

**A Conference Report: ‘The Process of Maturing: Human Childhood and Adulthood in a Theological Perspective’  
(2–5 September 2021, Fortna monastery, Prague)**

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Within the project Theological Anthropology in Ecumenical Perspective, the international conference focused on the important issue of childhood and adolescence, particularly on reaching human maturity from a theological perspective. Childhood and adolescence are not only important periods of human development from a biological and psychosocial point of view but also from a spiritual perspective, i.e. as regards finding mature faith and attitudes and relationships based on it. Contemporary society is focused on youth mostly without deeper reflection, so this conference aimed to reflect on the phenomenon of childhood, maturation, and maturity in a broader context. The future of society and the world depends on true adulthood and spiritual maturity. However, it is necessary to ask: What is the significance of childhood for human maturing/adulthood? What are the factors that foster maturing, and what hinders or limits it?

On Thursday, September 2, 2021, Ivana Noble opened the conference with her introductory lecture, in which she pointed out the basic findings of developmental psychology (Piaget, Ericsson), stages of moral development (Kolhberg), and spiritual development (Fowler). In doing so, she stressed the importance of moving towards maturity (calling a person to mature adulthood), which, however, in the spiritual sphere does not mean simply ‘copying’ the development of the human personality from other aspects. This opened up the space for the whole conference and especially for *the first block of lectures* (‘Moving between Childhood to Adulthood in the Abrahamic Religions’), which was devoted to different perspectives on the evaluation of childhood and adulthood in Jewish (Aleš Weiss: ‘When Israel was a Child...’), Christian patristic (Václav Ježek: ‘Childhood and Adulthood: Christian Scriptural and Patristic Images’), and the Islamic tradition (Amina Nawaz and Mujadad Zaman: ‘The Transition between Childhood and Adulthood in the Legal, the Ritual and the Mystical Tradition of Islam’ – online). The individual contributions showed that different traditions (despite the commonalities given by the generally valid laws of development) put different emphases in defining what constitutes maturity (moreover, gender-specific) and in defining when a person is considered an adult (moral responsibility, holiness, economic security, status).

On Friday, September 3, 2021, there were 3 blocks of main lectures and one block of small group sessions and short papers. *The second block of lectures*

under the title ‘Theological Reflections on the Physical and the Symbolic Reality of Childhood’ was devoted to both the phenomenon of birth/rebirth in the Christian liturgical tradition (Olga Lossky: ‘The Physical and the Symbolic Reality of Human Birth in Christian Liturgical Tradition’) and the ‘reverse’ side of childhood, i.e. its fragility and vulnerability (Petre Maican: ‘The Impact of Disability’ – online), particularly in the sexual sphere (Marek Drábek and Petr Jandejsek: ‘The Impact of Abuse’). *The third block of lectures* focused on youth and young people (‘Being Young’) and dealt with issues related to youth movements and their reflection (Viorel Coman: ‘The Theological Impact of the Youth Movements in the 20th Century Theology’) and theological reflection on youth and their needs and possibilities of reaching them in the present time (František Štěch: ‘Theology of, for, and with Youth Today’). *The fourth block* was devoted to the theme ‘Maturity: The Existential and the Ontological Discourses in a Conversation’. In addition to the family, as discussed by V. Ježek in the first block of lectures, the experience of friendship has a great influence. It ideally opens a person through the existential experience of personal, exclusive love to the love of others and the universe and allows one to overcome various social and other barriers, teaches man true reciprocity and respect for the freedom of the other and one’s own. The best example of this is the figure of Jesus Christ (Athanasios Papanthanasious: ‘Friendship and its Formative Role: A Theological Reflection’). The second lecture, ‘Maturity as Emancipation of the Subject and the Question of Freedom during the Covid Pandemic’ (Michale Kirwan-Tim Noble), focused on the role of the Church in the process of human maturing and its responsibility within the contemporary world for the conditions that will allow a person to be a true subject in front of God’s face, that is, a mature person according to God’s plan. The path to maturity and freedom leads through man’s commitment to others (solidarity, responsibility, and trust), as the Covid crisis has shown very clearly.

The small group contributions were focused differently according to the orientation of the individual PhD and post-doctoral lecturers. *Group A* included the paper ‘Motherhood as a way towards maturity’ (Barbora Šmejdová and Hana Benešová), which emphasised the importance of the mother for human maturation and motherhood as a spiritual attitude (the service of maturity), and the paper ‘Spiritual and Ethical Aspects of Encountering Death and Dying in the Experience of People from helping Professions at the Height of the Covid Crisis’ (Daniela Brůhová), which reflected on the complex professional, human, and ethical situation of health professionals at the time of the greatest covid crisis. In *Group B*, there were the contributions by Dávid Cielontko (‘Human, All Too Human: Should We Ask “What Would Jesus Do” after Reading the Infancy Gospel of Thomas’), Felipe Dittrich (‘Human Nature: Fixed or Open Development’), and Matej Kováčik (‘Active or Passive Freedom’).

Saturday, September 4, 2022, brought an unusual morning presentation and demonstration of the theme while walking through the city of Prague as a place where people are born, live, and also grow up (František Štěch,

Daniela Brůhová, Matej Kováčik, Felipe Dittrich, Pavel Pola: ‘Growing in the City: A Theological Study Trip’). The environment has a considerable influence on the formation of a person, so it is desirable to pay attention to it.

*The fifth session* in the afternoon was devoted to adolescence and maturity in relation to fatherhood from the physical and spiritual point of view. Pavol Bargár’s lecture (‘Maturity and Fruitfulness in 21st Century Religious Culture’) focused on the current shift from religion (institution) to personal spirituality and maturity as the ability to live in relationships. Kateřina Kočandrle Bauer (‘Physical and Spiritual Parenthood: A Theological Reflection’) emphasised the accompanying role of the spiritual ‘father’ as a guide, a companion on the path to maturity and education as a shared journey through which both parties are enriched. Education must lead to the freedom of both children and parents. Mature fatherhood, like motherhood, must combine both the physical and the spiritual.

This block of lectures was followed by a panel discussion (with panellists A. Papathanasiou, P. Pola, P. De Witt, T. Landová, I. Noble) and work in three small groups. *Group A* included papers by Bogdan Huley (‘The Brotherhood of the Cross: Educating Youth within Legionary Movement in Romania’), Marieke Maes (‘Human Growth and Forgiveness’), and Jana Hofmann (‘Confession of Sins and its Role in Spiritual Maturation of the Individual’). In *Group B*, the presentations were given by Martina Kopecká (‘“Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves” Prov 31,8f. Child Friendly Churches according to World Council of Churches: Safe Space for Children’), Pieter de Witte (‘Growth in Compassion: The Enlightened Education Dream of a Brave New Criminal Justice System’), Pavel Pola (‘Dark Night as a Way to Spiritual Maturity: The Case of Thérèse of Lisieux’). *Group C* included two papers: ‘The Role of Activity in “Self” Understanding’ (Gilija Žukauskienė) and ‘The Issue of Children’s Salvation: Comparing Views Held by Catholics and Baptists’ (Roman Shvets).

Sunday, September 5, 2021, included the final *sixth session of lectures* (‘The End and the New Beginning’ – online) on the issue of the difficult aspects of life and their relevance to human maturation (Ian Randall: ‘Illness and Death: A Theological Reflection’) and the goal of the Christian life of maturity/adulthood in Christ (John Behr: ‘By Such Order and Rhythms: Growth into Maturity in Christ’).

At the end of the conference, there was a presentation of new books and a final discussion of the theme, the conference, and the outlook for the future (on the theme of the next conference).

Organised as a university project, the conference sought to present an important contemporary topic from not only an ecumenical but an interfaith and international perspective to a wide range of participants from a variety of traditions and countries.

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