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## The Apostolate of People with Disabilities in the Teaching of Pope John Paul II

The aim of this article is to present the issue of the apostolate of people with disabilities in the teaching of Pope John Paul II. The issues concerning the existence of such people have been numerously discussed by the Pope, also with regard to the life of the elderly and of the sick. The Pope grounded the apostolate of people with disabilities on anthropological bases, and based his considerations on philosophical and theological anthropology. The apostolate of people with disabilities results from the subjectivity of man, which is never denigrated by any bodily disability or by any intellectual disability. In his teaching John Paul II indicated the apostolate of the presence and of the example as well as the apostolate of suffering or of the prayer. He thought that they were of particular value in the eyes of God and had a substantial impact on other people.

**Key words:** disability, a person with a disability, apostleship, apostolate, John Paul II.

People with disabilities have always been in a significant position in the pastoral ministry of John Paul II. During his pontificate, the Holy See and the whole Catholic Church were engaged into the celebration of year 1981 as the International Year of Disabled Persons announced by the United Nations. One of the fruits of the year is the *Document of the Holy See for the International Year of Disabled Persons*, published by a few dicasteries. It is the first extensive document which holistically discusses the issue of the existence, social life as well as the vocation and mission of people with disabilities. In celebration of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, people with disabilities also celebrated their special day in Vatican. On that occasion people with disabilities and

their families took part in the liturgy held by the Pope; it consisted in cultural and religious commemorative gatherings with special prayers. During the celebrations, John Paul II delivered occasional homilies and speeches for them, which were mainly devoted to their dignity and their place in the Church and in the society. The Holy See engaged into the celebration of the European Year of People with Disabilities in 2003, the holiday established by the Council of Europe. During the pontificate of John Paul II, the then Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Health Care Workers organized international scientific conferences devoted to people with disabilities and to their pastoral care. They were devoted to people with intellectual disabilities and to those with eyesight disabilities. People with those disabilities took part in them. The participants met the Pope who addressed to them the special speech devoted to disability. What is more, the conferences were an occasion to address messages on the issue to the faithful as well as for the Holy See to publish final documents.

Pastoral  
Theology

The issue of disability was very significant in the teaching of John Paul II. The distinctive feature of the Pope's teaching with regard to disability is the fact that he addressed it not only to people with disabilities but also to the sick and to the elderly. The Pope often compared the conditions of disability, sickness or old age, considering them as having a lot features in common as they all result from suffering which is their common element. Every year the Pope published messages on the World Day of the Sick in which he discussed the issues of disabilities, sickness and old age. He indicated that these forms of suffering are often interconnected. The issue of disability was often present during the Pope's apostolic pilgrimages. In each of his pilgrimages the programme included a meeting with people with disabilities and with the sick; during these meetings the Pope addressed to them the occasional homilies or speeches. He also discussed the issue of disability during numerous occasional meetings with health care workers, volunteers and members of the associations which serve people with disabilities.

The issue of people with disabilities was interconnected with the issue of their apostolate, particularly in the context of their vocation. Apostolate is "the participation in the salvific mission of Christ, which takes place through participating in His priestly, prophetic and kingly office and in uniting with Christ through faith and love; the main aim of all of the actions is spreading the Kingdom of God"<sup>1</sup>. The focus of this article is to present the issue of apostolate realized by

<sup>1</sup> E. Weron, *Apostolstwo*, in: *Leksykon Teologii Pastoralnej*, ed. R. Kamiński, W. Przygoda, M. Fiałkowski, Lublin: Towarzystwo Naukowe KUL 2006, p. 61.

people with disabilities. The teaching of John Paul II is the source of the research. Furthermore, the author introduces the documents of the Church which regard the issue, the ones published during the pontificate of John Paul II, as well as the scientific studies on the subject. The aim and the source of the research require the assumed research methods which mainly include: the leading method, the monographic method and the other methods, involving the historical and the critical method, the comparative method, the analogy and the content analysis.

## The dignity of a person with a disability and disability in the teaching of John Paul II

Pastoral  
Theology

John Paul II was a philosopher and a theologian. His philosophical views can be perceived in the light of the concept of personalism. According to the Pope, dignity is the most important value of a human person and it is not comparable to any other value. Man is a value himself, he is also the greatest of the earthly creatures. Man is bestowed with humanity due to being man and it cannot be taken away from him in any way. Man himself is not able to get rid of his dignity<sup>2</sup>. Such an understanding of a human person and of his dignity has its consequences in the field of morality and in placing man in the material world and in the social life. The first consequence is the fact that every man is entitled to the dignity, regardless of his race, religion, sex, age or other features. All people have dignity which is the basis of the definition of *humanitas*.<sup>3</sup> Another consequence is that human dignity is man's attribute from the moment of conception till his death. Human life begins at the moment of conception therefore man is bestowed with his dignity from the very beginning of his existence. Therefore, John Paul II definitely supported protection of the human life at its every stage and he firmly opposed to the practice of abortion and euthanasia<sup>4</sup>. Furthermore, yet another consequence of the fact that each person is bestowed with dignity is the way people with disabilities are perceived. According to the Pope, the physical and mental condition

<sup>2</sup> John Paul II, Encyclical *Redemptor hominis*, no. 14.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. W. Chudy, *Sens filozoficzny kondycji człowieka niepełnosprawnego*, in: *Osoba niepełnosprawna i jej miejsce w społeczeństwie*, ed. D. Kornas-Biela, Lublin: RW KUL 1988, pp. 106-108.

<sup>4</sup> John Paul II, Message *Nietykalność życia każdej istoty ludzkiej* (Rome November 9, 2004), *L'Osservatore Romano* (Polish edition) [further: *OsRomPol*] 26 (2005) no. 2, pp. 37-38.

of man are incidental and they do not interfere with the essence of humanity. Therefore, people with disabilities are human beings to the same extent as the able-bodied and they possess dignity meant as an inalienable human trait. John Paul II taught about equal humanity of people with disabilities. Such a person, he taught, requires the same respect and treatment as any other person. Thus he opposed to the prenatal testing which aimed at detecting the foetal malformations and, as a consequence, at having an abortion<sup>5</sup>.

Dignity of every human person ensures that each person with a disability possesses the full extent of natural and established rights. He or she has the same rights in the social and ecclesial community as any able-bodied person. A person with a disability is entitled to all rights in the family and social life although for some people with disabilities the full participation in these fields of life is not possible<sup>6</sup>. John Paul II considered disability as a kind of a human weakness and people with disabilities as the weaker members of the society. Such a weakness – according to him – is a request to the society for help and assistance in order to enable people with disabilities to fully participate in the life of the society. The Pope was an advocate of revalidation and rehabilitation of people with disabilities in order to enable them to the most complete commitment in family, in society and in the Church. He thought it to be indispensable to shape their physical and mental abilities to the fullest and he suggested using all the currently available ways and means in order to achieve it<sup>7</sup>.

Although disability does not disrupt the structure of the human person and does not violate his dignity, however, it is a noticeable lack for man. This shortage in the physical or mental sphere seriously limits his opportunities of development and of his ability for undertaking any activity to a degree which is possible for other people. For a man with a disability it is the source of suffering, therefore John Paul II perceived such people as suffering. The Pope perceived the sick and the elderly in a similar way as their condition was compared by him to the condition of the disabled. It was the reason why he addressed such people in his teaching.

John Paul II presented disability as evil. It is the lack of the fullness of humanity – that is of the good that man is endowed with. In case of

<sup>5</sup> John Paul II, Encyclical *Evangelium vitae*, no. 3, pp. 14-15.

<sup>6</sup> John Paul II, Speech *Godność i apostołstwo ludzi cierpiących* (Rome April 27, 1994), *OsRomPol* 15 (1994) no. 8, pp. 38-40.

<sup>7</sup> John Paul II, Speech *W leczeniu nie zapominajcie o duchowych potrzebach człowieka* (Rome March 23, 2005), *OsRomPol* 26 (2005) no. 2, p. 41.

people with disabilities the lack means the inability to realize the fullness of developmental possibilities proper for man, which are available for the able-bodied. This inability and the resulting limitations, and in some cases also life threats or the full dependence on others are the source of suffering. The Pope addressed his message called “Ewangelia cierpienia” [the Gospel of suffering]<sup>8</sup> to people with disabilities and to other suffering. He invited such people to join their suffering with the suffering of Christ which He accepted to save the world. In such a way the suffering can mean engagement into His salvific work. The Pope further emphasized that overcoming evil is a duty. In case of disability and the resulting suffering, it influences the people who suffer from it as well as the people who accompany them, mainly the members of their families and friends, as well as the whole society who should come to their aid<sup>9</sup>.

Personal dignity tenable for people with disabilities indicates their full subjectivity. They are full-fledged members of the human and ecclesial communities, they possess all rights as well as the ability for active work. Through baptism they are bestowed with the vocation to build the community with God and to cooperate with Christ in realization of His salvific mission. This means calling for the active realization of the Christian vocation through deepening of the personal holiness and of apostolic activity in the Church and in the world. John Paul II clearly indicated that there is no vocation for suffering. It is only an accidental – in the philosophical aspect – feature of man which does not constitute his humanity or the dignity of a child of God. However, it significantly influences human existence, substantially modifying his condition in the human and ecclesial community. Therefore, John Paul II taught about the vocation for disability. Disability causes that a Christian who suffers from it, realizes his apostolate in a different way than the able-bodied one. Disability influences, depending on its type and degree, the methods and scope of the apostolic activity. Regardless of the type and degree of disability, all the baptised who suffer from disabilities, can realize the apostolate in a way proper for all of such conditions<sup>10</sup>.

<sup>8</sup> John Paul II, Apostolic letter *Salvifici doloris*, no. 25-27.

<sup>9</sup> John Paul II, Message *Ludzie najślabi i najbardziej potrzebujący w życiu społeczeństwa* (Rome January 5, 2004), OsRomPol 25 (2004) no. 4, pp. 16-18.

<sup>10</sup> John Paul II, Message *Miłość najwspanialszą formą ewangelizacji* (Rome December 5, 2001), OsRomPol 23 (2002) no. 3, pp. 8-9.

## The apostolate of presence and of the example

The analysis of the teaching of John Paul II leads to the conclusion that he considered the apostolate of presence to be the basic form of apostolate of people with disabilities. It is a form of apostolate which is realized in a spontaneous way. It has been present in the Church since the time of the Apostles. In the ancient times, the apostolate of presence was an important element of evangelization, particularly when people around them watched how Christians build relations based on mutual love. Brotherly love was for the then faithful the principle of the social life and the foundation of interpersonal relations. It was the contrast agent between the lifestyle of Christians and of pagans, which led the latter to asking questions about motivation and about practising it, as well as its source. The mutual love of Christians motivated their environment to ask questions and to act.

Pastoral  
Theology

John Paul II taught that the presence of people with disabilities provokes the environment to ask questions concerning the essence of humanity and the meaning of suffering and to help them. He noticed that many people inspired by the presence of such people in the society took the initiative aiming at providing disabled people with multiple support. Due to this inspiration, numerous forms of medical and social activity have been undertaken. Many special centres offering specific aid addressed for such people have been organized. These are centres of education, of schooling, of rehabilitation and of social care<sup>11</sup>. Furthermore, volunteering plays an important role here because due to volunteering people with disabilities are provided with material, psychological and spiritual aid. John Paul II called volunteering the school in which those engaged into providing aid learn to be sensitive to the needs of others. In this respect, the volunteering of young people who learn to offer others (in whatever condition they are) the emotional support and encouragement, empathy and the altruistic attitudes, is the most meaningful<sup>12</sup>.

The presence of people with disabilities is an inspiration for Christians for a deepened reflection on the meaning of suffering in the human life. The faithful try to see in the life condition of people with disabilities the suffering of Christ and in the disabled – the presence of the Saviour. Therefore, providing spiritual aid and psychological

<sup>11</sup> John Paul II, Speech *Medycyna a prawa człowieka* (Rome July 7, 2000), *OsRomPol* 21 (2000) no. 9, pp. 35-36; cf. W. Przygoda, *Posługa charytatywna Kościoła wobec osób niepełnosprawnych*, "Homo Dei" 73 (2004) no. 1, p. 60.

<sup>12</sup> John Paul II, Reflection before the Angelus prayer *Rok Wolontariatu* (Rome January 7, 2001), *OsRomPol* 22 (2001) no. 3, p. 40.

and material aid, they try to lead the disabled to the meeting with the suffering Christ. It is meant to help the disabled in understanding the meaning of suffering and to provide meaning to their further life. At the natural level of activity, Christians aim at providing relief to the suffering, while at the supernatural level, they are to lead them to salvation<sup>13</sup>.

However, John Paul II noticed that the presence of people with disabilities also evokes negative emotions. In some people it evokes the need for eliminating people with disabilities, especially those who are burdened with significant suffering which particularly results from an additional illness or dependence on others. Some people suggest introducing euthanasia with regard to such disabled persons; it is motivated with pity or care for the good of a suffering person. The real motivation is difficult to determine. There are opinions that propagating euthanasia is motivated by economic reasons because the care for such people is costly and it requires participation of many people from the medical and social sector. John Paul II opposed to the use of euthanasia. He thought that this opinion was favoured by those for whom the dignity of a human person and of the human life were not the highest values. These aims and propagating abortion promote the emergence of the “culture of death” which is contrary to the “culture of life” rooted in God’s creation and in the salvific act of Jesus Christ<sup>14</sup>.

The presence of people with disabilities who maintain their roles or take on new social roles exerts significant influence on the social environment. It mainly refers to those among the disabled who realize their vocation for marriage and family life, who work professionally and lead an active cultural and social life. The attitudes of such people are of interest and they are often admired by their environment which leads to respect. Their presence and visible testimony are important for other people with disabilities. They can become a reason for the creative acceptance of one’s disability and an inspiration for undertaking activities in their family and in the social sphere. The engagement of people with disabilities is also an inspiration for the able-bodied. It allows for the critical view of one’s life adversities and suffering which are relatively lesser in degree than the ones experienced by people with disabilities. The presence of such people strengthens the motivation for sacrifice and for more intense activity in marriage and

<sup>13</sup> John Paul II, Speech *Spieszmy z pomocą cierpiącym* (Rome February 11, 2004), *OsRomPol* 25 (2004) no. 4, pp. 22-23.

<sup>14</sup> John Paul II Apostolic letter *Salvifici doloris*, no. 26-27.

in the social life<sup>15</sup>. It is valuable in particular in the current culture conditions mainly created by people who are egocentric and not used to accepting sacrifice. It chiefly concerns young people who are less and less eager to seek for ideals in the spiritual sphere and more and more eager to assume the consumerist lifestyle<sup>16</sup>.

The apostolate of the example is similar to the apostolate of presence. They differ from each other because in the apostolate of presence the disabled person does not want to be visible to others while in the apostolate of the example such a person assumes the consciously defined attitudes and behaviours in order to present others the examples of behaviours and values which they represent. The presented values and results are to be shared in the apostolate of the example as the conscious and free-will activity. It indicates that for the person who assumes this attitude, the addressees of the activity are important and that he or she is not indifferent to their fate. Moreover, it indicates that the presented values which are transmitted to others are important<sup>17</sup>.

The apostolate of the example of people with disabilities is addressed to everybody from their environment, however, in the first place it refers to the people who are important for some reason. These are mainly family members, friends and other nearest and dearest. The apostolate mainly concerns the dignity of a human person and the value of life of a person with a disability. People with disabilities indicate to others how to live despite limitations and how to cope with suffering. What is more, their good example indicates the perspective to others for whom it is difficult to find way in the condition of disability and to get subjectively engaged into the life of the human and ecclesial communities<sup>18</sup>.

<sup>15</sup> John Paul II, Speech *Jesteście darem dla Kościoła i świata* (Prague April 26, 1997), OsRomPol 18 (1997) no. 8-9, pp. 14-15.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. K. Świąś, *Aktualny kontekst społeczno-kulturowy jako zagrożenie dla wiary*, in: *Duszpasterstwo wobec kryzysu wiary*, ed. W. Przygoda, K. Świąś, Lublin: Wydawnictwo KUL 2013, pp. 72-77; 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: Wydawnictwo i Księgarnia GOTÓW 2018, pp. 141-150.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. J. Majka, *Świadectwo chrześcijańskie jako element ewangelizacji*, in: *Ewangelizacja*, ed. J. Krucina, Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Wrocławskiej Księgarni Archidiecezjalnej 1980, p. 88.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. D. Lipiec, *Świadectwo życia ludzi chorych, starszych i niepełnosprawnych*, in: *Świadectwo w służbie ewangelizacji*, ed. W. Przygoda, Lublin: Wydawnictwo KUL 2012, pp. 223-225.



## The apostolate of suffering and of the prayer

Disability and its results in the individual and social life of people suffering from it is perceived as suffering and is accompanied by the question about its meaning and significance<sup>19</sup>. Suffering reflected as damnation became a blessing in God's Son. He came to earth and became man in order to save humanity from the sin's dominion and its results that is from suffering and death<sup>20</sup>. The "Gospel of suffering" was fully presented on the cross<sup>21</sup>. In the sacrifice on the cross which was indicated by the Father, Christ recognized the way to salvation of humanity. He stepped on this path and announced to His apostles that they would share His sacrifice. In the perspective of the way of the cross, we should perceive the life paths of people with disabilities as they are marked by suffering<sup>22</sup>.

John Paul II indicated that people with disabilities are called to join their suffering with the passion of Christ. It thus becomes their sacrifice which conditions its fruitfulness. In the suffering of the Saviour, these people find the meaning of their pain. They draw strength and motivation from Him in order to try to accept their condition and to trust the will of the Father and to submit to it; they also take from Him the courage to offer one's suffering for other people. Christ's sacrifice on the cross bore the fruit of salvation and so does the sacrifice of the disabled. Entering this mystery allows people with disabilities – in connection with Christ – to offer their suffering for others<sup>23</sup>.

Participation in the passion and death of Jesus Christ means co-operation in His work of salvation of man. People with disabilities can – following the example of Saint Paul the Apostle – through their life united with Him, fill up what is lacking (cf. Col 1: 24). Calling such people for the cooperation with Him, Christ allows them to participate in carrying the cross. He enables them to it through the development of God's grace in them, through giving meaning and value to their

<sup>19</sup> John Paul II, Speech *Chrystus i cierpienie* (Rio de Janeiro October 4, 1997), *L'Ossevatore Romano* (Polish version) 18 (1997) no. 12, p. 16.

<sup>20</sup> John Paul II, Speech *Cierpienie i śmierć nie są ostatecznym przeznaczeniem człowieka* (Tours September 21, 1996), in: John Paul II. *Ewangelia cierpienia*, Kraków: Znak 1997, pp. 197-198.

<sup>21</sup> John Paul II, Apostolic letter *Salvifici doloris*, no. 25.

<sup>22</sup> John Paul II, Speech *Godność i apostołstwo ludzi cierpiących* (Rome April 27, 1994), *OsRomPol* 15 (1994) no. 8, p. 38.

<sup>23</sup> John Paul II, Message *Tajemnicę cierpienia wyjaśnia tylko Chrystus* (Mexico January 24, 1999), *OsRomPol* 20 (1999) no. 4, p. 26.

existence and through empowering their effective engagement into the life of the human and ecclesial community.

According to John Paul II, the "Gospel of suffering" shown to Jesus' disciples on the cross is possible to understand only in the light of faith. Faith enables entering into this difficult mystery and attempting to accept it. The condition under which the suffering can be accepted is the awareness of being chosen by God and being bestowed with the special gift in the form of the painful experience. This gift is difficult to recognize and remains for man an unrecognized mystery. Thus people with disabilities have difficulties in recognizing this gift as the genuine God's love. Recognizing it, however, leads to the intimate meeting with God and to filling one's existence with the salvific love of Christ. Owing to this gift, people with disabilities can reach the inner peace and joy<sup>24</sup>.

Pastoral  
Theology

Recognizing disability as a gift from God and acceptance of it are difficult for man, therefore the Holy Spirit comes to aid in the process of accepting the "Gospel of suffering". In Him, people with disabilities can fully discover their dignity and the value of their lives in the light of the Christ's sacrifice on the cross. The activity of the Holy Spirit enables them to see themselves not as the victims meant to suffer but as the ones called for sanctifying themselves on the path of obstacles. The activity of the Third Person of the Holy Trinity brings the fruit of discovering the call to sanctify others. Owing to His gifts, a man with disabilities participates in the work of saving man and the world. He is enabled to introduce his pain into the suffering of Christ, and also to bring strength to others to renew their lives and to experience joy given from the Risen Christ<sup>25</sup>.

This joy is not a substitute of consolation, which is to distract from the disability and from the suffering connected with it, neither it is a way of escape from the difficult reality. It results from the joy which comes from the participation with Christ in His salvific work. The Third Person of the Holy Trinity makes it possible for a person with disabilities to experience being privileged, and having the greater right to be with God. Therefore the Holy Spirit appears as the Comforter for the people burdened with disabilities<sup>26</sup>.

<sup>24</sup> John Paul II, Speech *Ewangelia cierpienia źródłem nadziei* (Rome February 11, 2000), OsRomPol 21 (2000) no. 4, p. 24.

<sup>25</sup> John Paul II, Speech *Chrystus przyjmuje waszą pomoc w dziele zbawienia* (Budapest August 20, 1991), OsRomPol 12 (1991) no. 9-10, p. 29.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. D. Kornas-Biela, *Osoba niepełnosprawna, chora, cierpiąca: nauczanie Jana Pawła II*, in: *Rodzina: źródło życia i szkoła miłości*, Lublin: TN KUL 2000, pp. 364-365.

Cooperation with Christ in His salvific work allows for sacrifice of the suffering for others. It thus becomes a gift and, similarly to the prayer, connects man with God. According to the commentators of the teaching of John Paul II, the sacrifice of suffering strengthens the power of the prayer. The greater the suffering and the more eager the donator, the more meaningful it becomes in the eyes of God. It is thus the sign of faith, of hope and of love which is reflected as a gift of suffering and the prayer<sup>27</sup>.

The prayer, similarly to suffering, when offered by people with disabilities, becomes a gift for the Church and for man. It places the givers in the first line of those who participate in the salvation of the world. The prayer combined with suffering is the reflection of communication and solidarity with Christ Who is suffering on the cross. While combined with His suffering, the gift of his or her life achieves the salvific meaning<sup>28</sup>.

## Conclusion

The analysis of the teaching of John Paul II indicates that he treated the issue of the apostolate of people with disabilities in a way proper for other issues which he discussed during his pastoral ministry. His message for these people and for those who provided aid to them was rooted in the anthropological basis. He explained what the personal human dignity of a person with disabilities consists in, what is the source of the value of this life and what is the meaning of this life. He indicated that the natural law, which is rooted in the human nature and which can be manipulated and overused by the human-made laws, is the basis for the human rights. John Paul II combined philosophical anthropology with theological anthropology, particularly the biblical one, receiving a coherent and holistic image of man who is a value in himself in the natural perspective and a child of God in the supernatural perspective.

In the teaching regarding people with disabilities and addressed to such people, he indicated their subjectivity in the Church and in society. The important manifestation of it is reflected in the apostolate meant as the engagement into the realization of the salvific mission of Jesus Christ Who was sent by His Father in the power of the Holy

<sup>27</sup> Cf. R. Rak, *Chrześcijańska postawa wobec cierpienia*, "Śląskie Studia Historyczno-Teologiczne" 33 (2000), pp. 267-270.

<sup>28</sup> John Paul II, Speech *Różaniec waszą modlitwą* (Rome February 11, 2003), *Os-RomPol* 24 (2003) no. 4, p. 44.

Spirit. John Paul II focused on certain forms of it. He underlined the value of the apostolate of presence and the apostleship connected with the example. They initiate the reflection in people from the environment of those with disabilities, particularly with regard to human dignity, to the meaning and the value of this life. He devoted much of his teaching to the apostolate of suffering and of the prayer connected with it. The prayer and the suffering have the supernatural value, and when offered with intention, they can become part of the salvific work of Christ and thus be a gift for man and for the world.

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