



The integral development of the student as a support to the family in the process of formation: A case study of the Association of Friends of Catholic Schools¹

<https://doi.org/10.34766/s1matf59>

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Abstract: Formation, embedded in the very essence of human existence, is a dynamic and complex process that has long been the subject of philosophical and pedagogical reflection. Contemporary socio-cultural transformations and the growing challenges of modern civilization point to the need for a renewed examination of the aims and structure of formation. This article explores the notion of integral formation, understood as the comprehensive development of the human person in the fullness of their physical and psychological being – intellectual, emotional, social, spiritual, and religious. Such a holistic approach to human formation appears to offer an appropriate response to contemporary phenomena that contribute to the disintegration of both the individual and the community, such as individualism, consumerism, and the erosion of social bonds. A special role in the process of integral formation is attributed to the family and the school – particularly the Catholic school – which, through the affirmation of attitudes grounded in human dignity, community orientation, and axiological engagement based on Karol Wojtyła's concept of adequate anthropology, supports the multifaceted development of students. A practical model of integral formation is presented through the case of the Association of Friends of Catholic Schools (SPSK), illustrating specific didactic and formative solutions aimed at the integral development of students and the building of a value-based community.

Key words: formation, integral development, values, school, student

Introduction

Formation is a phenomenon embedded in the very essence of human existence and the dynamics of civilization development, which has been expressed throughout the history and culture of individual peoples and nations (cf. Geneja-Pietrzak, 2019; Olbrycht, 2012; Parzyszek et al., 2024). Diverse perspectives on the issue of human formation, especially in the context of philosophy, which has always been the foundation of any pedagogy, were clearly revealed over the centuries. The claim of G. Gutek (2023), who worked on the anthropological basis of pedagogy and education, clearly emphasizes that what is the anthropological vision, so shall be the pedagogy.

Social and cultural transformations contribute to the growing need for a profound reflection on the concept

of formation, its foundation, essence, and governing principles. In the face of the numerous modern concepts of formation, it emerges as a task that is not only complex and extensive but also extremely urgent. The complexity of the surrounding reality may result in the loss of the fundamental goal of education: the formation of the human person in their integrity, especially in the religious and spiritual dimensions. Even though there are many entities involved in the process of education, the primary responsibility for carrying it out remains with the parents and the family. This also entails the right to choose such educational institutions where the process of education is certain to be aligned with their adopted religious and moral rules (Kongregacja do spraw Wychowania Katolickiego, 2009, p. 497).

1 Article in Polish language: https://stowarzyszeniefidesetratio.pl/fer/62P_chod.pdf

The concept of integral student development encompasses both physical and mental dimensions: intellectual, emotional, social, spiritual, and religious. It emphasizes the importance of cultivating such traits as dignity, rationality, freedom, responsibility, creativity, and the capacity to transcend one's limitations. It is achieved through educational methods that support self-awareness, problem-solving, and active participation in cultural life.

Integral upbringing, from early childhood, fosters a profound understanding of the value of the human person, the meaning of life, and the duties that arise from the fact of "being" human (cf., Buk-Cegiełka, 2020; Łobacz, 2019). Addressing the issue of the meaning of life has become particularly relevant in relation to the contemporary adolescent crisis. In this respect, logoprevention – preventive actions rooted in V.E. Frankl's logotherapy and existential analysis (2009) – acquires special significance in the upbringing of the younger generation (cf. Hornik, 2024; Ruczaj, 2020; Szczukiewicz, & Solecki, 2023; Szykuła, 2022). Value-oriented education, understood as the support of learners in actualizing their own well-ordered hierarchy of values, which leads to integral development and the fulfillment of human potential, is founded on axiological activity. This activity is expressed through processes of recognizing, evaluating, accepting, experiencing, clarifying, and actualizing values, both individually and socially. This process is closely related to the formation of stable attitudes and intrinsic motivation, which promote conscious participation in social and cultural life (Chałas, 2018).

The core curriculum of early childhood education and the organization of educational process should provide a framework conducive to the implementation of integral education. Such a framework should enable the harmonious development of the child across all important dimensions: psychophysical, social, cultural, and spiritual.

Spiritual development, understood in both a naturalistic and religious perspective – especially with regard to the Christian tradition – constitutes a key element of integral growth. It pertains to fundamental existential categories, such as the meaning of life, ultimate values, moral excellence,

and sanctity. Within this context, early childhood education is a foundational stage in the formation of personal maturity, which is intrinsically linked to both spiritual and religious maturity (Maj, 2019).

The contemporary culture, characterized by the escalation of individualism, consumerism, and the erosion of social bonds, presents a serious challenge for actualizing the ideals of integral and personalistic education. The emphasis on individual achievements at the expense of common good, along with the spread of hedonism and materialism, leads to the weakening of spiritual and ethical foundations of education (Rostańska, 2016). Moreover, the process of negating the significance of traditional values and the growing social isolation hamper the formation of stable interpersonal relationships, which presents a threat to personality development grounded in personalistic values (Król, 2017). Therefore, there is an urgent need for renewing educational frameworks by creating environments conducive to both the building of personal relationships and the affirmation of human dignity and common good (Verhoef, Badley, 2021). Teachers, who are chief animators of the education process, should embody personalistic principles, provide a model of involvement and social responsibility, and inspire students to creatively and consciously participate in community life (Rumayor et al., 2022).

The aim of this article is to analyze the determinants conducive to integral student development and to identify opportunities for implementing this process in practice as a form of support to the family in the upbringing of children, in particular with regard to the educational, social and cultural environment. The article illustrates a practical dimension of the concept of integral education, grounded in Christian personalism, implemented in the schools of the Association of Friends of Catholic Schools (Pol. Stowarzyszenie Przyjaciół Szkół Katolickich, SPSK). The specific teaching and educational solutions presented in the article support the harmonious development of students – on the grounds of the theoretical assumptions discussed above – in the intellectual, emotional, moral, and spiritual areas.

1. Determinants of integral development of the person

Integral education, being the response to the contemporary educational and social challenges, requires a sound theoretical foundation to enable its conscious and effective implementation in pedagogical practice. Today, the subject of integral development seems to be less noticeable, not only in the space of education and upbringing but also in the field of culture as such. This does not mean that the modern man has no need of developing to the extent of his human potential. Over the centuries – especially in the context of philosophy, which has always been the foundation of any pedagogy – there were diverse perspectives on this problem. In order to adequately understand the meaning and significance of this approach, it is necessary to refer to the key anthropological, axiological, and pedagogical assumptions, which are the foundations of integral education. Thus, G. Gutek (2023), who worked on the anthropological basis of pedagogy and education, was right in his claim, clearly stressing that what is the anthropological vision, so shall be the pedagogy.

The experience of the schools that implement the assumptions of personalistic pedagogy shows that omitting objective educational principles is not merely uncondusive to development but also leads to chaos and the weakening of the creative potential of the learner. Upbringing, understood as supporting the young person in his integral development, is a significant duty of adults: both teachers and parents (Śliwerski, Szkudlarek, 2009).

The need to protect children from the predominant axiological relativism is being expressed with increasing clarity in the educational and parental circles. There is a growing desire to find the truth about man and to reflect on both the very essence of his identity and the directions of development that upbringing should define. This leads to the emergence of the fundamental question: who is man and how – through education – he can increasingly become himself (Kraśniewska, 2021).

1.1. Family as the first educational environment

Beyond any doubt, the first educational environment is family. Despite numerous crises and dynamic and deep socio-cultural transformations, it remains the elementary and primary educational environment in the child's life, playing a crucial role in the shaping of its emotions and social attitudes, and in the process of internalizing the system of values, norms, and behavioral patterns.

The pedagogy of family takes into consideration a number of key aspects of the family's right to educate. This right, which stems directly from the act of procreation and the unique relationships of love between parents and children, is inalienable and primary with regard to other educational institutions (Matyjas, 2020).

In a well functioning family, the foundation of the system and the most important relationship in its structure is marriage (Braun-Galkowska, 2002, p. 11-17). This relation is of particular importance, since it determines the functioning of the whole family system. The happiness felt by the spouses is reflected in the activities of the entire family, in the extent of the sense of security and general satisfaction, and in the fulfillment of needs. The style of interaction between parents transfers to their relationships with children. It also becomes the model of interpersonal behavior for the latter (Świętochowski, 2014, p. 31-32). In a proper family, its members are connected to one another but also have their own distinctiveness. The rights and feelings of each person are recognized and respected. Everyone cares for both the development of each family member and the discovery of their individual talents and skills. Parents are able to cooperate. They both hold power and can be relied on (Ryś, 2020).

One of the basic conditions of correct human development is the fulfillment of his psychosocial needs, such as the need for security, love, affection, kindness, and contact, as well as the needs to be recognized, successful, and to act unhindered.

The need for emotional contact is important at all stages of human development, even though it is particularly strongly expressed in childhood and youth. The parents' attitude of acceptance of the child

contributes to fulfilling this need. They show the child their interest, care, and most of all love, which the child wants to reciprocate. This relationship is therefore bilateral. By experiencing benevolent feelings from its parents, the child feels secure and finds its place in the family. The need for security – based on emotional contact and expressed by the child's trust – is also being fulfilled this way.

Fulfilling the need of emotional contact stimulates achieving development milestones and determines healthy personality development. Its fulfilment in childhood results in both the acceptance of oneself and others and the capacity and ability to make interpersonal contacts (Ryś, 2002, 2020). If the child's first experiences in contacts with significant persons are a source of positive emotions, the child will strive to maintain them. Therefore, those early family contacts define interpersonal references in the person's future life (Ryś, Krasowska, Witerek, 2021). The proper fulfilment of the needs for love, acceptance, and respect leads to the formation of a healthy sense of the child's own self, self-confidence, and the belief in its own strengths (Ryś, 2013). According to V. Satir (2000, p. 32), persons with a healthy sense of their own selves are characterized by love, responsibility, belief in their own strengths, integrity, compassion, and honesty.

The process of formation in the family is bi-directional and involves both conscious and unintended actions. It begins already in the prenatal period, which emphasizes the importance of the early stages of the child's life. Upbringing in a family takes place both in its planned, intentional form, and through every-day life situations, which – though not always intended to be educational – play a crucial formative role. Both the deliberate and the spontaneous form create an integral, indivisible whole, although unintentional parenting often predominates in the practice of families (Osewska, 2014, p. 125-139; Szymczyk, 2010, p. 71-83).

Being the first to introduce the child to the world of social culture, the family exerts a fundamental influence on the child's personal and social development. Other social groups and educational institutions – such as schools, peer groups, social organizations, and religious communities – play a supporting and supplementary role with regard to the fundamental influence of the family (Strużyńska, 2020).

The role of family in the formation of attitudes is crucial. Already in the early childhood in the family, a person gains the skills needed in everyday life, learns to distinguish between good and evil and to postpone gratification, and notices sex-related differences. The formation of attitudes towards social and moral norms also starts during development. The internalization of the normative system begins, along with the search for answers to the questions of the aim and meaning of life, and the meaning of human relationships and specific values. The quest for answers in that area, combined with making decisions that confirm or negate certain values, lead to and increasingly conscious formation of the hierarchy of values that will become the basis for many decisions and attitudes in life (cf., e.g., Póltawska, 2011; Ryś, Tataj-Puzyna, 2021).

A well functioning family, which is a community of love and solidarity, transmits cultural, ethical, social, spiritual, and religious values necessary for human development. Children learn both values and the world of culture in the family. They learn to act for the sake of others and to fulfil the needs of other humans (cf., e.g., Mudyń, 2013; Płopa, 2008; Walęcka-Matyja, 2022).

The family is also the first school of moral and religious development. Observing the attitudes of the mother and father towards each other, others, life, illness, suffering, and death forms the child's "moral backbone". Such ethical models often become deeply ingrained guidelines for life. The attitudes of respect for the dignity of oneself and another person, for one's own and another person's work, effort, and hardship are formed in the family. It is there that the person learns to both share responsibilities and take the rights and the good of other people into account (cf., e.g., Ryś, 2020).

The family's influence does not end when the child becomes independent or creates his or her own family. It remains active and significant throughout the individual's life. This is because family life is a permanent existential context for humans, which affects their functioning at various stages of development (Rusiak, 2014; Sozańska, 2014).

1.2. School environment

Besides the family environment, school plays a key role in the child's overall development with regard to education, socialization, formation, and value shaping. In pedagogical literature school is shown as an educational system observed from various perspectives: functional, structural, cultural, organizational, and anthropological. Each of these approaches emphasizes different aspects of its functioning: from fulfilling the students' needs to upholding the social order, to supporting the everyday co-creation of educational reality. Education and cooperation in formal and informal groups are, among many other factors, inherent in the process that allows young people to realize their dreams and passions, to develop themselves and their potential. The task of school, as an institutionalized educational environment, is to support the formation of the hierarchy of values, to develop social competences, and to integrate educational and formational activities (Stepulak, 2017, p. 34-36).

In spite of its potentially key role in the educational system, contemporary school often does not pursue its functions to the fullest, particularly in the area of formation and both culture-making and axiological activities. Observable dysfunctions include the lingering emotional distance between teachers and students, disturbed social relationships in the school environment, the lack of sufficient and healthy cooperation between school and the parents, and the institutional limitations that hamper carrying out effective educational activities. An accompanying problem is the lack of sufficient connection between curriculum contents and the actual formative needs of students. Curricula often focus on the transmission of theoretical knowledge, neglecting the formation of attitudes, values, and social competences. The excessive focus on achieving educational goals in separation from formative goals weakens the function of school as an environment conducive to integral student development. School very often creates an illusion of certainty by providing scientific knowledge – seen as irrefutable and as a sure way to success – which may lead to frustration, in particular among well-ed-

ucated unemployed young people (Buk-Cegielka, 2019; Musiał, 2019, 2024, also cf. Molenda, 2010; Nowak-Dziemianowicz, 2015).

The contemporary approach to education also stresses the necessity of educating teachers in line with the so-called good practice principles, including a high degree of professionalism, updated subject matter knowledge, creative thinking, and the ability to adapt to changing teaching conditions. The key role of a teacher is to develop the critical thinking ability in students, which requires a flexibility in the working style – from an authoritarian to a liberal approach – adequately to the didactic context and the individual needs of learners. This process should take into account the activity, self-evaluation, aspirations, sense of empowerment, and socialization level of the student. In order for the educational system in Poland to conform to good practice, it is necessary to involve – in an integrated and conscious way – all entities taking part in the process of education, including educational institutions, teaching staff, students, and their parents (Stepulak, 2017, p. 34-36).

According to the core curriculum in force since 1999 (Journal of Laws 1999, No. 14, item 129), the educational activities of school are based on the integration of three equal components: education, provision of skills, and formation. These components are the fundamental goals in the work of an educator and pedagogue, requiring mutual coordination and balance. Formation cannot be considered as a marginal task, instead it should exist in a close synergy with the remaining areas of didactic activity. The complementarity of these three functions determines the quality and integrity of educational process (Stepulak, 2017).

Integral student development is also significantly influenced by psychological and social factors, such as intrinsic motivation, emotional intelligence, and support from effective teachers and peers. These factors support the cognitive, social, and mental development of children, directly contributing to their academic achievements and general well-being (Vitoria et al., 2024). Therefore, integral education becomes not just the means of development of an individual but also a basis for constructing a society founded on personal and communal values. Assuming

that intellectual abilities are not the only wealth of a person, the school community should affirm overall student development, respecting his dignity and potential in its fullness. The core mission of school is to prepare the younger generations to take over the responsibility for the future and to provide them with the ability to share their talents for the benefit of the social community.

In order to effectively carry out its functions with regard to the broadly understood social environment, school should be perceived as a community of people driven by wisdom, who instruct students in the spirit of wisdom. Wisdom is the foundation of the community's permanence and spiritual development, enabling it to be, simultaneously, creatively rooted in tradition and co-created in modern times. Only under the conditions of correctly understood community it is possible to fully involve school in the formation of students both at the individual and the social level (Chalas, 2018). For school to effectively carry out its formative functions, it has to be redefined as the institution that teaches not only what the world is but also how to live with others in that world: in the spirit of values, responsibility, and communal orientation.

2. The role of the Catholic Church in the process of human formation

The teaching of the Catholic Church on formation in the first community – the family – emphasizes the key role played by the formative relationship between parents and children. Children, through their love, respect, and obedience to parents, make their special and irreplaceable contribution to building a genuinely human and Christian family (Gaudium et Spes, No. 48).

In his encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, Paul VI articulates the fundamental significance of the role of parents in the process of formation. As givers of life, they have both the fullest right and the duty to bring up their children, being their first and most significant educators. The Pope points out that once this task is neglected, it is difficult to repair by other

institutions. Parents are the ones responsible for creating the homelike atmosphere based on love and respect for God and people, which favors the overall personal and social development of children (Pawel VI, 1968, No. 25). In this context, the family is described as “the first school of those social virtues which every society needs” (Jan Pawel II, 1981).

In the teachings of Vatican Council II, each family member, according to their own vocation, shares in the gradual work of building a community of people. This transforms the family into the space where the full human potential can develop. This process is based on mutual love and grace shown – especially to children, elderly people, and the sick – through every-day service and unanimous sharing of goods (Gaudium et Spes, No. 52).

John Paul II – called the “Family Pope – taught that formation is an interpersonal reality, a relationship between people: “*education [is] (...) a reciprocal ‘offering’ on the part of both parents: together they communicate their own mature humanity to the newborn child, who gives them in turn the newness and freshness of the humanity which it has brought into the world*”. The Pope also stressed that “[p]arents are the first and most important educators of their own children (...)”. All other participants of education act, in a way, on behalf of the parents, under their consent, and even, to some extent, at their discretion (Jan Pawel II, 1994a, No. 16). Formation is a process culminating at the stage when, having achieved a degree of mental and physical maturity, the young person begins “educating himself on his own”. Over the years, this self-formation will surpass his formation so far. The young person encounters new people, environments, teachers, and schoolmates, who affect him in a formative way, positively or negatively. In spite of that, education in the family never strays far from its existential roots, even when the young person sets out on his own path (ibidem).

In his adhortation *Familiaris Consortio*, John Paul II indicates that the Christian family is the first and most important community responsible for communicating the Gospel to the human person undergoing the constant process of development. The family's task is to accompany him in maturing into the full human potential and Christian ma-

turity, realized through progressive education and catechesis (Jan Paweł II, 1981, No. 2). The Pope also stresses that the right and duty to educate children stems from the original vocation of married couples to take part in God's creative activity. By giving life to a new person by love and for love, parents simultaneously obligate themselves to support his or her development to live a fully human life (Jan Paweł II, 1981, No. 36).

According to the teachings of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (KKK, 1994), the first responsibility of Christian parents, ensuing from their role as givers of life, is the education of children. The family should be the space where a child gradually develops moral virtues and gains the skills necessary to attain true freedom, such as self-mastery, self-denial, and sound judgment (KKK, 1994, No. 2223). In early childhood, parents express their love by caring for the child's development, both in the material and spiritual dimensions, through their every-day presence, attention, and fulfilment of needs (KKK, 1994, No. 2228). Then, in adolescence, it is increasingly important to support the child in shaping a mature understanding of freedom and responsible use of reason (KKK, 1994, No. 2228). Young people should learn to make decisions and discharge their responsibilities in life, in the spirit of trust towards their parents, gladly accepting their advice and experience (KKK, 1994, No. 2230).

The contemporary challenges, brought by the subsequent decade of the twenty-first century, clearly indicate the need to intensify activities aimed at the development of integral education, especially in Catholic schools. As stressed by John Paul II (1994b), the Catholic Church must not limit itself merely to the intellectual formation of the younger generation but should become involved in its full integral formation encompassing all aspects of human beings.

2.1. 2.1 The model of personalistic education

In the course of history, numerous and diverse pedagogical concepts arose. Each of them strove to express its own understanding of education in an anthropological, cultural, or axiological context. Personalism, which occupies a special place among those approaches, emphasizes the dignity of a human person as the foundation of education. Many outstanding representatives of Polish pedagogical thought can be found in this current, such as Czesław Bartnik (1995) and Wincenty Granat (2006), whose academic contributions are a valuable source of inspiration for teachers and educators. Among personalists, it was John Paul II who articulated one of the most profound and also most precise definitions of education, combining philosophical reflection with pastoral and pedagogical experience. His take on education as the process that leads the person to the fullness of humanity, freedom, and responsibility remains a current and important point of reference for modern personalistic pedagogy (as cited in: Starnawski, 2020).

In its theoretical dimension, John Paul II's concept of pedagogy of person is rooted in the personalistic philosophy he pursued, which draws upon Thomism and phenomenology² (Wojtyła, 2021).³ As a person, by getting to know himself, the human experiences his own worth in the dialogue with himself, other persons, and God. The person has the capacity to love, is free in his or her choices, and is recognized as a person under the law (Rynio, 2004). Equipped with conscience, the person is open to moral values, norms, and obligations. He is able to self-actualize morally in relation to the Absolute. He is fully capable of "being himself". He achieves it in the socio-cultural dimension through dialogue, work, and sharing in the common good (ibidem).

2 For St. Thomas, the person is the most perfect expression of being. Aquinas adopts the concept of anthropological hylemorphism, defining the person as that which is the most perfect in all nature (*persona significat id quod est perfectissimum in tota rerum natura*). He also stressed that the human is a unity, a comprehensive being (Stokłosa, 2001).

3 Wojtyła's work has its sources in two great philosophical traditions. One of them is Thomism, the other is phenomenology. Human experience was Wojtyła's starting point, as he wrote at the very beginning of *Person and Act*: "this study came from the need to objectivize that great cognitive process which at its origin may be defined as the experience of man". For Wojtyła, Thomism provided human person with stability and invariability. Therefore, it is entitled to fundamental dignity and transcendence. Whereas the phenomenological method was able to add value to human experiences and feelings, which were dynamic in nature (ibidem).

In his teaching, John Paul II (1994) describes the phenomenon of “integral education” which aims at “being human” in all dimensions: personal, ethical, social, cultural, and religious. Since man, according to the Pope, is responsible in his conscience for the shape of his life, he should first fully enter the process of education, then “self-education”. The formation of conscience, mentioned in the Catechism of the Catholic church, is therefore important (KKK, 1994, No. 1774f).

According to Wojtyła (1969), man is “entrusted to himself”. He has, therefore, a moral responsibility to systematically “cultivate” his nature (*bios*), develop his cognitive abilities (*logos*), and deepen his moral actions (*ethos*) by opening himself to universal spiritual values: truth, good, and beauty. The mystery of the human person should manifest in a healthy personality. The ideal of mature personality is a man who was called and entrusted to himself. It is a person who constantly improves himself internally to live with dignity and enjoy his freedom responsibly. He is to build the civilization of life, truth, and love with his life, being a selfless gift to others. This is because man should constantly transcend himself, and the measure of his development is infinity (cf. Rynio, 2004).

A special importance in the process of education should be given to the concept of “adequate anthropology”, which constitutes a philosophical approach to the human person suggested by Karol Wojtyła, a philosopher from Krakow and the author of the fundamental work *Person and Act* (Wojtyła, 1969). This approach assumes that man is not merely a biological or psychological existential fact but a person whose essential dimension is “becoming” by free and deliberate acts. Unlike other beings of nature, man is not only subject to the processes of development but also takes an active part in shaping those processes. He is the subject of his own personal and moral maturing. The transcendence of person in action is thus accompanied by the experience of agency (Wojtyła, 2021).

Wojtyła’s adequate anthropology thus highlights the central role of man as a self-determining being who enters into a relationships with moral good and evil through acts of free will. The person’s reality is inextricably linked to ethical reality: the human person constitutes himself in relation to the moral values he actualizes in action. Man becomes who he is through what he does, and in this sense his development is internal, volitional, and personal. It is impossible to reflect upon this concept in isolation from the Christian foundation of Wojtyła’s thoughts, deeply rooted in Catholic theology. Nonetheless, this relationship does not limit its universality. To the contrary, it emphasizes the transcendental dimension of the human person and his dignity, which remains crucial in both the anthropological and pedagogical reflection (Wojtyła, 2021; c.f. Mruszczyk, 2010).

The integral development capacity of the student’s person became an inspiration for lay people to seek the model of school in which education and formation could be implemented based on the anthropology rooted in Christian personalism.

3. The Association of Friends of Catholic Schools and its pedagogical vision in the education of children and youth

The entry into force of the Law of Associations (Journal of Laws 1989, No. 20, item 104) allowed various groups and communities to establish educational organizations to further educational goals as the governing authorities of schools and pre-schools.⁴ The Act on the Educational System (Journal of Laws 2024, items 750, 854, 1473, 1933) then enabled the activities of public schools and pre-schools, funded through educational subsidies and governed by non-local government entities.⁵ The Association of Friends of Catholic Schools, founded at that time, adopted the integral

4 In January 1991 the Association of Friends of Catholic Schools (Pol. Stowarzyszenie Przyjaciół Szkół Katolickich) based in Częstochowa was incorporated by the court. The Association was the first Catholic educational organisation established after the fall of the communist system. It became legally possible to found a school only after the Act on the Educational System entered into force in September 1991.

5 The Association of Friends of Catholic Schools established at that time constantly develops its activities. Currently, in 2025, it runs 122 schools and pre-schools in 10 provinces.

development of a person as its mission. The foundation of the integral human development in schools run by the Association is Christian personalism, and the chief operating principle is to respect the primacy of person over action. At school, the formation of the person is implemented through the principle of subsidiarity⁶ (Dobek, 2008). Subsidiarity – the entirety of actions for the benefit of the social environment – is in line with the position of the Catholic Church, according to which parents should have as much power and responsibility as possible with regard to educating their children (Jan Paweł II, 1994b).

In their basic assumption and educational goals, parents should take into account the development of the entire person of their charges. This mission can be supplemented, in particular, by the Catholic school that fulfils the mission of the Catholic Church to be present in education – in line with the teachings of the Vatican Council, in the light of the constitution *Lumen Gentium* (Sobór Watykański II, 1964). *Gaudium et spes* (Sobór Watykański II, 1965b) embeds itself in the broader reality of Christian education, thoroughly described in the conciliar declaration *Gravissimum educationis* (Sobór Watykański II, 1965a).

School should strive to attain spiritual goals and a truly humanistic formation through the service of the teachers who profess their faith. In particular, Catholic school should form the transcendental nature of the human person, shape mature consciences, and aim at preparing learners to face the challenges of modernity with due regard to personal dignity and subjectivity in social life. Catholic school strives to assist students in shaping their lives in truth and justice, so that they may attain the maturity in faith (Płaziński, 2019). What is important in integral education is the primacy of the person over an object, ethics over technology, being over having, and mercy over justice. John Paul II also points it out, after his great predecessor Paul VI, demonstrating the importance and primacy of ethics over technology, which rests in the primacy of the person over things, as well as that of spirit over matter. It requires that teachers, and even students, should possess a certain philosophical and theological

knowledge, in the key of the encyclicals *Redemptor hominis* (1979) and *Fides et ratio* (1998). This is because the practice of education and formation demands a foundation, or a concrete theoretical basis, as it has been explored many times (cf. Gutek, 2003).

3.1. Educational activities of the Association of Friends of Catholic Schools in practice

The key role in the activities of the Association of Friends of Catholic Schools (SPSK) is played by the integral and personalistic vision of the human person rooted in the anthropology of Karol Wojtyła – John Paul II – and other representatives of Polish Christian personalism. Unlike other currents of personalism, this vision derives its identity from the revealed truth about the man and his vocation to sanctity, which is expressed in both the documents of the Magisterium of the Church and current scientific approaches (cf. Geneja-Pietrzak, 2019; Michalski, 2021; Mruszczyk, 2010; Wojtyła, 2021).

Integral anthropology, on which the pedagogical approach of the Association is founded, is not limited to the philosophical or psychological perspective – even though both are important and complementary to each other – it also includes a theological dimension, rooted in the Revelation and the teachings of the Catholic Church. This synthesis enables it to show man as a corporeal and spiritual being endowed with dignity and vocation to live in a community, and to actualize the full human potential. This concept also results in a specific vision of marriage and family, presented to students in the spirit of the teachings found, among other things, in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (cf. KKK 2201-2233).

Based on the above assumptions, the Association implements a personalistic model of education, expressed more tangibly in the statutes of educational institutions and in the educational and didactic practice. The aim of this model is to support integral student development in the corporeal, mental, social, cultural, moral, and spiritual dimensions, under a strict cooperation between teachers, students, and parents.

6 Subsidiarity (from Lat. *subsidiū* ‘aid, support, reserve forces’) – a principle saying that each level of government should carry out only those responsibilities which cannot be effectively fulfilled by a lower level or by individuals acting within the society.

The structure of the integral view of education comprises five main formational planes, which permeate one another and combine to make a cohesive concept of formation of a human person, namely: (1) physical formation, (2) social formation, (3) cultural formation, (4) moral formation, and (5) spiritual formation.

3.1.1. Physical formation plane

The physical formation plane is actualized in the educational activities of SPSK in a number of ways. By instilling in students the awareness that life and physical health are valuable gifts conferred to us by God. By caring for the life and physical health of oneself and others, taking into account not only one's own needs but those of others and the common good. And by the physical formation aimed at integral development, including care for the physical development of students. Sports activities and competitions organized by the school are meant to awaken in students the need for physical activity and healthy sports rivalry to ensure their harmonious development. The foundations of the physical formation of man can be found in the personalistic anthropological concept of St. John Paul II. In his teachings the Pope consistently presented sports as not only a form of physical activity but also as an integral element of the development of the human person, which included the ontological, anthropological, axiological, theological, and ethical dimensions. From this perspective sports appear as the space where the vocation to the full human potential is actualized by the harmonious formation of body and spirit. The reflection of John Paul II – rooted in the teachings of Vatican Council II and enhanced by personal sports-related and spiritual experiences – elevates physical culture to the rank of a spiritual and existential value and places it in the context of integral education (cf. Dziubiński, 2017; Kowalczyk, 2010; Seul, 2017; Szymczyk, 2012).

The Pope's catecheses on the theology of body provide an important point of reference for the Christian anthropology of sport, which introduces the human body into the sphere of ultimate Christian values, the sphere of sacrum. The Pope underlined the unity of body and spirit and pointed out that sports – when practiced with respect to the rules and the person's dignity – may contribute to building the society that values meetings over conflicts, honest competition over fierce confrontation. John Paul II warned against the dehumanization of sports. He saw sports as a tool for building a community based on solidarity and dialogue, where sport rivalry replaces social conflicts. An honest competition becomes a sign of respect for the dignity of the human person and common good. When sport is abstracted from personalistic values, it loses its educational and ethical dimension, while man is no longer the subject of sport but means to an end (cf. Seul, 2017). In 2004, in order to institutionally emphasize the importance of sport in the Church's pastoral mission, the Pope established a department of sports in the Vatican. The statement published at the time stated that "sport is a new field of Church activity, a part of the culture, and an indispensable component of human development in the service of peace and brotherhood" (Oroń, 2024).

In John Paul II's opinion, physical exercise, including sports, strengthens not only physical abilities in children and youth, but also intellectual and spiritual ones. Practicing sports may help uncover each child's potential. Sport is an opportunity to work on one's development with the support of parents, educators, and coaches. It is a certain struggle directed at the exercise of attention and the training of will and patience⁷. This purpose is served, among other things, by football events, in which all students of the schools run by the Association of Friends of Catholic Schools can participate. The scope of the play-offs, which includes students from many

7 During his pilgrimage to the homeland, in Elbląg on 6 June 1999, the Pope addressed sportsmen saying: "Every kind of sport carries an opulent wealth of values, which always need to be brought into awareness in order to be made real. The exercise of attention, the shaping of will, perseverance, responsibility, enduring hardships, and being faithful to one's obligations – these are all a sportsman's virtues. I encourage you, young sportsmen, to live according to your values, that in your lives you always be righteous, honest, and balanced people, the people who engender trust and hope". See also: <https://www.kurier-ilawski.pl/opinie/Rochowicz-Sport-i-wartosci-w-zyciu-Karola-Wojtyly-/5499> (access: 8.01.2025).

schools of the Association, is an added value. Moreover, under such a notion of sports, SPSK organizes bike trips, among other things, and all kinds of outdoor games.⁸

3.1.2. Social formation plane

The social formation plane is present in the educational activities of SPSK in the formation of the social maturity of learners and in the shaping of the attitude of respect towards all people. The learning of respect for the dignity of each person is achieved by teaching sensitivity to the needs of neighbors and responsibility for oneself and others. The work on students' autonomy in the strife for good is accentuated, along with the formation for true love understood as service for the sake of others. Cooperation with the family as the primary educator of its children is important, together with their family home as the place of formation of the foundational virtues of the social plane. In the spirit of love and responsibility, the school institution directs its educational activities to the formation of obedient attitudes towards parents and the people in power. The period of school education is for students the time of gradually discovering and internalizing the value of common good, represented by such fundamental communities of social life as family, class at school, nation (Motherland), and the Church community.

During the almost twenty-seven years of his pontificate, John Paul II made the question of the dignity of the human person one of the main axes of his teaching, which was particularly clear in his encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* (1995). The Pope incessantly accentuated the fundamental significance of Christianity as the carrier of anthropological values, indicating the transcendental dimension of human existence and the intrinsic value of humanity. In this context he called upon the faithful to unite around the person of Christ, who does not only endow man with a Christian dignity through his presence and actions but also confirms his genuine humanity. John Paul II emphasized that only by living in an authentic relationship with the Creator an

individual can become fully aware of his uniqueness and the dignity resulting from it, and actualize his humanity in the attitude of service to another human as well. By referring to the Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen gentium* (1964) as well as other documents of the Vatican Council II, the Pope showed that the sharing by the faithful in the royal mission of Christ allows them to discover and actualize the dignity ensuing from God's vocation, described as "kingship". This dignity is manifested as the readiness to serve others as Christ himself did (cf. Sadowski, 2010, p. 269-342). In this regard the Pope's teaching is one of the key curriculum components of the school entrusted with changing the world "from the inside", i.e., with educating people in the spirit of the Gospel. A Catholic school actively participates in the spiritual development of its students by creating room for becoming creatively rooted in tradition, including taking part in the celebrations related to the patron of the school. It is worth noting that bestowing a saint's name on a school is an opportunity for cooperation between the school, local authorities, and the local parish. A special accent in the naming of the school and consecration of its standard is the presence of the bishop of the diocese where the school is located, which underscores the uniqueness of the moment even more for the children, their parents, and the entire local community.

3.1.3. Cultural formation plane

The cultural formation plane is implemented in the educational activities of SPSK through the shaping of intellectual development and experiencing the world of culture by students. The care for intellectual development means transferring reliable knowledge and providing students with skills to deliberately take actions requiring consistent intellectual effort. It also means developing both creative abilities and analytic and synthetic thinking. Above all, however, it means making students more sensitive to truth, good, and beauty. Culture constitutes a dynamic and intrinsic aspect of the process of human formation, in which

⁸ One such example is the yearly Blessed Stefan Cardinal Wyszyński Trek, taking place in Bachledówka, in a place related to the sojourns of Primate Wyszyński as well as Karol Wojtyła. The main goal of the trek is the instilling of the values formed by the Primate of the Millennium with regard to the active style of life, reinforcement of peer bonds, and integration of participants.

love and work are assigned particular importance. The education carried out within culture and through culture aims to furnish the human with the system of symbols, norms, behavioral patterns, and values, which allow him to consciously participate in social and spiritual life. In the *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, Gaudium et Spes* (1965b), the Fathers of the Vatican Council II stressed the “great importance” of literature and art in human life. This document unambiguously shows culture as an important dimension of human existence, one that expresses and deepens the meaning of humanity.

In his *Letter to Artists* (1999), John Paul II stated: “all men and women are entrusted with the task of crafting their own life: in a certain sense, they are to make of it a work of art, a masterpiece” (No. 2). The Pope, who himself was a poet and an actor, often emphasized the importance of artistic creation and the role played by artists in the society. In his view artists – similar to scientists, technicians, teacher, and parents – serve an important educational function because they support the development of man and society through their creations. The art of education, as the Pope indicates, is a special form of artistic activity, which requires both intuition and devotion to values. He believed that the “creative intuition” of an artist, which allows him to encounter the mystery of reality by experiencing the beauty of the world, was a crucial component of creation. In this sense, art can support the mission of the Church and serve as the *praeparatio evangelica* – preparation for the Gospel – both for the artist himself and the entire culture (ibidem).

Therefore, integral education implemented in Catholic schools does not merely encompass the transfer of knowledge but also the all-round development of student’s abilities – particularly those most useful in his future professional career. The formation of aesthetic and social sensitivity, openness to transcendence, and systematic religious education, rooted in the critical reflection on culture, play an important role in this context. The educational curriculum of SPSK schools assumes that the students’ contact with art

should show its ethical dimension. The discovery of the moral meaning of culture by young people may lead to the deepening of their spiritual lives and to attaining moral freedom, which is only possible by orienting oneself to absolute values. This is why diverse forms of contact with culture and art are accentuated in working with children and youth as both recipients and creators. The activities of school theatrical groups, choirs, music bands, art groups, school newspapers, and artistic circles and workshops are subjects of educational care. The schools ran by SPSK make great effort to provide students with access to genuine forms of art and culture, both within and outside the school. Students also have the opportunity to learn the importance of culture by direct contact with it and reflection upon its value and message.⁹

3.1.4. Moral formation plane

The moral formation plane is realized in the educational activities of SPSK by developing the ability to distinguish between good and evil: between actions conducive to human development and those which affect him in a harmful way. It is aided by discovering the reality of conscience and its dependence on God, by shaping conscience, and by learning to analyze one’s own behavior according to the Decalogue and Blessings. It is also important to awaken the cognitive curiosity aimed at seeking truth, goodness, and beauty, as well as inculcate moral and ethical values in the attitudes of students, so that they may implement them in their every-day lives. An individual approach to each student is an important responsibility of the Association’s schools, so that education and upbringing may be a unique path in the journey of his development. For that reason the educational and formational program “Persona” was prepared. It is based on the assumptions of tutoring but focuses on both the educational and personal development of students. In this program, the student has the option of choosing the teacher with whom he will be working individually on his development. To aid students in this respect, “Indexes of Personal Development”

9 In the Association’s schools, there are acting workshops and theatrical events. There, children and youth are sensitised to the cultural values found in classical literature through such activities as “Literature with the spirit” conducted by professional actors.

were created as a kind of notebooks for working on oneself. What is crucially important for carrying out the “Persona” program is the constant training and workshop-based formation for teachers, the so-called promoters, who accompany and support students in working on their development.

The problem of conscience is central to the moral teachings of John Paul II, as one of the key themes of his anthropological and ethical reflection. This problem was particularly broadly developed in the encyclical *Veritatis splendor* (1993), where the Pope presents conscience in its inseparable relationship with truth and freedom. This document is a response to the moral crisis of today – derived from the deeper crisis of conscience – expressed, e.g., by the relativism of norms and the loss of the ability to distinguish good and evil (cf. Pokrywka, 2001). John Paul II emphasizes that, in order to correctly serve its function, conscience has to be constantly formed in truth. It is the result of its internal structure: conscience is not a fully matured and reliable instance but rather an ability in need of shaping (Jan Paweł II, 1993, No. 62). For this reason one should take into account the possibility that incorrect moral judgments can be made due to the influence of external factors, such as social environment, culture, or media disinformation. The human right to act in line with his conscience must be understood in parallel to his duty to shape that conscience in relation to the objective truth. While the formation of conscience is a responsibility of all humans, it pertains especially to young people, for whom it is an indispensable component of their self-education (ibidem, No. 63-66). Since moral maturation takes place in specific social circumstances, the responsibility for that process rests not only with the individual but also with the family, school, religious community, and the representatives of the world of culture, science, politics, and media (Jan Paweł II, 1993, No. 87-89).

As the work in this area is particularly important, the Association first and foremost relies on the teaching of the Church, in particular the teaching of John Paul II who emphasized multiple times – among other things in his encyclical *Evangelium vitae* (1995) – the incessant and urgent necessity to constantly rediscover the human and moral val-

ues which belong to the very essence and nature of man. This, according to the Pope, is discovering the truth about the man, his uniqueness, and dignity. He stressed that “no individual, no majority and no State can ever create, modify or destroy [these fundamental values], but must only acknowledge, respect and promote” (Jan Paweł II, 1995, No. 71).

During the summer breaks, original programs “In search of identity – on the trail of one’s own heart” are being organized (Kraśniewski, 2016). The activities are focused on discovering, experiencing, and rebuilding the vision of one’s own self with respect to the male and female identity as a boy or a girl. The program is a series of workshops divided into four parts: I. Training of intellect – “know yourself”; II. Training of will – “where my lusts rule, I, unfortunately, don’t”; III. Training of heart – “the heart has its reasons unknown to reason”; IV. Training of relationships – “no man is an island, entire unto himself”.

3.1.5. Spiritual formation plane

The spiritual formation of students in schools run by SPSK involves a multi-dimensional process of shaping the human being in his relation to God, himself, and other people. The key elements of this formation are the discovering of faith as a gift received in the Sacrament of Baptism, which is the foundation of Christian identity, and the interpreting of the events of one’s own life in the light of this faith. The experience of God as the loving Father whose unconditional love for all humans becomes the fount of hope and the foundation for giving witness to Christian love. It is the education to live in faith as a dynamic, personal relationship with the living God and to actively participate in the sacramental life of the Church community. It also means accompanying the student in discovering the depths of his own heart as the center of the human person and the place of meeting the Transcendent. This is a work on developing one’s ability to build genuine and stable interpersonal relationships and personal relations with God. It is also an education oriented towards love, understood as a selfless gift of oneself in the spirit of Christian personalistic anthropology. The important event which deepens the spiritual lives of the students of

schools run by SPSK is the pilgrimage of the relics of Blessed Carlo Acutis. His testimony of life in faith and the Eucharist and the evangelization over the Internet show the way of living to the young people. The visitation of the relics taking place in each SPSK school provides each student with the opportunity to meet Blessed Carlo in person. This formation, related to the integrity of the human person and to his religious and spiritual dimensions in particular, is an important component of overall development. It relates to such fundamental existential categories as the meaning of life, hierarchy of values, and the quest for moral excellence and sanctity. The spiritual dimension – fundamental for the development of the human person – is directed to fulfil the vocation of man to the fullness of life, which, as John Paul II emphasized, “far exceeds the dimensions of his earthly existence, because it consists in sharing the very life of God” (1995, No. 2).

What distinguishes the schools run by SPSK is the attention the Association pays to the integral development of teachers. It may be said to be a *sine qua non* condition, without which there is no integral development of students. To implement integral student development in this way, the teacher has to be a master, an authority, and a witness of faith. The teacher who works on developing his own person will have the ability to assist students in their journeys of personal development. It is also through the witness of life of teachers, who act as both educators and spiritual guides, that the school carries out its formational goals aimed towards the spiritual development of students and a genuinely personalistic vision of education. The spiritual formation and professional background of teachers, which combines interdisciplinary knowledge, ethics, creative thinking,

and a flexible didactic approach, are achieved through participation in numerous trainings, formational meetings, and philosophical workshops. Consequently, the teachers improve their pedagogical and therapeutic competences, including the use of logotherapy and logoprevention (Frankl, 2024).

Summary

In the context of the contemporary socio-cultural transformations and the growing civilizational challenges, the need to review the concept of integral education becomes increasingly pronounced. In family environments, as well as in the circles of educators and pedagogues, there is a noticeable growing determination in counteracting the relativistic trends in education, while simultaneously striving to discover and display the truth about man. The danger of over-accentuating the axiom of freedom in the modern model of education, without taking responsibility into account, not only constitutes a shift in perspective but also becomes a distortion, which is destructive to man through a false image of himself. In this context, the educational activities of the Association of Friends of Catholic Schools – whose educational model is rooted in the teachings of the Catholic Church and reinforced by the cooperation with the family and the active involvement of the entire school community – is a significant example of implementing the concept of integral education, clearly inspired by the personalistic anthropology of John Paul II. This program is a suggested answer to the crisis of identity of education in the world of today and an example of a cohesive and axiologically driven concept of formation of the younger generation.

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