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A Person with a Disability in the Church: The Concept of the Active Church – the Objective Dimension

For a person with a disability the activity in the Church depends not only on the personal convictions but also on the external factors which are independent from him or her but which condition the possibility of being active in the Church to a greater extent. The article focuses on the analysis of the interviews conducted with people with physical disabilities, with the deaf, with the blind, with those with full or partial mental disability as well as with the caregivers of people with disabilities.

The aim of the article is to find answers to the following questions: which spheres of the pastoral practice determine the inclusive Church? To what extent can people with disabilities be active in the Church and to what extent do they want it? The article discusses the original Concept of the Active Church (KAK) in the objective dimension. The concept constitutes the answer to the above-mentioned questions.

KAK in the subjective dimension includes the spheres in which people with disabilities can and want to be active in the Church.

Key words: a person with a disability, the Church, the Active Church, inclusion, affiliation.

Introduction. A person with a disability in the Church

The teaching of the contemporary Church indicates the need for including people with disabilities into the life of the community of the Church. Regardless of the kind and degree of disability, the faithful manifest certain expectations from the Church and this Church, through certain activities and initiatives, is inclusive for everybody,

and She activates the parish community and, through the integration of all the faithful, strengthens the sense of community and affiliation. The attempts to define the model of the inclusive Church accepting people with disabilities, were described by, among others: J.O. Enyinnaya¹, Wen-Pin Leow², J.M. Hull³, E.W. Carter⁴ (2021), Rea Dennis and Trish Murdoch⁵, Mhelle LaRocque and Rick Eigenbrook⁶. In the practice of the ecclesial communities we can also find the attempts of implementation of the special projects which regard the correct and complete inclusion of the people with disabilities into the life of the community of the Church.

However, neither the integration nor the inclusion are enough to be determined as the satisfying feeling of being a part of the community. Eric W. Carte noticed the fact in a right way saying that the old concept of integration is now replaced by the concepts of inclusion or involvement. However it turns out that neither of these terms properly explains the need to belong. Man's true desire is to experience something more than integration or inclusion. Man wants the full belonging. The writer explains that the Church used to tend to integrate but nowadays She aims at inclusion and enabling. However, it seems that neither of these concepts reflect what is really important in this matter. Man wants to experience something more than only integration or inclusion. People with disabilities want to experience genuine belonging⁷. It should be emphasised that the need for belonging is not "an unusual need". In reality it is an ordinary need of the majority of people, also of those with disabilities. However, belonging is a concept difficult to define. It is immediately felt when we lack it, but defining the feeling is much more difficult. Eric W. Carter identified ten dimensions of belonging which condition achieving the satisfying level of belonging

¹ J.O. Enyinnaya, *The Church's Ministry to People with Disability*, in: *Going and Making Disciples of all Nations*, Ogbomoso 2016, pp. 149-155.

² L. Wen-Pin, *Enabling Hearts: A Primer for Disability-Inclusive Churches*, "Disability Ministry in Asia" 2021, vol. 1, Graceworks.

³ J.M. Hull, *Disability: The Inclusive Church Resource*, London 2014.

⁴ E.W. Carter, *A Place of Belonging: Including Individuals With Significant Disabilities in Faith Communities*, "Inclusive Practices" 1(1) 2022, pp. 6-12.

⁵ R. Dennis, T. Murdoch, *Disability Focus Groups: A Strategy for Including People with Disability in Parishes, Religion*, "Disability & Health" 2013, vol. 5/4, pp. 45-59.

⁶ M. LaRocque, R. Eigenbrook, *Community Access: A Survey of Congregational Accessibility for People with Disabilities*, "Religion, Disability & Health" 2005, vol. 9/1, pp. 55-66.

⁷ E.W. Carter, *Research on Disability and Congregational Inclusion: What We Know and Where We Might Go*, "Journal of Disability & Religion".

of a person with a disability. – or even of everyone – to the community of the faithful, although in practice this idea applies to the presence in any other group and can be a universal concept. In the terms defined by Carter, the proper building of the feeling of belonging to a community consists of ten dimensions: present, invited, welcomed, known, accepted, supported, cared for, befriended, needed, loved. Belonging is the source of feeling “in” and “for” the group or community which conditions the full belonging and engagement. Pope Francis writes that: “Numerous reports point to the lack of appropriate structures and ways of accompanying persons with disabilities, and call for new ways of welcoming their contribution and promoting their participation: in spite of its own teachings, the Church is in danger of imitating the way society casts them aside”.

Methodology

The method of synthesis used in the article is based on the acquired results of the sociological research conducted among people with disabilities and their caregivers throughout the whole Poland.

The nationwide qualitative research (using the Focused Group Interview FGI) was conducted among people suffering from disabilities (people with physical disabilities, the deaf, the blind and the visually-impaired, those with full or partial mental disability) as well as among the caregivers of people with disabilities. The researchers used the selection of an intentional sample. The research was focused on providing the maximum volatility in the sample, which allowed for capturing variation and diversity within the research field. The assumption allowed for understanding the areas of activity in the religious life of people suffering from various disabilities and with different intensity of them, living in various parts of the country. Due to the subject of the research, it was assumed that only the faithful of the Roman Catholic Church would be taking part in the quantitative research. At the same time, the degree of religiousness among the participants of the research was not taken into account or evaluated because the degree of religiousness was not the subject of the discussion.

The research material consisted of a transcript of 49 in-depth interviews conducted in five groups of people: with the deaf (the number of conducted interviews – 7), with the physically disabled – (the number of conducted interviews – 4), with the blind – (the number of conducted interviews – 5), with developmental disorders (the number of

the interviews – 24), with the caregivers of the people with disabilities (the number of the interviews – 9).

The interviews were considered to be the tool for getting to know the way in which the interviewees perceive the issues which constituted the subject of the interviews. The conducted interviews enabled the participants to present the issues from their perspective and with their own words.

During the elaboration on the transcript of the interviews, the researchers indicated the following major topics discussed in the interviews: faith in God, the prayer, the Holy Mass, sacraments, activity in the liturgical service, activity in the parish communities, the attitudes of parishioners, the expected attitudes of parishioners, the clergy, the obstacles to the active participation in the religious and community life.

The researchers used the following research tools: coding the meanings, condensation of the meanings, categorization of the meanings.

The Concept of the Active Church – the objective dimension (further on: also KAK)

The active Church in the objective dimension is built on three pillars: the priest – the person with a disability – the environment consisting of the able-bodied people⁸. The responsibility for inclusion is particularly emphasised, not only with regard to the priest but also to all the members of the community of the Church and – which is obvious, to the very person with a disability. However, the objective dimension constitutes the foundation on which all the important dimensions of the presence in the community of the Church are based.

The Concept of the Active Church (KAK) aims at determining the full model of inclusion and belonging of the people with disabilities in such dimensions as: pastoral care, architecture, liturgy and sacraments, community, and belonging, catechesis and communication. It is also worth to indicate that KAK focuses on shifting the full responsibility for the presence of the people with disabilities in the Church from the priest to the person with a disability and to other faithful alike.

Pastoral care

The interviewees assign the key role in building the idea of the Active Church to the priests and expect them to be engaged and to take

⁸ Zielińska-Król K., Referat: *Koncepcja Aktywnego Kościoła*; Konferencja: *Niepełnosprawność – zadanie czy wyzwanie we współczesnym świecie?*, UKSW, Warszawa, November 2022.

initiatives to create an inclusive parish. Their activities directed at including everyone to take various activities in accordance with their needs and possibilities in the broad scope of the functioning of the parish community, are necessary for building the sense of belonging. Pastoral care is addressed to all the parishioners and it aims at creating the integrated formation, adjusted and available, which aims at including all the able-bodied and disabled into the main stream of the parish community life. Although the interviewees with disabilities perceive priests as organizers and initiators of the Active Church, we must bear in mind that – as it was mentioned above – the initiative should reach both the able-bodied and the disabled who take on the tasks resulting from KAK alike.

Architecture

The Active Church in the context of architecture focuses on providing such structural and organizational conditions which will enable: the full accessibility to the places of worship and prayer (this regards e.g. the proper width of entrances, drives for the wheelchairs (or the lifts), access to the adapted spaces and methods enabling preparation for and receiving sacraments, materials in alternative formats (e.g. Braille's with regard to the principles of a text which is easy to read and to understand and which is available in electronic form).

In the situation when it is impossible to adapt the space (e.g. limitations resulting from the custody of the conservator of monuments), it is necessary to promote such strategies of support which will enhance independence and self-reliance of each individual instead of preserving their dependence on others or their isolation. The strategies of creating inclusive space of the parish consist in taking into account various needs of parishioners. In the contemporary world the idea of normalization of the life of people with disabilities has its own practical implications in the form of the universal designing. In this context, the accessibility of the churches is also emphasized. For obvious reasons the universal designing will not be applied in all churches, however, in case of renovating, building or adaptation of the buildings used for religious purposes – the places of worship, it is particularly necessary to implement.

Liturgy and sacraments

In the dimension of the liturgy and sacraments, the interviewees clearly indicated the conditions which determine the level of presence

and engagement of a person with disabilities in the community of the Church. The necessary condition for that is the adaptation of the communication (with special regard to the adaptation of the songbooks, of the Holy Scripture, of the prayer books and of other printed texts), the possibility to use the translators of the sign language or displaying the subtitles on the screen in such a way as to enable reading to the people with special needs. Participation of people with disabilities in the Holy Mass, receiving the sacraments and belonging to religious communities constitute the foundations of the Active Church which help to satisfy not only the spiritual needs but also the social needs, – being a part of a community, sharing experiences, experiencing belonging in the full sense⁹.

Popularization of activities directed at the development of the social responsibility and citizens' initiatives enables to obtain the support from associations and foundations which provide service for people with disabilities. In this context it regards not the organizational aid but rather the conceptual aid, creating the forms of inclusion, initiating the inclusive methods of participating in the ministered pastoral services and in the community service.

Catechesis

Catechesis is the generally understood work which consists in the whole pastoral activity that is the formation of religious attitudes, catechization through the preparation for receiving sacraments, participating in the worship, in the days of retreat, pilgrimage¹⁰. The analysis of the interviews leads to the conclusions that the offer of KAK assumes taking particular care for this type of catechization of children, of young people and adults with disabilities, with the particular emphasis on the catechization of the deaf, of those physically disabled, of the blind, of the ones with the impaired intellectual norms and of those with developmental disorders.

While implementing the contents of the teaching and religious education, educators should make use of the potential created by the environment of the student, person as well as by the material and didactic base of the school and of the parish. The development of the religious life of the person according to the principle that everyone, regardless of their limitations, is capable of development in their holiness, should be

⁹ N.H. Annandale, E.W. Carter, *Disability and theological education: A North American study*, "Theological Education" 48(2) 2014, pp. 83-102.

¹⁰ Stopikowski A., *Duszpasterstwo osób głuchoniemych na przykładzie archidiecezji częstochowskiej w latach 1952-2012*, Kraków 2016, p. 60.

the most important criterion for the selection of the content. The implementation of the content is connected with the favourable educational conditions which enable discovering of faith. While implementing this task, it is essential to get to know the environment of the person with disabilities, particularly the parents and the family environment. It is also necessary to take into account the unique individual cognitive and developmental criterion of the person who is eager to participate in the catechesis or/and in receiving the sacraments. This concerns the intellectual potential of the person with a disability but also the way they experience their faith, and, in particular cases, the regard to the faith and religious attitudes of the parents / caregivers of the person with a disability or of the community to which they belong, as this may be the important aspect of the implementation. The Concept of the Active Church indicates that the syllabus of catechization should include the full account of the individual pace of development and of the cognitive and perception abilities of a disabled person.

Community and belonging

The statements of the interviewees who experience disabilities indicate that the feeling of belonging to a community is extremely important in building the bonds and integrity with the group, however, not in the sphere of the dedicated pastoral care but also for the universal pastoral care. The idea of the Active Church indicates initiating, especially by priests, the activity which aims at facilitating it for people with disabilities to be able to function as independent individuals, particularly in the parish. The surveyed group of the faithful expects the attitude of openness and flexibility of their priests and of other members of the parish, along with the positive atmosphere which would motivate them to regularly participate in the liturgy and in other activities in the parish. The Active Church is also a place which is inclusive and encouraging for its members to initiate organizing various activities for the people with disabilities and by them as well.

On the one hand, people with various disabilities are the recipients of the initiative of formulating a wide variety of classes which correspond with certain kind of disability, however, on the other hand, they can and want to be the source of inspiration and help for others. Many disabled people are bestowed with extraordinary gifts which can be used in their community and for the community.

3.6 Communication and openness

People with disabilities often suffer from the so called “social suffering” – experiencing loneliness and rejection¹¹. On the one hand, it results from the limited possibilities to make spontaneous social contacts. On the other hand, the functional consequences of the dysfunctions they suffer from, such as: impeded mobility, communication difficulty influence their possibility to realize certain roles. The Active Church treats a person with disabilities in the category of “one of us” and not as “one of them”¹². It is also re-emphasising the formula that a person with disabilities can also be a giver and not only a taker of all the forms of action, support, help and engagement. For those taking part in the research, the personal relations with priests and with animators of evangelizing groups are of particular importance. The genuine engagement of priests, of the leaders of communities and of prayer groups into the matters of people with disabilities can be the source of their religious life development. The man who experiences suffering and loneliness, who is aware of their infirmity in many life situations, who faces rejection or isolation, and at the same time is trying to develop a positive identity – needs other people who would accept him the way he is, who would give him care, respect, liking and their genuine presence.

KAK is the answer to the need for an emphatic listener, for an aware witness who would firstly understand the negative emotions (dismay, anxiety suffering), and later on will provide skilful spiritual guidance and will become the leader of creating the inclusive space. The process of adaptation to the limited bodily physical ability is multiphase, filled with numerous dramatic situations, emotionally difficult. In the Active Church, people with disabilities who are undergoing this process can use the help of psychologists and spiritual therapists. The genuine interest, emotional support, readiness to listen and to understand, indicating the forms of aid which are adequate to the experienced situation, are a foundation for the development in faith, and often the reason to remain in the Church. In the context of initiating communication, it is worth to re-emphasise the parallel role of the other members of the community and of the disabled members as well. They are equally invited and responsible for the satisfying and efficient communication as well as for building the sense of belonging.

¹¹ Ż. Stelter, *Cierpienie a utrata sprawności*, Poznań 2010, p. 2, <https://repozytorium.amu.edu.pl/bitstreams/bb54bc4f-646c-4b53-aecf-7a3c98fe78cd/download>

¹² See D. Lipiec, *Przeciwdziałanie marginalizacji niepełnosprawnych w życiu wspólnotowym Kościoła*, “Polonia Sacra” 22/4(53) 2018, pp. 135-149.

Conclusions

The analysis of the conducted interviews with people with disabilities allows to conclude that the degree of engagement of the life of the parish, the sense of belonging to the community of the Church, spiritual development and growing in faith to a great extent depend not only on the level of their religiousness or on the degree of trust in the Church but also on the atmosphere of openness, on infrastructural availability and on the proper “offer” in the Church. Many faithful with various dysfunctions can manifest certain dualism; sometimes they separate their faith and spirituality from the physical participation in a devotion, often deciding to participate in the worship through watching of listening to a TV or a radio broadcast or visit the church after the time of the Mass. On the other hand, their needs of the physical presence in the community of the Church can easily be noticed. Such an attitude partly results from the specific nature of their physical and mental limitations, however, it seems crucial for them to feel invited to the community. Such an invitation results not only in getting through with a message. The invitation is also connected with the message that the presence of the person is expected and awaited. The invitation is personal, targeted, nonrandom, it allows to feel that the invited person and his or her presence is essential.

It should be emphasised that the activity of people with disabilities in the Church results on an equal footing from the initiative of priests, of the whole community of the Church as well as of the people with disabilities themselves. Priests, through their activity and their attitudes, create the positive atmosphere enabling the presence of this group of faithful in the religious devotions. The members of the community, while observing the priests’ activity and leadership, their openness and understanding for the people who suffer from disabilities, often follow the message and change their own attitudes into more positive ones. All in all, the people with disabilities also have their tasks which enable but also compulsorily include the responsibility for determining their place in the community of the Church.

This means that everybody (the able-bodied and the disabled) can be the addressees of the activity of others, but also, that they themselves – to the best of their abilities – have the right or even the duty, to get engaged into the life of the community of the parish and in its dynamics. At the same time the Church is obliged to provide the conditions and possibilities of various ways of involvement within the range:

- accessibility and participation in liturgies, devotions and receiving sacraments;

- every basic function;
- the parish and sacramental catechesis;
- engagement in the parish prayer, the caregiving, educational, cultural, social and other groups;
- inclusion into the entities and teams connected with the functioning of the parish;
- access to information and the possibility to communicate, taking into account the participation of priests, of people with disabilities and of the able-bodied.

According to Amadeusz Krause's apt comment, "the gravity" of the contemporary marginalization is transferred towards taking responsibility for one's own fate. The negative social marking caused by external factors, which are independent from an individual, and which include disability, diminishes. The factors which influence social exclusion are conditioned by the society to a lesser extent, and to a greater extent it depends from the individual competence (resourcefulness, the ability to cope with crises). Therefore, we can assume that it is not the environment that marginalizes an individual but an individual contributes to it himself to some extent. It emphasises the role and responsibilities of people with disabilities for the participation and activity in the community of the Church as well as the responsibility for the effective communication of their needs, expectations and abilities.

Building the Church which is open and inclusive for everybody and which is hospitable to everybody alike, is the more important as it assumes the responsibility for all the members. It is worth to emphasise the words of Pope Francis that disability "that we exist as an *us* and not a *them*"¹³, we are convinced about it

whenever disability, whether temporary or due to natural aging, affects ourselves or someone for whom we care. Then we begin to look at reality with new eyes and we see the need to break down even those barriers that at first seemed insignificant. Nothing, however, can detract from our certainty that no disability – temporary, acquired or permanent – can change the fact that we are all children of the one Father and enjoy the same dignity. The Lord loves us all with the same tender, fatherly and unconditional love¹⁴.

In the Church they should have their own place to which they are invited. Building the activity of people with disabilities in the Church

¹³ Francis, *Orędzie na Międzynarodowy Dzień Osób Niepełnosprawnych*, 2022, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/messages/pont-messages/2022/documents/20221203_messaggio-disabilita.html

¹⁴ Ibidem.

not only creates a more inclusive religious environment but also promotes the idea of a community which includes the variety and cares for the needs of all its members.

The suggested Concept of the Active Church, in the whole range of the described spheres, is the answer to the needs indicated by people with disabilities. This concept can become the foundation for building a proper model of the presence and activity of people with disabilities in the community of the Church and it will implement the Pope's idea of the "hospitable home".

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