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The “Quality of Human Life” in the Age of Pandemic – Polish Perspective ,Kakovost človeškega življenja’ v času pandemije – poljska perspektiva

Abstract: It seems that the time of the pandemic has completely changed the pattern of human behavior and contributed to the reevaluation of life priorities. Until now, the busy, consumerist post-industrial society suddenly had to stop and take care of weaker and sick individuals. In my article, I justify that many actions introduced on the initiative of the governments from different countries, result from the thought for the quality of every human life. The world, which so far focused only on quality of life, suddenly emphasizes the essence of every human life, regardless of age or disability. In the text, I draw attention to the fact that many activities in the era of a pandemic are consistent with the Catholic social teaching, which many are not aware of.

Keywords: quality of human life, pandemic, coronavirus, postindustrial society, value of human life

Povzetek: Zdi se, da je čas pandemije popolnoma spremenil vzorec človekovega vedênja in prispeval k prevrednotenju življenjskih prioritet. Doslej zaposlena, potrošniška postindustrijska družba se je morala nenadoma ustaviti ter poskrbeti za šibkejše in bolne posameznike. V članku utemeljujem mnenje, da so številni ukrepi, uvedeni na pobudo vlad različnih držav, posledica skrbi za kakovost vsakega človeškega življenja. Svet, ki se je doslej osredotočal le na kakovost življenja, nenadoma poudarja bistvo vsakega človeškega življenja – in to ne glede na starost ali invalidnost. Opozarjam še na dejstvo, da so številne dejavnosti v času pandemije skladne s katoliškim družbenim naukom, česar se mnogi ne zavedajo.

Ključne besede: kakovost človeškega življenja, pandemija, koronavirus, postindustrijska družba, vrednost človeškega življenja

1. Introduction

“The postmodern world in which we live is characterized by the rejection of traditional values and certainties as well as the adoption of new, ever-changing points of reference.” (Bortkiewicz 2017, 81) The time of a pandemic, for members of

communities around the world, is a time of many changes. Interpersonal relations have changed, work took a different mode, and free time began to be celebrated in a previously unknown way. Lockdown also had a huge impact on the religious sphere: on the mode, form, and frequency of religious practices. In connection with the pandemic, in public space, as well as during private conversations, more and more people talked about what really mattered in life. It seems that all of a sudden, people began to pay more attention to interpersonal relationships and material possessions lost their importance.

It seems that the difficult time of the pandemic made it possible to highlight everything that is crucial in the Christian moral dimension: concern for human relationships, instead of concern for material goods; care for every human life, regardless of age or health condition; social solidarity, interstate solidarity.

In this article, I would like to present those aspects of human activities that emerged during the pandemic, and which are consistent with Catholic moral teaching. I would like to emphasize that the once rushing, post-industrial societies, for which only the growth of gross domestic product mattered, suddenly stopped, announced a full or partial lockdown only (or maybe as much as) in order to protect the elderly and less immune to the side effects of coronavirus. In the face of the pandemic, neighborhood help started, mainly for the elderly.

A lot of members of society began to put the value of life as a priority. Consequently, the struggle for material goods and the quality of human life at the highest possible level was forgotten.

This text is the aftermath of a speech lectured at the International Congress of the European Society for Catholic Theology at Osnabrück University in Germany. The Congress was held in August 2021 and was entitled "Creation. Transformation. Theology."

2. Care for the "Quality of Life" in Post-industrial Society

Moral issues concerning human life have always posed many dilemmas. The Great Economic Crisis, two world wars, and then the reconstruction of damaged economies, the creation of a new world order, in which one of the key determinants was the level of economic development, contributed to the perception of social welfare in economic terms. Their number increased even more with the advent of new technologies (Rokicka 2014). The issue of "quality of life" goes beyond the theological and moral views related to political, social, and economic development, especially with the development of highly developed countries. After the Great Depression, Western countries were found in a period of prosperity and economic growth. At a time when technological development was gaining momentum, John Kenneth Galbraith formulated the concept of "quality of life" in the early 1960s.

The concept of "quality of life" leads to a multiplicity of ways of understanding this theory and inconsistencies in its operationalization. According to Marta Pe-

telewicz, the matter is additionally complicated by the presence, and what is worse, the unreflective use in scientific publications of terms synonymous or treated as synonymous with the concept of quality of life. These include: standard of living, well-being, life satisfaction, life satisfaction as well luck (Petewicz and Drabowicz 2016).

Measuring quality of life brings many challenges (Carr, Higginson and Robinson 2002, 17). According to Antoni Bartoszek, research on "quality of life" carried out in two current results in two types of definition: the first one is defined as the theoretical and cultural trend, showing, and analyzing the multidimensionality and multidimensionality of the "quality of life", often referring to philosophical analyzes. In the second trend of research, called technical and methodological, one would like to describe the "quality of life" with measurable quantities that enable its measurement, carried out by numerous research centers, national and international. This approach, as Rev. Professor Bartoszek writes, is associated with the problem of finding adequate indicators of "quality of life." When creating the entire range of these indicators, it was obvious from the beginning that one should go beyond the previously considered indicators of economic and economic growth (Bartoszek 2002, 312). An important conclusion from Antoni Bartoszek's considerations is as follows: the aforementioned trends over the "quality of life" cannot be completely separate. As the author of the article, he claims that the search for adequate indicators of the "quality of life" and the subjective assessment of living conditions will always be associated with deeper, philosophical questions, such as: who a human being is, what is human life. Many studies state that the question of the "quality of life" ultimately leads to the question of the "vision of life", for "the meaning of life" (313).

Concern for the quality of human life also seems to be justified from the theological and moral perspective. The social teaching of the Church noticed the human need for qualitative development very quickly. Already at the beginning of the 1970s, Pope Paul VI wrote about the ambiguous nature of progress. In the Apostolic Letter "Octogesima Adveniens" he wrote that "progress was the condition for and the yardstick of human freedom. Progress, spread by the modern media of information and by the demand for wider knowledge and greater consumption, has become an omnipresent ideology." (OA, no. 41) According to the Pope, unchecked progress was not caused by anyone, because the real progress lies in the development of moral awareness, which would inspire a person to take on increased social responsibilities and to be open to God and others. Analyzing the apostolic letter of Paul VI as a whole, the following reflection arises: he clearly sees the need of a transition from quantitative to qualitative thinking, despite the fact that changes in technological and economic development in highly developed societies are only just gaining momentum.

This idea is continued by Pope John Paul II in the encyclical letter "Centesimus Annus," claiming that: ".../ development must not be understood solely in economic terms, but in a way that is fully human." (CA, no. 29) It is worth noting that the Pope in his document emphasizes that

“It is not wrong to want to live better; what is wrong is a style of life which is presumed to be better when it is directed towards having rather than being, and which wants to have more, not in order to be more but in order to spend life in enjoyment as an end in itself. It is therefore necessary to create life-styles in which the quest for truth, beauty, goodness and communion with others for the sake of common growth are the factors which determine consumer choices, savings and investments.” (CA, no. 36)

Pope John Paul II continues his reflections in the encyclical “*Evangelium Vitae*,” where he writes that the post-industrial society dominated by technical-scientific rationalism has rejected the truth about creation and God’s plan for life that must be respected (EV, no. 22). Living as if God did not exist, according to John Paul II, man loses not only the mystery of God, but also the mystery of the world and of his existence. In a world without God, the only aspect that is taken into account is one’s own material well-being. “The only goal which counts, is the pursuit of one’s own material well-being. The so-called ‘quality of life’ is interpreted primarily or exclusively as economic efficiency, inordinate consumerism, physical beauty and pleasure, to the neglect of the more profound dimensions—interpersonal, spiritual and religious—of existence” (EV, no. 23) - the Pope wrote in the encyclical.

The issue of “quality of life” does not go unnoticed also in the teaching of Pope Francis, who devotes his attention to this issue in the encyclical “*Laudato si*”. In his considerations, the Holy Father mentions more than once that the quality of life is influenced not only by material prosperity, but mainly by what is immaterial. According to the pope, rapid changes occurring in nature, have a huge impact on the quality of human life. Pope Francis mentions the privatization of space, which hinders human access to virgin areas, among the reasons for lowering the quality of human life. Another issue is the establishment of “ecological enclaves” - housing estates accessible only to selected members of society. The speech is specifically about creating green areas in designated, guarded housing estates. Among other aspects affecting the deterioration of contemporary quality of life, Pope Francis includes the dynamics of the media and a digital world that limits the ability to live wisely, think deeply, love generously (LS, no. 45–46).

Maciej Ostrowski remembers that the quality of human life is diametrically influenced by the density and cramped housing estates. In his considerations, he refers to the teaching of Pope Francis, who claims that mentally working students need and learn to move for the proper functioning of the body. Those seniors who remain motionless in a cramped apartment are exposed to the risk of worsening of their age-related physical disabilities. Closed in their apartments, necessarily deprived of wider space, paradoxically, despite the proximity of other residents, they are additionally exposed to social isolation. All the mentioned situations minimize the quality of human existence (Ostrowski 2019, 131–132). According to Father Ostrowski, we need some privacy and intimacy. The constant presence of many others, especially strangers, crush, fatigue - all these become a burden that negatively affects

the quality of human life. Overcrowded human settlements, lack of sufficient space separating from other people make the environment life becomes unfriendly (138).

3. The Value of Human Life in the Age of Pandemic

In the context of the rampant pandemic, many dimensions of a social life have been devastated, while others, have re-gained in importance. The value of human life was appreciated, also in those European countries where abortion and euthanasia have long been legally practiced. In the overall social dimension, measures for the elderly and the sick, who are losing in the fight against SARS-CoV-2, have been taken. Suddenly, every human life gained value (Ozorowski 2005, 17). What is more, "pandemic does not only force us to consider the value of lives weighed against economy, rights, etc, but it also forces us to weigh the value of lives against other lives" (Zdunek 2020).

According to The Washington Post, the coronavirus has devastated our generation:

"In many European countries, the median Covid-19 victim has been older than 80. In Italy, the average is 83, and the dichotomy between the generations is notably stark. Even with the virus raging, the 2020 death rate for Italians at the age of 50 and younger fell, compared with previous years, with lockdown measures keeping people off the roads and indoors. But the country's overall death rate nonetheless spiked some 15 percent. Those 80 and older — a group that makes up 7 percent of Italy's population — have so far accounted for 60 percent of the nation's covid-19 deaths." (Harlan, Pitrelli, 2021)

The data is terrifying indeed. It is important, however, that after many years of ignorance and silence, people of lower age began to be talked about, and the dignity of the end of life, a dignified death, was emphasized.

The evangelical concept of helping has a rational nature. The rational dimension of love is expressed in the fact that we do not love everyone in the same way, and we are not able to help everyone (Bartoszek 2017, 59). Nevertheless, activities on the basis of the family and loved ones are the starting point for building a safe, healthy vision of the universe and interpersonal relations, especially in the time of a pandemic (Mółka 2016, 292).

"Human dignity flows directly from the ability of individuals to grow in community /.../ The person achieves his fulfillment by relating to others in families and other social institutions that foster development, protect dignity and promote the common good." (Maloney 2014) The Catholic principle of solidarity says that we are one human family, we are responsible for one another. The virtue of solidarity is best expressed in the commandment to love our neighbour: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." (Mt 22:37-40) Catholic solidarity urges us not only to be re-

sponsible for our personal, individual sense of happiness, but to recognize that there are more important social issues that cry out for fairer solutions. What constitutes the common good is always a subject of discussion, and the lack of sensitivity to the common good is always a sign of the regression of society. "The right attitude of caring for community is an antidote to unbridled individualism, which, like unbridled selfishness in personal relationships, can destroy balance, harmony and peace in relations between groups, neighborhoods, regions and nations." (Maloney 2014)

All the actions aimed at isolating individual members of society have one important goal: to protect the weaker, the elderly and the sick. Contemporary society often sees no place for the elderly and the sick. The position of older people in society is shaken: they often have to cope not only with loneliness, but also with severely limited access to material goods - they live in poverty. And it was precisely in the era of a pandemic, in a world where consumerism was promoted and the value of human life was denied (through the promotion of abortion and euthanasia), measures were taken to care for the weaker, sick, and older social units (Szafulski 2020).

One of the greatest challenges of a pandemic is a social isolation. The elderly and the disabled are particularly vulnerable to loneliness, although the difficulties related to limited social contacts are also more and more often reported by young people. Another challenge is learning and working from home: this includes children, teenagers, and adults. Many people point out that their biological clock is disturbed, and work and study penetrate deeper and deeper into the home environment. Considering all these disadvantages, the high mortality rate caused by the Covid-19 virus should certainly be emphasized.

With the outbreak of the pandemic, many countries introduced the principle of social distancing (the minimum distance was 1.5 m), masks (in public places and/or outdoors) and finally the lockdown was announced. All these activities were aimed at protecting members of the public, regardless of gender, skin colour, financial situation or faith, from being infected with the coronavirus. These activities are consistent with Catholic social teaching, because "human life at every stage of development and its decline is valuable and therefore deserves protection and respect" (Maloney 2014). Continuing this thought, it is worth emphasizing that, in accordance with the social teaching of the church, the life of every person is not only sacred, but also has a social character.

The principle of love for one's neighbour began to be put into practice: many volunteers undertook activities aimed at providing the elderly with basic necessities. It is worth mentioning that in Poland, there are young volunteers as a part of the Solidarity Corps of Seniors Support. This program (#WspierajSeniora) was designed to coordinate assistance to the elderly during a pandemic and covered both the central and the local levels. Through the program, the elderly could get the essential help in the difficult time of the pandemic. All the people over 70 years old could, via the indicated telephone number, submit orders for drugs or basic products, all so that you do not have to leave the house or move around.

Among many activities, it is worth mentioning the action "Neighborly help for seniors." As part of the activities for the elderly, the lonely, the sick and the disabled, in the name of social solidarity, assistance in shopping, walking the dog or buying medicines at pharmacy points was offered (Wspieraj seniora 2020). It was enough to download from the government website a poster informing about joining the action, write down your name and a telephone number on it. Such a prepared poster was ready to be printed and placed on the door, on the staircase or on an advertising pole in the nearest area. In this way, it was possible to provide help to people from the immediate environment, while avoiding direct contact with those who were mostly exposed to the effects of the pandemic.

It is also worth noting that in Poland within the program there were hours for seniors for many months. The following information appeared on the government website: "from Monday to Friday from 10:00 to 12:00, only people over the age of 60 may stay in a store, drugstore, pharmacy, or post office. If you need to leave the house, take advantage of this time to safely shop and stock up on medications." (Chrońmy osobo starsze! 2020) Moreover, during the holiday season, students at many schools and kindergartens in Poland prepared Christmas cards for the elderly who, due to the pandemic, were forced to spend this time in isolation.

4. Conclusions

There was nobody on a global scale who would be prepared for the situation caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus. Both the government actions and voluntary social initiatives were aimed at reducing the effects of the pandemic. Among the groups that were particularly at risk were the elderly, lonely people who required support in everyday life due to their health condition or disability. In the era of the coronavirus, it seemed crucial to set ethical values and refer to a sense of solidarity and the common good. It is worth hoping that the introduced principles: social solidarity or care for the life and health of the weakest individuals will enter our blood, regardless of whether we are aware (more or less) that these principles are derived strictly from the Christian vision.

Much has been said about what the "after" world will look like since the outbreak of the pandemic (Murphy, 2021). Is it possible to return to the world before the coronavirus outbreak? Can covid-19 ravage the world be mended? An unequivocal answer to this question seems to be impossible due to the fact that we are still dealing with new waves of the pandemic and with new variants of the coronavirus.

Abbreviations

CA – John Paul II. 1991 [Centesimus Annus].

EV – John Paul II. 1995 [Evangelium Vitae].

LS – Francis 2018 [Laudato si’].

OA – Paul VI. 1971 [Octogesima adveniens].

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