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ADOLESCENTS AND YOUNG PEOPLE BETWEEN CELEBRATIONS AND FREE TIME

A summary of G. Pietropolli Charmet's intervention in the Round Table

Today's narcissistic society drives young people to the pursuit of high visibility and personal success. These aspirations can be more easily pursued when there is a marked dependence on peer group relationships. This causes free time to be mainly controlled by spontaneous peer group initiatives that are difficult to contain within the context of a youth associative structure.

Belonging to the family is currently characterised by a marked emotional need for reflection and warmth, to the detriment of ethical obligations and participation in the rites and ceremonies of celebrations. It would seem necessary to examine how the tendency toward moral familism can give greater space to ethical values and the sharing of the religious dimension.

Psychosociological research and statistics carried out during recent years have ascertained a high level of coresidentiality between children and parents within the framework of today's family. The prolonged stay of young adults in the family home causes much discussion: there are those who believe it could pose a risk to the process of subjectivization of young people and that it highlights an element of fragility with respect to young people of other European countries, but there are also those who believe that it can be proof of the vitality of our families who have been capable of reformulating the emotional, educational ethical bond with their children, thereby prolonging the indispensable period of preparation for insertion into a highly complex, globalised society.

Another ascertained datum is the lengthening of the average life of men, and

in particular, of women. This means that a family with adolescent children or young adults is challenged with on the one hand, the resources but also with the needs, sometimes onerous, of the grandparents, and on the other hand, with having to cope with the needs and requirements of the children who are still economically and emotionally dependent on the family of origin.

The family is therefore still seen as characterised by the mononuclear pattern, but it is evident that around its nucleus gravitate two generations that significantly extend both the resources and the universe of needs.

If we make this structural datum interact with the transformations concerning the management of celebration and free time by adolescents, we can see prospects of resymbolization of their significance and new opportunities for growth and development of the ethics of responsibility vis-à-vis the other.

The adolescents of today come from a background of childhood growth that favours and rewards a precocious development of social skills, urging them to strike a bond of friendship and solidarity with their peers which is highly emotionally absorbing and characterized by a strong reciprocal need of belonging. This has increased the importance of cohesion in peer groups with respect to the previous generations, as documented by all recent studies on juvenile groupality and the risks regarding behaviour that can derive therefrom.

Adolescents choose to spend the time that they have free from school and family duties together with the spontaneous peer group to which they are required to give identity and solutions to the problem of boredom and

solitude. This has put the functions performed by the youth association networks and the educational and religious institutions which had catered for young people in their free time in a critical position.

The decisional and organisational powers conquered by the spontaneous peers group are the source of some of the noted educational difficulties encountered by parents and teachers in middle and high schools. Without institutional affiliation and educational support from competent adults, the possibility that the group takes risky, transgressive and stupefying initiatives increases. Since parents are obviously aware of the power that a group of peers has on the behavioural choices of their children, the most common conflict within family walls is the definition of the times and control that the parents have on the children when they are emotionally immersed in group life.

This context of relationships and symbolisation favours the possibility that the management of the “free time” of young people be delegated to the organisational and promotional capabilities of the peer group, thereby running the risk of going to far in the direction of evasive, consumistic, extrafamily activities, far from the scope of religion and relationship with the other.

The proximity of the grandparents acts as counterbalance to the centrifugal trend of the peer group. Grandparents are often still autonomous and propositive, and, as opposed to the young, they are eager to put meeting and the opening of their homes to the family in all its ramifications. A feast is celebrated more fully when it has the meeting of the three generations at its centre and it is characterised by the narration and transmission of values and

experiences accumulated by the various components of the family.

It is highly probable that in future years the new grandparents will understand the importance of the bond that their new grandchildren have made with a small group of close friends. Consequently, it will become the custom to celebrate feast days in the home of the grandparents that is open to the meeting of generations of adolescents and young people, kept far from the possibility of dedicating free time to distraction and involved once again in the celebration of the sacred rite of family continuity.

It is basically a matter of recovering the practice of the extended family, which, although living in separate homes, is revitalised in a time and space dedicated to celebration, protecting the members of the family from the experience of dissipation and fragmentation, and opening up to listening, to kinship and to the sharing of a common destiny.

Basically, it is the same problem of renegotiation that almost all parafamily institutions have with the young, from the school to the oratory, involved in the search of how to satisfy young people's desire for deep and meaningful relationships, refute the fascination exerted on their minds by consumistic and social visibility models put forward and often deceitfully imposed by the mass media subculture and the world of advertising, both inflamed by the need to glorify free time and pervert it into a time for consumerism and the contemplation of the shop windows of shopping malls, the new squalid meeting venues for many groups of young people.

It may prove complicated to weaken the bond that is also of an ethical and

ideal nature and which binds the adolescent to that which is seen as a true “social family”, a group of peers bound by tight emotional bonds during childhood. But the family network can be useful for giving back time and place to the “celebration” and destroying the abusive power of bodies that have no authorisation nor educational competence and which have taken hold of the young minds. They are only devoted to selling illusions and persuading the young to sell their free time in exchange for a handful of useless and perishable items.