone [...]. Despite experiences, suffering, failures and prayers that went unanswered for a long time, faith remains in us as a deep conviction that God exists and loves us.<sup>33</sup>

Blachnicki suggests avoiding despair and lamentation during prayer because unlimited trust in God's mercy should, in his opinion, eliminate these extreme negative emotions and awaken hope for God's pardon and forgiveness and a happy life in a state of sanctifying grace. Blachnicki also emphasized the importance of an attitude of thanksgiving for the emergence of Christian optimism.

According to Blachnicki, the Holy Mass is the most helpful element in strengthening Christian cheerfulness. He confesses, "Today I realized [...] how much the Holy Mass is at the centre of the life of the Church, how everything flows from it, goes towards it, is anchored in it."<sup>34</sup> In turn, regarding the emotionally positive meaning of the sacrament of reconciliation, Blachnicki writes:

[...] it is a joyful event in the lives of each of us. Joyful for God and the Church community. We often unnecessarily associate the practice of the sacrament of penance with some kind of self-torment [...]. It is accompanied by fear and some feelings of sadness and depression. We have not understood the essence of this sacrament [...]. We should experience this sacrament in an atmosphere of joy, trust and entrustment. The new form, given by the conciliar version of the liturgy, wants to help us always experience the sacrament of reconciliation in its positive content [...] that removes fear [...] the essence of this sacrament is reconciliation with God thanks to His mercy and His love.<sup>35</sup>

He also believes that the sacrament of penance is similar. Namely, Christ does not wait for the confession of sins to punish people but reveals himself as a Good Samaritan who addresses words of forgiveness and comfort to people.

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<sup>33</sup> Blachnicki, *Myśli, wyznania, testament*, 208. See also Franciszek Blachnicki, "Nie ma powodów do pesymizmu". *Tygodnik Powszechny* 9 (1976): 1–2.

<sup>34</sup> Blachnicki, *Myśli, wyznania, testament*, 238.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 143–144.

Under the influence of the social teachings of Primate Stefan Wyszyński, who repeatedly called for the defence of human spiritual and physical life, the lives of unborn children, adults and older people, Blachnicki started his own anti-abortion 'campaign'. He emphasized many times that he did it not to prove his puritanism, but to defy the visible capitulation of humanity, manifested in insensitivity to the fate of defenceless, innocent beings, and, above all, in the name of respect and defence of human life, that is, an unborn child. This activity has a profoundly positive meaning as a counterweight to the nihilism that lies in the killing of children in the mother's womb and to the 'culture of death' that threatens humanity.

Regarding the observed substitution of the concepts of joy and pleasure, he suggests developing the ability to efficiently recognize illusory and authentic joy in childhood. He writes:

What is happening in our civilization today is [...] a confusion of concepts. What is pleasant is supposed to be a source of joy for a person and [...] bring happiness. Meanwhile, this is hugely shallow because although pleasure gives some joy, it is very superficial. It is [...] an irritation of the nervous system [...]. Man deceives themselves that they are joyful. An example would be a carnival or joy under the influence of alcohol [...]. The great tragedy of modern society is that man seeks joy and satisfaction in the realm of love [...] in the sensual realm [...]. Normally, it should start with love: there should be an attitude of 'eros' constantly complemented by 'agape' [...]. There must be a mutual, selfless attitude [...] to make the other person happy.<sup>36</sup>

The so-called serene evenings which were permanently included in the oasis retreat programmes served to properly experience the joy of life. They usually referred to the theme of the day<sup>37</sup> as a kind of echo of daily experiences and their recapitulation.<sup>38</sup> These evenings were organized by individual groups of participants under the supervision of organizers of cultural activities. Singing, jokes and poetic works were supposed to be a manifestation of the joy of experiencing the community of God's children. The expression of the joy of oasis members was associated with respecting the rules of rest. Noise could not disturb the silence of the night, so a serene evening should not be prolonged until late at night. Children were also advised against celebrating the so-called green night (a night of sleepover pranks) as incivility (rather than a good custom) that has nothing to do with showing agape love.<sup>39</sup> The priest moderator ensured the appropriate cultural level of fun and humour. The children learned to derive joy from appropriate sources

<sup>36</sup> Franciszek Blachnicki, *Miłość – seks, eros, agape*, ed. Irena Kucharska (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Światło-Życie, 2011), 8–10.

<sup>37</sup> See Bogdan Biela, "Rekolekcje oazowe jako metoda wychowawcza uczestników Ruchu Światło-Życie". In: *Ksiądz dr Franciszek Blachnicki wychowawca młodzieży polskiej. Materiały posesyjne*, eds. Rudolf Brom, Józef Śliwiok (Katowice: Drukarnia Archidiecezjalna, 2003), 57.

<sup>38</sup> See Blachnicki, *Oaza Nowego Życia I stopnia*, 42–43.

<sup>39</sup> See Blachnicki, *Oaza Nowego Życia II stopnia*, 242.

and experience spiritual joy, the joy of helping others, even older people or peers who found themselves in a difficult emotional situation. At the same time, children developed an aversion to apparent joy, particularly those that were morally and ethically reprehensible. Serene evenings were therefore an attractive alternative to the forms of recreation that threatened a young person's development and were based on the use of stimulants,<sup>40</sup> drugs and other doping substances or premature, irresponsible sexual contacts.

### A child as a human being untainted by evil: pure

According to the Gospel's teaching, a child is a pure being, untainted by grave sin, naturally good and predisposed to remain in constant communication with God, which leads them to eternal happiness. They are somehow destined for eternal life.<sup>41</sup> A prenatal child – a potential newborn – is already a perfect person,<sup>42</sup> whose mission in life comes down to God's grace and the process of self-improvement. Blachnicki comments on this issue as follows:

The concept of purity or impurity [...] is in danger of being distorted in a direction that has historically found its classic expression in Manichaeism. In this approach, these are ontological categories, one of which (purity) belongs to the spiritual reality, the other (impurity) to the material reality [...], purity must be defined as a personal attitude, which excludes and denies the attitude of use in relation to one's person and in interpersonal relationships [...]. Purity in the area of bodily and sexual life will occur when everything in this area is subordinated to the personalistic norm, expressed in the fact that a person realizes themselves in accordance with their nature alone [...] in love.<sup>43</sup>

Therefore, the feeling of shame (observed as situational embarrassment or a trait: shyness) is a symptom of personal life, and it arises as an emotional reaction when a person feels threatened by being treated as an object of use, or when they begin to refer to someone in this way. This especially concerns various manifestations of sexual life. The feeling of shame serves to maintain personal values,<sup>44</sup> such as love, goodness, faithfulness, responsibility and wisdom. Shame somehow saves the dignity of those who distance themselves from spontaneous sensual desire.

<sup>40</sup> See Franciszek Blachnicki, *Krucjata Wyzwolenia Człowieka, czyli dzieło Niepokalanej, Matki Kościoła. Podręcznik* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Światło-Życie, 2017); idem, *Abstynenckie Credo Krucjaty Wyzwolenia Człowieka* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Światło-Życie, 2014).

<sup>41</sup> See Blachnicki, *Kim jest człowiek*, 65.

<sup>42</sup> See Franciszek Blachnicki, *Aż dojdziemy do człowieka doskonałego* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Światło-Życie, 2010).

<sup>43</sup> See idem, *Godność osoby a czystość i wstydlivość* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Światło-Życie, 2019), 6, 11–12.

<sup>44</sup> See *ibid.*, 14–15, 17. See also Janina Kostkiewicz, "Aksjologiczne podstawy katolickich koncepcji pedagogicznych". In: *Chrześcijańskie inspiracje w pedagogice*, ed. Janina Kostkiewicz (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2011), 13–29.

The ability to feel shame should be developed from late childhood, so that children know what true exclusive love and marital friendship are, and be able to cultivate such attitudes in their adult lives. Therefore, children should not be scolded, ridiculed or criticized for expressing the emotion of shame in justified circumstances. Shaping the virtues of sobriety and self-restraint is one of the core tasks of moral education. It is recommended to start educating children in the spirit of caring for internal purity by also taking care of the cleanliness and order in their apartment, house and its surroundings, in places of stay and rest (for example, by keeping the seas, lakes, rivers, beaches and forests clean). It is also important to shape a culture of social coexistence in the spirit of agape, free from egoism and self-interest, which result in the instrumental treatment of people.

Blachnicki also reflects on the contemporary causes of the loss of modesty, including materialism, mass culture and mass media (oriented towards visual impressions, glorification of sensuality, inappropriate fashion: provocative clothing of women and men, immodest style of behaviour and promiscuity), addictions, particularly to alcohol and drugs, as well as deficiencies in the upbringing process in the family and other environments, for example, in the Church or school. Several dozen years have passed since Blachnicki's death, and the threats to man's internal purity are increasing. New problems and challenges related to experiencing sexuality continue to arise, such as addiction to pornography and sex, promiscuity (including prostitution) and paedophilia.

Owing to their limited social experience, delicacy, psychophysical sensitivity and trustfulness, children are vulnerable to injury. They are at risk of losing their sense of purity as a result of harm inflicted by other children, adolescents or adults. And yet, as originally generous persons, they deserve to lead a good and happy life. Therefore, parents, educators, guardians and catechists are obliged to protect the purity and integrity of children by all moral, social, legal and other forces and means.

It is worth referring to the Sermon on the Mount as a collection of Christ's teachings and the new law. Blachnicki claims that the Bible refers to a child's attitude, especially in one of the beatitudes: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God."<sup>45</sup> Today, purity does not seem to be a component of the educational ideal, a desirable feature or virtue. It only expresses the maximalist assumptions of Christianity regarding the concept of man and their lifestyle. The educational programme for maintaining internal purity has been developed mainly by Christian pedagogy, in which the leading category is not so much conscience, but pure conscience.<sup>46</sup> Unfortunately, in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, people have been privileging the concepts of pleasure, delight, well-being and comfort, leading to axiological instability, deterioration and questioning of traditional moral beliefs.

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<sup>45</sup> *The Bible, New International Version*, Mt 5, 8, <https://www.biblegateway.com> [accessed: 20.05.2024].

<sup>46</sup> See Blachnicki, *Kim jest człowiek*, 45.

## A child as a witness of love: marital, parental, brotherly/sisterly, fatherly – of God and motherly – of Mary

I start this part of the article by presenting the understanding of testimony and describing its meaning. Blachnicki believes that “Testimony can have different manifestations [...] it can be about one’s life, about God’s action in it; testimony can also be the presentation of one’s beliefs, certain principles that one follows or that a person tries to implement in their life.”<sup>47</sup> In another work, he adds, “Martyrdom is the highest testimony of faith and love, and hence the tradition of the Church calls it ‘martyria’ which means testimony.”<sup>48</sup> Therefore, Blachnicki also suggests referring to a witness as a ‘martyr’. He also confesses:

I was intrigued [...] by the word [expression – the author’s note]: Christian – a risk-taker [...]. What is risk? [...] In what sense can a Christian be said to be a risk-taker? [...] Faith eliminates risk [...]. For a Christian there is actually only one risk, the risk of losing faith, or the risk of inconsistent faith, faith that is declared but is not reflected in life, faith that does not become life [...] we lack the courage of faith. Faith does not go hand in hand with courage and this is probably the whole problem of the believers’ lack of faith.<sup>49</sup>

In this context, a child’s faith is usually associated with the courage to confess it clearly and spontaneously, without the need to be aware of its sometimes-severe consequences.

In accordance with the teachings of the Catholic Church, Blachnicki believes that in a child-friendly family, children learn intergenerational solidarity, respect for the rules of coexistence, openness to other people and forgiveness. They observe the feelings of their parents (spouses) and experience positive feelings from them. In this way, they discover the essence of love and learn to love. Thanks to the proper process of upbringing in the family, they learn that human love should not become an object of consumption, but turn out to be a basic experience that gives meaning to existence.<sup>50</sup> Blachnicki sees the family as a school of evangelical love and a catechumenate in which the baptized young generation is to grow.<sup>51</sup> In one of his works, he writes:

The marital and family community born out of love [...] has its own right to life. Love understood in the sense of New Testament agape, the most perfect description of which was given to us by

<sup>47</sup> Blachnicki, *Świadectwo niepokornego*, 5.

<sup>48</sup> Franciszek Blachnicki, *Charyzmat i wierność. Do Ruchu Światło-Życie z Obczyzny 1981–1987* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Światło-Życie, 2022), 80.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 5–6.

<sup>50</sup> See Marek Marczewski, *Pedagogia nowego człowieka wobec społeczno-kulturowych wyzwań nowoczesności*, foreword Janusz Mariański (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Światło-Życie, 2017), 64.

<sup>51</sup> See Franciszek Blachnicki, *Uwierzyliśmy miłości i o niej świadczymy. Konferencje ewangelizacyjne* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Światło-Życie, 2008).

St. Paul in the First Letter to the Corinthians 13, 1–13, it is a constitutive principle of the family community, which is and becomes this community (a small Church) insofar as everyone has the same aspirations: the same love and a common spirit, desiring only one thing, and desiring nothing out of selfish rivalry or vain selfishness, and looking ‘not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others’ (Phil 2:2–4).<sup>52</sup>

Respect for the mystery of love and human conception makes spouses unite and generously give themselves to one another. The spirituality of the marital community is therefore a personalistic spirituality, based on a deep understanding of the dignity of and man’s vocation to agape love.<sup>53</sup>

Growing up in a Christian family, a child usually becomes a witness to the bond of love between spouses, parents (or guardians) and children from the very moment of conception.<sup>54</sup> They experience the love of parents, siblings, grandparents, cousins and other family members. In this way, they also experience the fatherly love of God and the motherly love of Mary, and become convinced of their supernatural, constant care (perceiving not only themselves, but also their loved ones as gifts of God).<sup>55</sup> Thanks to the family, a child becomes a person predisposed to creating brotherly/sisterly bonds, and in the future, to marital and parental bonds. Following the example of the emotional bonds existing in the family, the child also becomes able to establish and maintain satisfying bonds of friendship, for example, in a small class group or a group resembling an oasis community.

The idea of a mother’s oasis proposed by Blachnicki as an environment in which participants can feel the motherly care of the Virgin Mary and the care of young people organizing cultural activities for small groups of children<sup>56</sup> contributes to the formation of mature love. A participant in oases is a witness and therefore a young person involved in their internal development (purity of conscience) and the surrounding reality: usually as a future organizer of cultural activities for children and youth groups.

Social life still lacks witnesses of mature evangelical love who are ready to express their values at any time, regardless of the consequences, that is, to testify to the importance of agape love. The attitude of witnessing responsible, selfless and faithful love is acquired from the earliest years, mainly in an exemplary family environment. It is not easy to acquire it in any other environment.

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<sup>52</sup> Franciszek Blachnicki, *O małżeństwie i rodzinie*, text selection Katarzyna Maciejewska, Paweł Maciejewski (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Światło-Życie, 2021), 13.

<sup>53</sup> See *ibid.*, 12.

<sup>54</sup> See Franciszek Blachnicki, *Rekolekcje więzienne. Notatki z „rekolekcji zamkniętych” odprawianych w Centralnym Więzieniu w Katowicach, w czasie od 15 marca do 19 lipca 1961 r.* (Krośnice: Wydawnictwo Światło-Życie Instytutu im. ks. Franciszka Blachnickiego, 2001), 115.

<sup>55</sup> Wodarczyk, “Ksiądz Profesor Franciszek Blachnicki”, 147–165.

<sup>56</sup> See Blachnicki, *Charyzmat i wierność*, 165.



## A child as a humble person (and rebellious, when necessary), whose attitude triggers the action of God's mercy

In his works, Franciszek Blachnicki repeatedly considers the Gospel's message about adults becoming like children and thus experiencing spiritual conversion. With pedagogical and theological insight, he writes:

[...] to become like a child, that is, to give up faith in yourself, feel weak and defenceless in the face of God. A small child experiences their weakness deeply. A child knows that they cannot live without their mother, without their father, without the care of their older ones. They hold on to their mother's hand. They hug an older one and base their sense of life and trust in someone stronger, wiser and more powerful than them. This is the attitude of a child [...] which releases the action of God's mercy and God's grace [...] we must boast before the Lord not of our justice, but of our misery, our incompetence, as only admitting to the Lord the inner truth about ourselves releases God's saving action [...]. However, for God to save us, He must find faith and trust in us. Such an attitude first assumes [...] giving up relying on oneself [...]. And God waits for us patiently until we are disappointed again and again until we fall [...]. Our pride slowly crumbles, and we become more and more humble [...] it is [...] a different direction of our effort than that which is inspired by our pride.<sup>57</sup>

Blachnicki gives the example of St. Teresa of the Child Jesus and specific features of this attitude as an example of the humble attitude of a child of God:

- experiencing one's weakness in the face of God;
- experiencing spiritual childhood, that is, feeling oneself as a child who can only be strengthened and led along the path to salvation thanks to Christ;
- experiencing strong faith, trust in God and the love of God who, as the best educator, guides man through various stages of achieving Christian maturity, yet infallibly, to liberation, salvation and union with Him;
- experiencing peace (the lack of internal torment caused by major life mistakes and sins) and joy.<sup>58</sup>

Blachnicki also recalls the Sermon on the Mount<sup>59</sup> as a collection of Christ's teachings and the new law. The theologian claims that a child's attitude gives rise to biblical associations, particularly certain beatitudes:

- 'Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.'<sup>60</sup> A child is a person who has little life experience and can thus be called meek, that is, unsure of th

<sup>57</sup> Franciszek Blachnicki, *Jeśli się nie odmienicie* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Światło-Życie, 2010), 37–40.

<sup>58</sup> See *ibid.*, 40–41. See also Alicja Żywczok, "Przejawy pokory i skromności odzwierciedlone w losach oraz dorobku pedagogicznym Księdza Franciszka Blachnickiego". *Biografistyka Pedagogiczna* 1 (2023): 35–67; Mariusz Szram, *Cnota pokory w nauczaniu greckich Ojców Kościoła IV wieku* (Lublin: Wydawnictwo KUL, 2014); Włodzimierz Zatorski, *Pokora* (Kraków–Tyniec: Wydawnictwo Benedyktynów, 2008).

<sup>59</sup> *The Bible, New International Version*, Mt 5, 3–12, <https://www.biblegateway.com> [online version; no pagination].

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, Mt 5, 5.

- Tuta emselves and humble. As such, they deserve to enjoy all the benefits of the earth. Nowadays, however, what arouses widespread recognition are not modest people, but immodest ones, not meek people, but those who become famous, who often put themselves on a social pedestal at the expense of others.
- ‘Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.’<sup>61</sup> According to both this and the above beatitude, a child is considered a modest person, without financial resources. This attitude gives rise to the greatest gratification in the form of the promise of entering the kingdom of God, that is, obtaining salvation. The poor in spirit are destined to enjoy God’s grace and eternal life. Meanwhile, in today’s world, people who are focused on possession, consumers, are trying to triumph.
  - ‘Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.’<sup>62</sup> A child is a person who gradually gets to know the world and gets used to interacting with people, reacting with sensitivity, even by crying, to some unfavourable circumstances. Compared to adults, they experience suffering and sadness relatively intensely, and they usually experience worries with double intensity. Meanwhile, in modern societies, those who are thick-skinned are praised: they rarely cry,<sup>63</sup> rarely take the good of others into account and enjoy worldly pleasures carelessly.
  - ‘Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness.’<sup>64</sup> A child was and is currently perceived as a person who has a natural sense of justice and demands it in the environments in which they live, especially in the family, kindergarten and school. When they or their companion are hurt during play or the educational process, the child raises objections, rebels and thus tries to gain justice in these first social groups. They are happy with fair decisions and shape their desire to bring order in many areas.
  - ‘Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.’<sup>65</sup> A child is a spontaneous and sincere person, who is straightforward, not prone to manipulation and not depraved. They thus generate positive feelings in adults, calm negative emotions, relax them, give encouragement, activate older family members especially and motivate them to physical and mental effort and give rise to hope that the situation will improve. Often exhausted by professional duties and dealing with problematic adults, parents usually value free contact and recreation with their offspring. Grandparents are similar: they usually enjoy the company of representatives of the younger generation, especially grandchildren.

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., Mt 5, 3.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., Mt 5, 4.

<sup>63</sup> See Blachnicki, *Kim jest człowiek*, 45.

<sup>64</sup> *The Bible, New International Version*, Mt 5, 6.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., Mt 5, 9.

- ‘Blessed are the merciful, for they will obtain mercy.’<sup>66</sup> Children are generally capable of the deepest empathy: they can empathize with someone’s suffering, show understanding in pain, comfort those who are distressed, sad or mourning, drive away despair, and cheer them up. Therefore, they are undoubtedly merciful people who are guided not only by the principle of justice but also by the principle of love.

According to the above beatitudes, a child is a meek person, poor in spirit, longing for justice, peace-making and merciful.

## Summary

Father Franciszek Blachnicki (1921–1987) gained moral and intellectual authority among his contemporaries and also his successors thanks to his dynamic religious, social and educational activities. He was called various names, including: ‘a brother to others’, ‘a lover of the homeland’, ‘a zealous apostle of conversion’, ‘a man of consistent faith’, ‘a model of a Christian educator of children and young people’, ‘a mystagogue of liturgical renewal’, ‘a pioneer of the new evangelization’, ‘an apostle of practical ecumeny’, ‘a pastor of families’, ‘a patron of the renewal of theology’, ‘a creator of a new formation of the laity and clergy’, ‘an apostle of the internal transformation of man and nations’ and ‘a propagator of the spirituality of Christ the Servant.’<sup>67</sup>

This excellent educator and theologian perceived a child as:

- ‘A bundle of energy’ owing to the features/properties ascribed to this term, such as: physical and mental vitality, an eagerness to learn about the world, a sense of freedom, or rather liberation from irrational social constraints (the corset of etiquette and custom). He compared a group of active children to a herd of wild horses, who need to be interested and occupied with something positive during the educational process.
- An initiator of counter-revolution. Blachnicki hoped that children and young people from the so-called oases would be alert to the issues of defending faith, protecting the common good, building social solidarity and a sense of national unity, as well as other socio-political issues at home and abroad. This would soon become a basic tool for political transformation.
- Solace in good times and misfortunes. A child, as a gift from God (bringing comfort), is called to offer themselves to others with a sense of service and mission. This perception of a child is also related to the evangelical (and at the same time metaphorical) approach to them as ‘hope’, ‘future’ and ‘light of the world.’

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., Mt 5, 5.

<sup>67</sup> See Wodarczyk, “Książdz Profesor Franciszek Blachnicki”, 155–162.

- A pure man, that is, untainted by greater evil. Blachnicki perceives a child as a good person, predisposed to constant communication with God and thus destined to achieve eternal happiness. Therefore, in his opinion, a child is distinguished by such features as: delicacy, sensitivity, shyness, restraint, sobriety and trust.
- A witness of marital, parental, brotherly/sisterly, fatherly – of God and motherly – of Mary, love. Thanks to the family, a child becomes a person predisposed to creating brotherly/sisterly bonds, and in the future also marital and parental bonds. Following the example of these emotional bonds, they also become capable of maintaining satisfying bonds of friendship. In a Christian family, a child learns mature evangelical love: responsible, selfless and faithful.
- A humble man. These are the specific features of this attitude: experiencing one's weakness in the face of God; experiencing spiritual childhood, that is, feeling like a child who can only be strengthened thanks to Christ; experiencing strong faith, trust in God and the love of God who leads a person through various stages of achieving Christian maturity; experiencing inner peace and joy. A humble man is also described (in the spirit of the eight beatitudes) as: meek, poor in spirit, sometimes weeping, craving justice, peace-making and merciful.

Based on Franciszek Blachnicki's specific approach to a child, certain truths can also be drawn about his perception of childhood. He considered this period to be particularly formative, requiring moderators and organizers of religious movements and associations to use appropriate methods and create the right atmosphere, taking into account the specific features of a child's psyche. Childhood should be associated not only with family activity but also with participation in parish meetings of the Light-Life Movement groups (Oasis of the Children of God, 1<sup>st</sup> degree), as well as community days in the deanery or diocese. Childhood can therefore be understood as a period of opportunity for developing humanity, shaping an appropriate hierarchy of values, training in many skills and virtues, developing an attitude of internal improvement and strengthening faith, hope and love. The achievement of Christian maturity<sup>68</sup> and, in the future, eternal happiness – salvation – depends on the proper experience of childhood, for example, during oasis retreats.

Blachnicki's suggestions related to the religious, ethical and educational formation of children and young people can be contained in several recommendations. Religious education should not resemble traditional knowledge training, and catechesis should not be a conventional school lesson, where the teacher's questions often only arouse anxiety. There should be a cheerful family atmosphere both during catechesis and in parish communities. The bond between children and

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<sup>68</sup> See Franciszek Blachnicki, *Celebracje „Dziesięciu kroków ku dojrzałości chrześcijańskiej”*, eds. Franciszek Blachnicki et al. (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Światło-Życie, 2013).

between children and the priest moderator and organizers of cultural life should be of a brotherly or friendly nature, based on cooperation, interesting conversations, prayers, participation in the Eucharist and involvement suitable for the participants' interests and talents. Appropriate religious education, aimed at deeply experiencing faith, gradually leads to maturity in this area and the formation of a Christian identity. Such religious formation is also the basis for proper moral, social and civic education.

*Translated from Polish by Barbara Komorowska*

## Kim jest i kim może stać się dziecko. Przypomnienie dokonań edukacyjnych i prospołecznych Księdza Franciszka Blachnickiego

**Streszczenie:** Przedmiotem badań zaprezentowanych w artykule uczyniono przede wszystkim postrzeganie dziecka przez księdza Franciszka Blachnickiego (1921–1987): założyciela m.in. Ruchu „Światło-Życie”, Krucjaty Wyzwolenia Człowieka i Chrześcijańskiej Służby Wyzwolenia Narodów. W wyniku analiz dzieł tego pedagoga i teologa zarysowała się również jego wizja dzieciństwa. Zaprezentowaniu wyników badań służyła odpowiednia struktura artykułu, na którą składają się: deskrypcja metodologicznych podstaw badań, umieszczenie problematyki wśród dyscyplin i subdyscyplin naukowych, podanie zasadniczych pojęć, nakreślenie wizerunku Franciszka Blachnickiego w szerszym kontekście historycznym. W rezultacie procesu badawczego rozstrzygnięto problemy badawcze dotyczące (zgodnego z nauką Kościoła katolickiego) postrzegania przez Blachnickiego dziecka i dzieciństwa oraz wydobywania sugestii wychowawczych, prospołecznych i etycznych skierowanych do współczesnych ludzi, a odnalezionych w jego dorobku.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Franciszek Blachnicki, Ruch Światło-Życie, oaza, dziecko, oazowicz, dzieciństwo

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