

The Child's Right to Spiritual Development

By Cardinal Anders Arborelius

In the secular atmosphere of our contemporary society it is often forgotten that it is a human right for every child to be offered some possibility for spiritual development. In Sweden of today, many people cannot see the necessary difference between state and society. That the state is secular and neutral is necessary in our pluralistic age, but the society must be open to various options. Unfortunately, many people, consciously or unconsciously, proclaim that society as such must also be secular. Recently, an enquiry showed that many children having a Christian faith were treated badly at school, sometimes also by their teachers. They were regarded as ridiculous, stupid and not enlightened by science. At the same time, a distinction between the words religious and spiritual has become widely recognized. Religion is looked upon as something suspicious and even dangerous, whereas spirituality could be something good and interesting. Of course, these tendencies are often hidden and not proclaimed officially. Still, a good number of people are influenced and even brainwashed to regard religion as something old-fashioned and even dangerous. Children ought to be protected from every kind of religious influence or contact. We also have to mention that sometimes there is a kind of subtle islamophobia behind this point of view. Nobody would admit it openly, but behind the screen it is evident that there is a fear and a very critical attitude towards Islam. As a result, some people will show their negative view of Islam by criticizing Christian faith and morality very loudly.

How shall we as Christians react in a similar situation? It is a human right for parents to educate their children in the Christian faith. Nobody has any legal right to deny us or parents of any religion this human right. We have to be more vocal about this human right. At the same time, we have to respect other parents who do not want their children to be educated in any religion whatsoever. It is essential, though, that the spiritual dimension of our human existence will be recognized by everyone. Every child has to be recognized as a spiritual being needing a formation and education as such. Unfortunately, it can be very difficult to find a universal definition of what it is to be a spiritual being. Still, I daresay that every person of good will, whether believer or not, can recognize that a human being is not purely something material. It would be a very important issue to try to find a definition of our human reality as spiritual in order to overcome many misunderstandings. The secular person needs to respect the religious person as being spiritual. The religious person needs to respect the secular person as also being spiritual. We have to find a common ground where we look upon every single human being as spiritual having a dignity and value that must always be respected and never looked down upon. When we accept that every single human being is spiritual, we also have to accept that every single child has the right to a spiritual development. As Christians, we have the right to educate our children in the faith. Religion is always something spiritual. Today, there is also a kind of interior secularization among Christians. That implies that many are only Christians by name and cannot offer their children a real spiritual development. Some of them would like to do so, but they have not the capacity or the time to do so. They hope that the parish or even the school could offer their children this spiritual insight and learning. But if there is no spiritual or religious impulse or influence from the family it is very difficult for the child to develop spiritually. That's why it so important to help families to realize their responsibility. Even secular families have to discover this spiritual dimension. Today many people also begin to realize that something is missing, when only material values are recognized. There is a kind of general meaninglessness and void in the air. Especially during the pandemia, some people realized that they lacked a deeper sense of their life and existence as such. Somehow, this experience can be very hopeful. Pope Francis speaks about the globalization of indifference, but this insight can also lead us to start longing for a deeper spiritual meaning.

The child of today deserves something more spiritual. This insight ought to help us all to establish a kind of dialogue where we try to look for this common spiritual dimension of all humankind. As Christians, we believe that every human being was created in God's image. There is a spiritual dimension in every person. We might call it soul or something else. Even the non-believer can believe in something similar. Our human nature is spiritual at its core. As human beings, all of us have spiritual needs and longings. A child needs help in order to develop this dimension. As Christians, we believe in the Holy Spirit who is always at work among us and inside us. We believe that he is the source of all spiritual values. He is constantly trying to imbue us with this fundamental spiritual outlook on our existence. Thanks to his influence and inspiration we can discover the spiritual dimension of our own personal life as well as that of the entire human family.

Even a child who is brought up in an entirely secular atmosphere can get some glimpse of this spiritual dimension. There is always a longing, often quite hidden, but anyway a real longing for something more profound. As Christians, we know that Jesus Christ is the perfect model of how our human nature can be totally transparent for the Spirit. Our spiritual development as human beings has to reflect his person and mystery. When we try to help children to discover how they can grow and develop as spiritual beings, we have to point to Jesus and help them to develop a personal relationship to him. In prayer and everyday-life they can grow more and more familiar with him. This development has to start in the family and to be nourished continually in the womb of the family. In the secular atmosphere of today, we cannot expect that this could be offered by the school. Of course, it is the task of every Christian parish to help children and young people to grow spiritually, but sometimes it could be impossible for the parish to offer this help.

The main issue is to see how we can inspire families to help their children in their spiritual development. The Church - of whatever denomination - has to be more alert and active in order to help families to be faithful to this task. In our digital contemporary time there could be many possibilities to reach out to families and their children. It is necessary for parents to pray together with their children, e.g. before meals and before going to bed. In the home of the family religious images, icons etc. can create a spiritual atmosphere. And what do you talk about when the family is together? You can bring God and religious matters into the daily conversation between the members of the family in a natural way. God has to be part of the everyday-life in order to be important for the children. A spiritual development can only take place if God is present. Children are often very open to spiritual issues and questions. But they need guidance and help in order to be really involved in a spiritual process of growth.

In the gospels we see that Jesus is always eager to receive the children. If a child becomes familiar with Jesus at an early age, this spiritual development can start. To show the child that he or she is close to Jesus and receives his tender affection and love is essential. The personal relationship with Jesus can transform the heart of the child. If the parents are unable to transmit this value, it is important to find other persons who can do so. Pope Francis often speaks about *i nonni*, the grandparents. They have a providential importance in our days, when so many parents are extremely busy at work and building up their own career and fortune. Anyway, a child needs someone who can be a witness and speak about his or her spiritual relationship with Jesus. This message has to be received at an early age, in order to make the child aware of the mystery of God's love that comes to us in the person of Jesus. The child needs to be accompanied in a continuous way.

When the child becomes a teenager, it needs special attention in order to remain open to this spiritual relationship with Jesus. We know that the sexual dimension becomes very important and all-encompassing at a very early age in our culture. That is a most crucial moment. Sexuality tends to overshadow spirituality for many young people. Unfortunately, it is very difficult to help the young person to remain open for the importance of spiritual values. It is a challenge that we have to cope with, because more than ever the upgrowing child needs spiritual

development when confronted with the sexualized atmosphere of our contemporary society and culture.