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The formation of presbyters for the work with non-believers in Poland

The article presents the ways of preparation of priests for the work with non-believers. The author enumerates the dimensions of the priestly formation: human, spiritual, intellectual and pastoral. Human and spiritual formations require deepening of the presbyters' spirituality as well as the formation of the humanistic attitude which is the basis for establishing and leading a dialogue with non-believers. The implementation of intellectual formation requires studying the contemporary philosophical currents which constitute the basis of the current cultural changes as well as of the social transformations. In the pastoral formation presbyters are to gain new pastoral skills which are adequate to the current challenges as well as deepen the skills of making proper use of the pastoral experience which they had gained.

Keywords: formation of presbyters, ongoing formation, formation of priests, dialogue with non-believers, atheism.

The presence of non-believers in the traditional societies is not a novelty. The Second Polish Plenary Synod of Bishops paid attention to their presence and indicated the necessity to take special care of them.

The Synod encourages priests to particularly refer to non-believers whom they meet in the parish office or during a pastoral visit or in any other everyday situations. Non-believers usually want the priest to listen to them, try to understand them and not try to convert them at once. Every non-believer has his own theory or reasons for losing his faith but these are often irrational or primitive. However, in most cases the theories are just covers for many dramatic experiences, for their individual thoughts and decisions, especially in case of those who used to believe in God. These people often suffer because of the long-established sense of injustice which was unfortunately a priest's fault.

While talking to such people priests should always remember about the inalienable role of one's own testimony of faith and of life in faith¹.

Since the end of the Second Polish Plenary Synod, the attitude of non-believers towards the Church has changed. Many non-believers are not friendly towards priests or towards the secular members of the ecclesial community. The origin and the results of atheism have also changed. Atheism and the negative attitude towards the Church are often inherited from the ancestors and in such families the basis of atheism is more often rationalized. Non-believers become more and more aggressive towards the faithful, especially in public. This probably results from secularization processes which are developed in Western Europe and which are more often present in Poland.

Regardless of the origin of atheism in Poland and of its characteristics, the Synod's indication which regards the need for pastoral concern for non-believers is still advisable. And as the number of non-believers who live as if there was no God and far from the Church, has increased, this indication is even more urgent than it used to be.

Pope Francis teaches that meeting non-believers requires courage and "taking the initiative"². It also requires proper preparation, especially of the clergy who are mainly responsible for the pastoral care, for the new evangelisation and for the dialogue with non-believers. The preparation is a part of the ongoing formation of presbyters. It is not limited to teaching them certain methods of dealing with non-believers in certain situations but it consists in all the aspects of the formation process: the human, spiritual, intellectual and pastoral ones.

Human and spiritual formation

The Second Polish Plenary Synod indicates the importance of the personal testimony of faith given by priests. Therefore, their spiritual formation is of such an importance. It is based on the ongoing maintenance of a deep relationship with God, which helps to sanctify the priest and make him resemble Jesus Christ the Good Shepherd. John Paul II taught that

The Spirit, by consecrating the priest and configuring him to Jesus Christ, head and shepherd, creates a bond which, located in the priest's very being, demands to be assimilated and lived out in a personal, free

¹ *Potrzeba i zadania nowej ewangelizacji na przełomie II i III Tysiąclecia Chrześcijaństwa* nr 58, in: *II Polski Synod Plenarny (1991-1999)* (Poznań: 2001), 26.

² Francis, Encyclical *Evangelii gaudium* nr 24, (Kraków: 2013), 17-18.

and conscious way through an ever richer communion of life and love and an ever broader and more radical sharing in the feelings and attitudes of Jesus Christ³.

According to Pope John Paul II, the testimony of the priest's life affects non-believers in many dimensions. The priest shows them Christ, introducing His true nature to them. He shows Christ as a Shepherd Who is good and Who cares about them because they are important for Him, he proves that He cares about their worldly life and wants them to attain their eternal life in the community with Him, with the Father and with the Holy Spirit. The Pope's teaching also indicates that the effects of the priest's inner unity with God are of great importance for non-believers. What is more, the positive impact of this unity particularly influences: the priest's personality, his attitude towards people, especially those who are far from God, and his attitude towards the realized vocation. It reflects whether the priest believes in what he does and if he remains faithful to his decisions and is consequent in realizing his mission⁴. The two most important features of the priest's testimony of his ministry are: transparency and faithfulness. Transparency does not draw the attention of non-believers solely to those who minister but it draws their attention to Christ Who leads the priest in his life. For others, especially for non-believers and for those who distance themselves from the Church, the priest who tries to draw people's attention only to himself is an obstacle in the attempt to discover Christ and to establish a bond with Him⁵. Faithfulness allows to discover God's action in human life, that is: to discover God not as a concept but as a living Creature and to notice His positive influence on human life, especially the impressive faithfulness to God which results from this bond regardless of any obstacles⁶. Such an attitude which is close to heroism can be convincing for non-believers who are often focused on themselves and on their own experiences and who mainly aim at their own particular good.

³ John Paul II, Apostolic exhortation *Pastores dabo vobis*, 72, in: *Adhortacje ojca świętego Jana Pawła II* (Kraków: 1996), 519-520.

⁴ The letter of Polish bishops to the Polish presbyters about the ongoing formation of priests *Abyśmy nie ustali w drodze*, (8.03.2006), www.episkopat.pl/abysmy-nie-ustali-w-drodze (30.12.2020).

⁵ K. Bardski, "Naśladowanie Chrystusa w miłości do Kościoła", *Pastores* 4 (2003): 14-16.

⁶ The Congregation for Catholic Education, *The Gift of the Priestly Vocation. Ratio Fundamental Institutionis Sacerdotalis*, 81, (Watykan: 2016), 42.

Maintaining the open approach towards contemporary non-believers is a difficult task for many reasons. Contemporary non-believers often openly show their distrust or even aggression. Meeting such people and taking actions which aim at their conversion often require certain qualifications. These include pastoral and intellectual qualifications as well as the human and spiritual ones. They mainly involve the courage to maintain the attitude of openness, to be able to establish a dialogue and to consequently lead it in order to succeed. However, this attitude is not promoted by the public opinion which is mainly shaped by liberal media which are managed by non-believers and by those who distance themselves from the Church. These media mainly favour non-Christians and non-Catholics, supporting them and giving them a privileged place in the public. They also depreciate Christianity and everything which is connected with it and, what is more, the faithful, particularly priests, are often ridiculed. This results in the attitudes of withdrawal and anxiety among Christians and the clergy⁷.

The attitude of courage and openness which is encouraged by Pope Francis, requires proper spiritual and human formation of priests. The shape and form of the formation are indicated by the Second Polish Plenary Synod. These are effective and widely practised forms although they are not only meant for use in dealing with non-believers but more universally. The synodic indications include:

- everyday devout celebration of Eucharist and the personal meeting with Christ in the Blessed Sacrament
- sacrament of penance and reconciliation, spiritual direction, everyday examination of conscience and forms of compensation to God and to people
- the integral celebration of the liturgy of hours
- everyday 20-minute meditation, its form and time
- Marian piety (the Rosary, putting oneself in the care of Virgin Mary, internal conversation)
- the time of the doctrinal or hagiographical formation
- the renewed resolution of practical implementation of the bishop's indications, verification of one's definite adherence to the Magisterium of the Catholic Church, transmission of the ecclesial discipline
- care for the friendship and communion of priests
- the due rest⁸.

⁷ See R. Jaworski, "Psychiczna kondycja współczesnego księdza", *Dobry Pasterz* 22 (2002): 229-243.

⁸ *Kapłaństwo i życie konsekrowane jako wspólnota życia i posługi z Chrystusem*, 68, in: *II Polski Synod Plenarny*: 178-179.

The courage which is necessary for coping with fears and anxiety as well as the openness in dealing with non-believers come from God, as the Synod indicates, just like the motivation which is necessary for accepting such a challenge. The more negative the attitudes towards the Church, especially towards the clergy and their ministry, the more courage it requires from them to realize their mission⁹. This clearly indicates the necessity for even greater commitment into the relationship with Jesus Christ the God Shepherd and for becoming like Him, and through that, the need for even more zealous use of the means of formation indicated by the Synod. This involves both the supernatural means which create a bond between the presbyter and Christ as well as the natural forms which provide him with the support of the priestly community.

Intellectual formation

The aim of the intellectual priestly formation is to enable priests for more harmonious openness to the mystery of Christ Who acts in the world through His priests realizing His saving ministry¹⁰. The process of preparation of presbyters for the work with non-believers requires a thorough study of philosophy. This need for the study with particular regard to the formation of those who are being prepared for the sacrament of holy orders was indicated by the Second Vatican Council:

The philosophical disciplines are to be taught in such a way that the students are first of all led to acquire a solid and coherent knowledge of man, the world, and of God, relying on a philosophical patrimony which is perennially valid and taking into account the philosophical investigations of later ages. This is especially true of those investigations which exercise a greater influence in their own nations. Account should also be taken of the more recent progress of the sciences. The net result should be that the students, correctly understanding the characteristics of the contemporary mind, will be duly prepared for dialogue with men of their time.¹¹

In the light of the changing social situation which mainly results from the liberal ideology, based on the neo-Marxist philosophy, it is very important to get to know philosophy and all the contemporary philosophical currents which exert serious influence on people's

⁹ See K. Dyrek, *Formacja ludzka do kapłaństwa* (Kraków: 1999), 95-98.

¹⁰ The Second Vatican Council, Decree on priestly training *Optatam totius*, 14.

¹¹ Ibidem, 15.

conscience, on public opinion and on the shape of the social life, as it is a necessary demand for the ongoing formation of priests. Studying contemporary philosophy allows for a better understanding of the contemporary social processes but, what is more important, also of their background. It also helps to notice the influence of various social groups on the shape of community life, internationally and within the state. This particularly concerns political elites and the people from the media who have specific views which result from their assumed philosophical concepts¹².

Learning about contemporary philosophical currents and their influence on the lives of particular people and on the shape of the social life, enables presbyters to form a critical view on the current events and helps them to find proper pastoral means which can effectively influence the negative impact. The awareness of new threats and social mechanisms based on the present philosophical currents helps to get rid of anxiety and fears: anxiety appears when you face something unknown and incomprehensible. Better acknowledgement and better understanding of the background of the contemporary changes makes it possible to get the courage and to become more open. Furthermore, it motivates for taking up the challenges which result from contemporary threats.

Getting to know contemporary currents enables formulating strategic plans for the pastoral care within the local Church and within the particular Church. It is a proper action for the episcopal conferences and for the diocesan bishops, however, the awareness of the social processes which are currently taking place enables particular bishops for better understanding of pastoral programmes, for accepting them and for implementing them. It also helps in the acquisition of the abilities to prepare tactical plans for the parish pastoral care¹³.

The Second Vatican Council also indicated the need for gaining knowledge in sciences. It is also important because of the dynamic development of sciences and their influence on contemporary people. Priests should be aware that:

Account should also be taken of the more recent progress of the sciences. The net result should be that the students, correctly understanding

¹² See P. Mazurkiewicz, "Polityka jako roztropna troska o dobro wspólne", *Pastores* 1 (2018): 28-30.

¹³ See D. Lipiec, *Formacja pastoralna młodych prezbiterów w diecezjach w Polsce. Studium teologiczno-pastoralne*, [Pastoral formation of young presbyters in the Polish dioceses. Theological and pastoral study] (Lublin: 2020), 137.

the characteristics of the contemporary mind, will be duly prepared for dialogue with men of their time¹⁴.

It is not to require from priests to become specialists in the fields of these sciences and not to make them lead professional discussions, however, they should know the latest scientific achievements and the influence they have on particular people and on social life. In the current reality of social life in Poland, the development of medicine, biological and technical sciences is of greater and greater importance as they influence people's worldview. This influence seems to be even greater in case of non-believers¹⁵.

The intellectual formation of the clergy necessary in dealing with non-believers, requires learning about the achievements of social sciences. Similarly to the acknowledgement of the current philosophical currents, deepening the knowledge of the achievements of social sciences allows priests to understand the changes which are taking place in the lives of particular people and in their communities. The awareness of the processes which are taking place in the contemporary social life as well as their results allows for a better understanding of the phenomenon of atheism and of the ways of thinking of non-believers¹⁶.

It seems that the achievements of social sciences and of sciences play a greater role in creating the worldview of non-believers than of the faithful. The attitude towards oneself, towards others, towards the world and towards God is shaped by medicine, psychology, pedagogy and sociology and by other social sciences to a greater extent in the case of non-believers who totally or partially reject the Christian vision of man and of the world. The acknowledgement of the scientific achievements allows clergy to get to know the inner world of non-believers and their worldview. It also helps to notice the individual nature of the phenomenon of atheism.

Study of the issues of social sciences enables priests to assume a more adequate attitude towards the phenomenon of atheism and, in particular, towards particular people who consider themselves to be atheists. Understanding the origins of their atheism, the mechanisms

¹⁴ The Second Vatican Council, Decree on priestly training *Optatam totius*, 15.

¹⁵ See J. Grzybowski, "Czy psychologia komunikacji wystarczy?", *Pastores* 3 (2010): 45-49.

¹⁶ J. Mariański, *Kondycja religijna i moralna młodzieży szkół średnich (1988-2017)*, in: *Duszpasterstwo młodzieży w Polsce wobec współczesnych przemian*, ed. P. Ochotny, M.J. Tutak, T. Wielebski (Warszawa: 2018), 147.

which led to it, helps to take proper pastoral action which aims at converting them.

Pastoral formation

The pastoral dimension of the formation of presbyters is strongly connected with its spiritual, human and intellectual dimensions. Particularly, the spiritual and human aspects lead to deepening the pastoral charity of priests, which is a servitude for those the priests were sent to. Enriched with intellectual dimension, the pastoral formation

impels the priest and stimulates him to become ever better acquainted with the real situation of the men and women to whom he is sent, to discern the call of the Spirit in the historical circumstances in which he finds himself and to seek the most suitable methods and the most useful forms for carrying out his ministry today¹⁷.

The Second Vatican Council teaches that the major aim of the pastoral formation of presbyters is to motivate and develop their pastoral zeal. Non-believers are the addressees of the pastoral zeal, indicating that undertaking pastoral efforts towards them results not only from the personal zeal of priests but also from their mission which is universal and inalienable¹⁸. It is therefore obligatory to approach non-believers with the attitude of openness and it is the basic duty of presbyters, just like the zealous service for the faithful who are in constant connection with God and with the Church. The main aim of priests is to find such people among those who were entrusted to them and take proper action for the effective pastoral influence.

Pastoral formation of presbyters influences pastoral zeal and the attitude of the effective openness towards non-believers. The effectiveness of the undertaken actions results, according to John Paul II, from the greater pastoral experience and from the new forms and methods of evangelizing activity¹⁹. Pastoral experience, especially the one useful in working with non-believers, is much more effective than the remembered pastoral events and interiorised experiences which accompany them. Pastoral experience consists in the acquired philosophical, theological, scientific and social knowledge, which is strictly combined and correlated with pastoral needs. With regard to

¹⁷ John Paul II, Apostolic exhortation *Pastores dabo vobis*, 72,

¹⁸ See The Second Vatican Council, Decree on priestly training *Optatam totius*, 19.

¹⁹ John Paul II, Apostolic exhortation *Pastores dabo vobis*, 72.

the work with non-believers, pastoral experience means correlation of the previously gained experience with currently acquired knowledge and skills of presbyters in dealing with non-believers as well as with the phenomenon of atheism in the current specific reality.

The pastoral formation of presbyters for the work with non-believers is also connected with self-reflection over the past experiences and with the development of the ability of drawing constructive conclusions²⁰. One of the most common conclusions resulting from such meetings is the reluctance to maintain further contacts with non-believers and resignation from their influence on them. However, this reflection should not lead to discouragement but to the rational overcoming of the emotional obstacles and to perceiving the possibility to influence such people²¹.

Pastoral formation also consists of theoretical and practical abilities which are necessary for the work with non-believers. It is important for presbyters to participate in various workshops, courses, trainings and other such initiatives. It is not only important to acquire the knowledge and skills connected with dealing with non-believers. It only leads to the automatic use of them, which is ineffective. It is necessary to gain knowledge and skills which regard broader social and cultural context and the religious context in dealing with non-believers so that priests could learn to use all their experience and make use of all the available means of impact²². It is also important for them to independently make proper use of their knowledge in certain conditions and with regard to certain challenges. Learning independence in making proper use of their pastoral experience is necessary because there are no universal means or pastoral tricks which will ensure the effectiveness of their impact.

Conclusion

The preparation of presbyters for the work with non-believers regards all the dimensions of the ongoing formation. The spiritual and human dimensions aim at enabling them to assume the attitude of openness, which is indicated by Pope Francis, as well as at drawing

²⁰ Francis, The Speech during the meeting with the Episcopal Council of Brazil "Duszpasterstwo to realizowanie macierzyństwa Kościoła Pastoral care is the realization of the motherhood of the Church" (São Sebastião do Rio de Janeiro, 27.07.2013), *L'Osservatore Romano* [Polish edition] 44 (2013) nr 10: 19-24.

²¹ See R. Jaworski, "Trudności w pracy księdza", *Pastores* 3 (2003): 25-30.

²² See J. Maciąg, "Naucz się, czego będziesz nauczał", *Pastores* 4 (2011): 117-122.

attention and at the consequent preaching of the Gospel to those who distance themselves from it. The aim of the intellectual and of the pastoral dimensions of the formation is to acquire the ability to understand pastoral needs and to formulate conclusions which concern working with non-believers. It is important to acquire knowledge and skills which concern new forms and methods of working with non-believers.

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