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The message of the Polish bishops to youth in pastoral letters in years 1945–2000

The bishops' conference is a new, post-conciliar authority in the structure of the universal Church. The aim of this study is to signal an important role of this body in the apostolic activity through the work of Polish bishops in respect of matters related youth. The bishops' conferences carry out their tasks using various forms and methods of apostolate corresponding to the current situation of particular Churches. The subject of this analysis will not be legally formulated competences of bishops' conferences with regard to *munus docendi*, but rather those regarding the pastoral teaching and related to young people.

In 1985, on the occasion of the International Year of Youth, Pope John Paul II wrote to youth: "The Church looks to the young; or rather, the Church in a special way sees herself in the young... And so she sees herself in relationship to the whole great human family which is in constant growth. She sees herself in worldwide dimensions. She sees herself on the paths of ecumenism, on the paths towards the unity of all Christians, for which Christ himself prayed and which is of unquestionable urgency in our time. She also sees herself in dialogue with the followers of the

non-Christian religions, and with all people of good will. This dialogue is a dialogue of salvation, which should also serve the cause of peace in the world and justice among people. You young people are the hope of the Church that sees herself and her mission in the world precisely in this way.”¹

In young people, the Polish pope saw hope of the universal Church. Bishops from the Polish Episcopal Conference have propagated similar theses since 1945. In years 1945–2000 they repeatedly addressed youth in pastoral letters. Nine letters² will be analysed below, in which the Polish Episcopal Conference drew attention to issues bothering young people, not sparing sharp admonitions recalling Polish youth to return to the path of the Gospel.

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- 1 Apostolic Letter *Dilecti Amici* of Pope John Paul II to the Youth of the World on the Occasion of International Youth Year, 15, https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1985/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_31031985_dilecti-amici.html (07.07.2016).
 - 2 List Episkopatu Polski do katolickiej młodzieży polskiej z 15 kwietnia 1948, in: *Listy pasterskie Episkopatu Polski 1945–2000*, red. P. Libera, A. Rybicki, S. Łącki, t. 1, Marki 2003, pp. 47–52 [Letter of 1948]; List pasterski biskupów polskich do rodziców, dzieci i młodzieży katolickiej o nauczaniu prawd wiary świętej z 2 września 1961, in: *Listy pasterskie Episkopatu Polski 1945–2000*, red. P. Libera, A. Rybicki, S. Łącki, t. 1, Marki 2003, pp. 244–249 [Letter of 1961]; Słowo pasterskie biskupów do rodziców, wychowawców i młodzieży o obowiązkach religijnych w czasie wakacji z 31 maja 1964, in: *Listy pasterskie Episkopatu Polski 1945–2000*, red. P. Libera, A. Rybicki, S. Łącki, t. 1, Marki 2003, pp. 397–401 [Letter of 1964]; Słowo do maturzystów z 3 maja 1968, in: *Listy pasterskie Episkopatu Polski 1945–2000*, red. P. Libera, A. Rybicki, S. Łącki, t. 1, Marki 2003, pp. 624–625, [Letter of 1968]; List pasterski biskupów polskich do młodzieży uczącej się i pracującej z 1 października 1969, in: *Listy pasterskie Episkopatu Polski 1945–2000*, red. P. Libera, A. Rybicki, S. Łącki, t. 1, Marki 2003, pp. 712–717 [Letter of 1969]; List Episkopatu Polski na uroczystość Chrystusa Króla. *Młodzież w służbie Kościoła, narodu i każdego człowieka* z 25 września 1971, in: *Listy pasterskie Episkopatu Polski 1945–2000*, red. P. Libera, A. Rybicki, S. Łącki, t. 1, Marki 2003, pp. 837–842 [Letter of 1971]; Słowo pasterskie biskupów polskich w sprawie reformy wychowania dzieci i młodzieży z 5 maja 1973, in: *Listy pasterskie Episkopatu Polski 1945–2000*, red. P. Libera, A. Rybicki, S. Łącki, t. 1, Marki 2003, pp. 940–943 [Letter of 1973]; Słowo pasterskie biskupów polskich do rodziców, dzieci i młodzieży o potrzebie czasu dla Pana Boga z 8 września 1974, in: *Listy pasterskie Episkopatu Polski 1945–2000*, red. P. Libera, A. Rybicki, S. Łącki, t. 1, Marki 2003, pp. 996–998 [Letter of 1974]; List biskupów na Rok Młodzieży z 26 sierpnia 1985, in: *Listy pasterskie Episkopatu Polski 1945–2000*, red. P. Libera, A. Rybicki, S. Łącki, t. 2, Marki 2003, pp. 1474–1476 [Letter of 1985].

1. The pastoral letter as teaching of bishops in matters of faith and morality

Preaching the Gospel is the main task which covers the whole ministry of bishops. As noted by Mariola Lewicka, “The bishops acting collegially are also responsible for *munus docendi*. One of the forms of collegiate activity is the bishops’ conference. This institution has recently gained great importance and contributes in various ways to affective collegiality.”³

The Conciliar Decree Concerning the Pastoral Office of Bishops in the Church *Christus Dominus* resolves: “In these days especially bishops frequently are unable to fulfil their office effectively and fruitfully unless they develop a common effort involving constant growth in harmony and closeness of ties with other bishops. Episcopal conferences already established in many nations have furnished outstanding proofs of a more fruitful apostolate. Therefore, this sacred synod considers it to be supremely fitting that everywhere bishops belonging to the same nation or region form an association which would meet at fixed times. Thus, when the insights of prudence and experience have been shared and views exchanged, there will emerge a holy union of energies in the service of the common good of the churches.”⁴

After the Second Vatican Council, episcopal conferences existing in some countries became common law institutions. Countries with no episcopal conference were to establish one.⁵ In this period these conferences became a body especially valued by the bishops as a forum for exchange

³ M. Lewicka, *Kompetencje legislacyjne Konferencji biskupów dotyczące munus docendi*, “Kościół i Prawo” 14 (2012) nr 1, p. 67.

⁴ Decree Concerning the Pastoral Office of Bishops in the Church *Christus Dominus* Proclaimed by His Holiness, Pope Paul VI, 28.10.1965, 37, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651028_christus-dominus_en.html (07.07.2016).

⁵ “Bishops of countries or territories which do not yet have an episcopal conference according to the norms of the Decree *Christus Dominus* are to see to its establishment as soon as possible, and to the drawing up of its statutes which are to be confirmed by the Apostolic See.” Paul VI, Apostolic Letter *Ecclesiae Sanctae* Issued Motu Proprio, 41. (1), https://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/motu_proprio/documents/hf_p-vi-motu-proprio_19660806_ecclesiae-sanctae.html (07.07.2016).

of ideas, mutual consultation and cooperation for the common good of the Church.

The term “pastoral letter” is an important, but not the only one used with reference to bishops statements. Apart from it, there are also other terms used: “address,” “appeal,” “circular.” The purpose of a pastoral letter is to give instructions on matters of faith or the Christian morality and to remind about the duties resulting from it. It can also be an incentive, a warning or an order. Such a letter is usually read out in all churches of a diocese or a country to spread its content to the widest possible audience and to get believers acquainted with it. In this respect, this is also a form of the bishops’ teaching (the bishops’ conference) of the widest range and a specific meaning. Pastoral letters of bishops belong to the official and authentic teaching of the Church. Even though the teaching contained in letters is not infallible, however, their value deserves recognition and should be of religious nature and be based on the belief in the mission and authority of the Church. Pastoral letters have their own specific language and style of a lecture-preaching nature. This style to is some extent individualized, which is primarily due to the personality of its author. In one case, it will be own and original, in another schematic and conventional, which manifests in the abundant use of quotations from documents or works of various authors. In general, pastoral letters are characterized by the fact that they lack documentation in terms of footnotes or references to sources, which hinders their analysis.⁶

2. “No” for educating the youth without God

Soon after the Second World War, in 1948 the bishops addressed their letter to Polish Catholic youth. They drew attention to the fact that new needs facing the rebuilding of Poland, necessary changes in the social and economic life coincided with the intense propaganda of the materialistic approach. The bishops warned that materialism denies the existence of God, immortal soul, the supernatural world, and the afterlife. In addition,

⁶ R. Dzwonkowski, *Listy społeczne biskupów polskich 1891-1918*, Paris 1974, p. 22.

it rejects religion, revelation, redemption, the Church, prayer, sacraments, and the Christian ethics. According to the materialistic theory, man is to forget his Creator, to renounce their Christian beliefs and moral principles. Matter is supposed to be the only reality and the only real value of man is to be their share in production of earthly goods. The primal virtue of new man is to be record-breaking productivity and total dedication to the development of the economic life. The pastoral instruction went in the direction that young people should not agree to education without God, ignoring His teachings and commandments. The bishops called: "You should aspire to get to know the whole truth, which is inherent truth and revealed truth. You should fulfil whole man in you. You should cooperate with nature and grace, knowledge and faith. You should multiply natural values in you and by grace join the world of infinite good."⁷

The letter of bishops of 1948 called young people to be reserved towards views of materialistic education, to care about their own religious education, to practice faith with conviction and without fear. In addition, the bishops encouraged young people to develop a social disposition in themselves, to assimilate noble sensitivity to people, learning to respect their dignity and rights. "Treat with particular peace nagging press, propaganda and living apostles of materialism, behave with kindness and understanding... Leave the flood of materialistic literature aside... Do not be offended by materialism worshipped by older people and respect the good will of these people in the ranks of the materialists who sincerely work for the better tomorrow. Remember that these dear masses need not only bread that feeds a body, but bread craved by the spirit."⁸

The bishops see in youth an anchor saving principles and practices of the Christian morality in their own lives and immediate surroundings. Hence, the incentive for young people to beware of hatred, harm and selfishness. The final words of the letter, calling for standing by God, are significant: "All Polish young youth shall think, live and act for the sake of their nation, state and Church in the Catholic spirit of our past. Stand faithful to Christian principles and fulfil them in yourself and

⁷ Letter of 1948, p. 49.

⁸ Letter of 1948, p. 50.

around you. There is no better service to your soul, homeland and the heavenly Father.”⁹

3. Religious duties of young people during holidays

Polish bishops could not ignore the situation which took place in 1950s and at the beginning of 1960s. Camp teachers were forbidden to bring youth to a Mass due to freedom of conscience. Moreover, it was recommended to organize attractive activities or conduct obligatory lessons at a time when churches held Masses. Young people were not allowed to go to the Eucharist on Sunday, even when the church was located next to camp buildings. Such practices were violating fundamental human rights. Pope John XXIII writes in his encyclical *Pacem in terris*: “Also among man’s rights is that of being able to worship God in accordance with the right dictates of his own conscience, and to profess his religion both in private and in public. According to the clear teaching of Lactantius, ‘this is the very condition of our birth, that we render to the God who made us that just homage which is His due; that we acknowledge Him alone as God, and follow Him. It is from this ligature of piety, which binds us and joins us to God, that religion derives its name’ (*Divinae Institutiones*, I IV. C.28, 2 PL 6.535). Hence, too, Pope Leo XIII declared that ‘true freedom, freedom worthy of the sons of God, is that freedom which most truly safeguards the dignity of the human person. It is stronger than any violence or injustice. Such is the freedom which has always been desired by the Church, and which she holds most dear. It is the sort of freedom which the Apostles resolutely claimed for themselves. The apologists defended it in their writings; thousands of martyrs consecrated it with their blood’ (*Libertas praestantissimum*, ASS 20 [1887], p. 608).”¹⁰

In the pastoral letter of the Polish Episcopal Conference of 1964 the bishops note that the action hindering religious practices at camps

⁹ Letter of 1948, p. 52. Cf. Letter of 1961, p. 247.

¹⁰ *Pacem in terris* Encyclical of Pope John XXIII on Establishing Universal Peace in Truth, Justice, Charity, and Liberty, 11.04.1963, 14, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_j-xxiii_enc_11041963_pacem.html (07.07.2016).

depraves educators themselves because it forces them to act contrary to their conscience. At the same time, it undermines the authority of teachers in the eyes of youth, who recommend young people to act unethically i.e. contrary to their conscience and unlawfully. Due to the fact that during holiday there is no “dispensation” from the obligations of religious practice, the bishops present the following demands:

- ▶ Members of organizing committees of summer camps are required in the name of fundamental human rights to assure that camp regulations do not hamper, and certainly not forbid, religious practice by young people;
- ▶ All teachers, regardless of their beliefs, have a duty to always and everywhere respect religious beliefs of young people and therefore cannot hamper and prohibit religious practice;
- ▶ Catholic parents have the right and duty to demand from camp management to guarantee young people freedom of religious practice. State legislation guarantees parents the right to decide on religious education of youth;
- ▶ Young people should remember about daily prayer, even said privately. They should also ask their teachers to enable them to go to church to Mass on Sunday;
- ▶ Religious practice during holidays is an expression of the witness to the love of Christ and the Christian maturity;
- ▶ Youth, regardless of the places of their holiday, is to remember about daily prayer and Sunday Mass;
- ▶ One should also remember during holiday about the commandment of love for neighbor requiring peaceful peer coexistence and respect for every human being;
- ▶ One should not forget about the fifth commandment, therefore, must not recklessly put their own and other people’s lives at risk, e.g. by careless swim;
- ▶ The sixth commandment requires respect for man by the attitude of purity and modesty of heart.¹¹

11 Cf. Letter of 1964, pp. 399–401.

In the pastoral letter of 8 September 1974 the bishops directly appealed for the need to find time for God, not only during holidays. At the end of the letter we read as follows: “Dear Young People! You often ask how to live your lives in the best way. St. Augustine, the great Doctor of the Church, posed similar questions. In his youth, he thought he would find the answer in pleasures, so he surrendered himself to them enthusiastically. Upon realizing his mistake, he started to search for an appropriate way out. In his adulthood he wrote: ‘Where God is in the first place, everything is in its place’. Found God restored order to his life. Living a good life means to live it with God. You should be able to find time for God.”¹²

4. Joys and hopes, sorrows and anxiety of Polish young people

Referring to the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, the Polish bishops in the pastoral letter of 1969 drew attention to the positive occurrences that are a result of the participation of Polish young people, as well as to some dangers. Despite many difficulties, most young people were raised in the faith in their families, bravely admit to it, attend massively retreats, days of prayer, walking pilgrimages, and receive the sacraments. The bishops gladly look at numerous and vibrant university chaplaincy centres, where young people deepen their religious knowledge and strengthen the life of faith. With equally great joy and hope the bishops look at secondary school students that prove their Catholic attitude by systematic learning of religion despite the challenging conditions. However, next to these joys, the Polish bishops sadly recognize that young people live in an unfavourable educational atmosphere. Many authorities doubt about every truth and trigger the attitude of ridiculing everything and an uncontrollable desire to use life by undermining fundamental moral values.¹³

¹² Letter of 1974, p. 998.

¹³ Cf. Letter of 1969, pp. 712–713.

Concern may be raised by the fact that unprepared for an objective assessment, youthful minds can only take from the whole chaos of the world, what promises them easy pleasure and immediate benefit. Such an orientation on convenience and benefits of youth can be deepened by example of the older generation. “One of the most important factors pushing some circles of young people to mindless use of life, ridiculing all values and trampling on any form of personal and social governance, including destruction of common goods, is the power and the emphasis of the opinion, new fashion, pseudo-modern custom. For fear of being called old-fashioned or outdated, this ‘new custom’ promotes a vulgar style of language, behaviour and life. Young people, even fundamentally good, under pressure or blackmail of the opinion of a group they live in every day and which cannot be accessed by older people, present themselves as atheistic, deprived, even spoilt, because this the right thing to do, because such fashion, style, social code are in force.”¹⁴

The first step to personal development of one’s truly modern lifestyle among young people, ensuring full freedom to a human being and real advantage to society, is to fulfil basic duties of a believer. The Polish bishops include to these responsibilities: prayer, Sunday Mass, deepening religious knowledge through systematic religious instruction, deepening faith through the sacramental life, courageous apostolate in word and deed of the Christian way of life, the living contact with priests.¹⁵

5. “Support the Church, homeland and every person”¹⁶

In the pastoral letter of 1971 the bishops made an appeal to Polish young people for requiring from oneself. Posing difficult requirements is a proof of respect and support of the Church, homeland and every person. Therefore, the first duty of young man is acknowledgment to God, the faith and the Church. It is the duty of the youth to accept the heritage of the

¹⁴ Letter of 1969, p. 713.

¹⁵ Cf. Letter of 1969, pp. 716–717.

¹⁶ Letter of 1971, pp. 837–842.

holy faith and transfer it into the next generation. The second task is to live by faith, to keep the principles of the Christian morality. All moral freedom eventually ends with a disaster. Self-control and the fight against evil tendencies give joy and bear good fruit, personal and social. Bishops urge that young people do not follow youth from abroad corrupted by prosperity, deprived of ideals. “We remind you of your responsibility not only for your own lives, but also for the future of your homeland... We invite you to ‘the Social Crusade of Love.’ Being responsible for personal life, for your generation, the nation and the Church, try to help others. There is nothing more liberating and educating as providing assistance, as a belief that we are needed. And so help everyone parents and siblings, colleagues, the elderly, the weak and the sick.”¹⁷

The concept of Christian love has a spiritual dimension, takes into account the supernatural vocation of man and the eschatological goal of their life. It is an essential element of the Christian life. It constitutes basis for the distinction between evil and good in the world, it is also a determinant of the morality and a level of Christian life. Therefore, without it, any human action does not matter in the plan of salvation, while the fulfilment of orders is necessary to achieve eternal happiness in the union with God. Authentic love is a key to solve all problems, even the most dramatic ones. The way out is always and only love, stronger than death. Human love, however, is a fragile reality, vulnerable to ambush. In order to survive without burning out – it has to overcome itself. Only love, which meets with God, can avoid the risk of getting lost along the way.¹⁸

¹⁷ Letter of 1971, p. 841. The bishops mentioned also the necessity of requirements in the pastoral letter of 26 September 1985: “The gift of love, the value constituted by love and good human deeds they oblige, pose requirements, demand behaviour according to His will – the One, who is the source of all good. God asks you to be faithful to His commandments on all roads which you will take walking through life. He demands that you will be people of the conscience and will not silence and distort it. He wants you to notice another person and not shut yourself away in a tight backyard of your own interests, or even own judgments,” Letter of 1985, pp. 1475–1476.

¹⁸ D. Alimenti, A. Michelini, *Wy jesteście moją nadzieją. Słowa Jana Pawła II do młodzieży*, Warszawa 198, p. 295.

6. The value of education of youth

“Education then is before all else a reciprocal ‘offering’ on the part of both parents: together they communicate their own mature humanity to the new-born child, who gives them in turn the newness and freshness of the humanity which it has brought into the world.”¹⁹ Pope John Paul II spoke in his teaching about the necessity of education for the responsible use of freedom. However, it cannot be wrongly understood as full freedom to do anything but as “a gift of self and interior discipline of the gift.”²⁰ According to John Paul II, the key principles of education are the value of good and truth, and the value and dignity of a human person. Education should introduce man to the world of fundamental values i.e. freedom, responsibility and love. Education for freedom is at the same time education for responsibility. A human being is responsible for their deeds and experiences responsibility because they are capable of responding to the value with the will. There is a duty to refer to an object according to its real value and combined with it, the responsibility for the object in terms of its value is born.²¹

Real human development is also carried out through personal relationships with other people, because man as a social being by its nature, forms their character through society, manifests themselves in interactions with others, and the basis of various interpersonal references lies in its internal structure.

In 1973 the Polish bishops expressed their views on the reform of education of children and young people and referred on that occasion to “The Report on the State of Education” and “Resolution on the Task of the Nation and State in the Education of Youth and its Participation in the Construction of the Socialist Poland.” According to the bishops, both documents ignore the right of the believers to bring up young people according to religious principles. “Believers, constituting the absolute

¹⁹ Letter to Families from Pope John Paul II *Gratissimam Sane*, 16, https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1994/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_02021994_families.html (07.07.2016).

²⁰ Letter to Families from Pope John Paul II *Gratissimam Sane*, 11.

²¹ See: K. Wojtyła, *Osoba i czyn* [The acting person], Kraków 1985, p. 207. Cf. Letter of 1968.

majority of Polish society, have the right to clear guarantees securing freedom of religious education of children and youth. They also have the right to have their own beliefs respected by the school... Dear Parents and Educators, we recommend to your proven and mature national and Christian prudence, courage and fervent prayers in the upbringing of the young Polish generation.”²² The bishops also emphasized that it is the duty of the believers in Poland to express in person or in writing their views on such an important issue, which is education of young people.

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In the book *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* we read as follows: “My most memorable experience of that period, when my pastoral activities concentrated above all on the young, was the discovery of the fundamental importance of youth.”²³ The Polish pope believed that young people are “the hope of the Church [...] The Church of Rome, like any other church in the world, must be built by the effort of the young. They are the generation already containing the future. The future is built through young people.”²⁴ Youth is portrayed in the pastoral letters of the Polish bishops as a special treasure of man, time of intensive discovery of the human “I” and characteristics and abilities related to it. During this time, unique and unrepeatable potential of concrete humanity develops, which includes the whole project of prospective life, which is sketched as implementation of this plan. Wealth of youth is wealth of exploring, as well as planning, choosing, predicting and making one’s first decisions. John Paul II wrote at the end of the Letter to the Youth *Parati semper*: “You are also strong for the struggle: not for the struggle of one against another in the name of some ideology or practice separated from the very roots of the Gospel, but strong for the struggle against evil, against the real evil: against everything that offends God, against every injustice and exploitation, against every falsehood and deceit, against everything that insults and

²² Letter of 1973, pp. 942–943.

²³ *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* by his Holiness John Paul II, New York 1994, p. 120.

²⁴ D. Alimenti, A. Michellini, *Wy jesteście moją nadzieją. Słowa Jana Pawła II do młodzieży*, p. 228.

humiliates, against everything that profanes human society and human relationships, against every crime against life: against every sin.”²⁵

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²⁵ Apostolic Letter *Dilecti Amici* of Pope John Paul II to the Youth of the World on the Occasion of International Youth Year, 15, https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1985/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_31031985_dilecti-amici.html (07.07.2016).

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