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The family *communio personarum* in the context of human subjectivity

Man lives and acts together with others while commonality belongs to the nature of human existence as one of its fundamental factors. However, it also invariably remains a being which constitutes the foundation of all communities and a principal reference point for their creation and existence. All actions taken up and carried out by a human as a member of various communities and associations are deeds of particular persons comprising them. We ought not to forget that the social and community character of man is rooted in his personal character, not vice versa. Not only does man live together with others, has to act with others, but also, by acting and living together with others, may achieve one's own personal maturity by being characterised by an increased degree of self-possession and self-control. It is difficult not to notice that in the present-day world, the sense of subjectivity and personal dignity of every human being is becoming more apparent and stronger. It is an almost common belief, at least in the more economically developed and democracy-based parts of the world, that a human is neither a "thing" nor an "object" which can be utilized, but always and only a "subject" which has their own judgement, freedom and conscience and is called to a responsible life in society. On the one hand, however, man really emphasizes their subjectivity since thanks to it, he or she may be something more than

just a “place” in which diverse socio-political processes occur.¹ However, on different levels, mainly the real practice of social life, emerges the phenomenon of only ostensible and verbal bolstering of subjectivity and, at the same time, understanding it in a reductionist way.

While searching for reasons of the problems with understanding human subjectivity integrally, we may point out, first and foremost, accepting the erroneous or reductionist anthropology, equating man to merely a natural fact.² As John Paul II wrote, the contemporary civilisation programmes take advantage of man’s weaknesses as it were, deprive him or her of their spirituality, and eventually their identity, reducing their aspirations almost entirely to the sphere of temporal existence.³ Thus, even if they refer to humanism or human values, they often reduce man to the role of a passive object of large economic and political processes.

Assessing these disconcerting facts, we may conclude that only in the light of internally coherent and consistent personalism, a human is invariably treated as a person and always, regardless of the circumstances, remains a person. The subjectivity of the person is therefore founded on the personal account of man and is a natural consequence of such their ontic status.⁴ It is indicated here that the genesis of the reality of a person is not only determined by the laws of biology but the creative will of God is inscribed into the personal constitution of each and every man.⁵ Only man regarded as a person, fulfilling oneself through actions, experiences that they are not merely a passive object or an observer of reality but its originator, a subject creating it, who has been

¹ See: M. Szymański, *Edukacyjne problemy współczesności*, Kraków 2014, pp. 98–99.

² See: S. Pyszka, *Godność osoby ludzkiej jako podstawa nauczania społecznego Jana Pawła II*, in: *Testament społeczny Jana Pawła II*, red. J. Kupny, M. Łuczak, Katowice 2006, pp. 12–13.

³ See: Pope John Paul II, Letter to families *Gratissimam Sane* (henceforth LF) 13, https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1994/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_02021994_families.html.

⁴ See: K. Wojtyła, *Miłość i odpowiedzialność*, Lublin 1986, p. 54 (English version: K. Wojtyła, *Love and responsibility*, transl. H. T. Willets, San Francisco 1993).

⁵ See: LF 9, 14; Pope John Paul II, Encyclical letter *Evangelium Vitae* (henceforth EV) 75, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25031995_evangelium-vitae.html. Cf. J. Truskolaska, *Kategoria osoby i czynu w personalizmie etycznym Karola Wojtyły i ich konsekwencje pedagogiczne*, in: *Pedagogiczne inspiracje w nauczaniu Jana Pawła II*, red. M. Nowak, C. Kalita, Biała Podlaska 2006, pp. 224–238.

bestowed freedom.⁶ One should hold a deep conviction that the full value of this freedom reveals itself only in the dimension of inner freedom but only partially in its negative conceptualization as a lack of external obligation. Freedom may serve human dignity only when it is closely related to such values as the truth and good.⁷ What is important, in this context it is entirely obvious that nobody can use a person as a means to an end; no man, not even God who – actually contrary to fears that appear today – poses threat to human subjectivity in the least degree. Human subjectivity and dignity is a specific Gospel value which cannot be violated or destroyed without gravely offending the Creator.⁸ Since a human being possesses a particular plenitude and perfection of being, exists prior to any ideological, social and political division, constituting the rule, subject and goal of all social institutions.⁹

While considering the problem of subjectivity of modern man, existing in a complicated cultural context, it must be stressed that integrally understood subjectivity reveals itself most clearly in such communities as family, which function on the basis of relations of a smaller or larger number of personally understood 'I' for the common good. This kind of relations, based on personalism, may be viewed as an explicit antithesis of the two erroneous visions of social life that emerged in the last century, which are actually opposite to each other: individualism and totalism. The former perceives man as an autonomous, intrinsic, and in fact perfect. A human is not in actual fact a subject included in the social life, responsible for other persons' good but a being driven almost entirely towards their own good.¹⁰ A lack of participation,

⁶ See: Pope John Paul II, Encyclical letter *Centesimus Annus* (henceforth CA) 25, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_01051991_centesimus-annus.html. Cf. S. Kowalczyk, *Wolność naturą i prawem człowieka. Indywidualny i społeczny wymiar wolności*, Sandomierz 2000, pp. 199–202.

⁷ See: J. Godłów-Legiędź, *Wolność w ujęciu Jana Pawła II i myślicieli liberalnych. Próba analizy porównawczej*, in: *Myśl społeczna Jana Pawła II. Studia i szkice*, red. W. Piątkowski, Warszawa–Łódź 1999, p. 86.

⁸ See: Jan Paweł II, *W imię przyszłości kultury. Przemówienie w UNESCO*, Paryż, 2 VI 1980, „L'Osservatore Romano” 6 (1980) nr 1–2 (English version: Pope John Paul II, Address to the International Catholic Center for the United Nations Educational, Scientific And Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 10 May 2002, 1–2, https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/2002/may/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_20020510_unesco.html).

⁹ See: RH 13–14.

¹⁰ See: P. Skrzydlewski, *Błąd antropologiczny w teoriach społecznych*, in: *Błąd antropologiczny*, red. A. Maryniarczyk, K. Stępień, Lublin 2003, pp. 245–246.

characteristic for this concept, is related to acknowledging the egoistically understood good of a unit as superior to the good of the community. It is difficult not to notice that individualism, by its nature, threatens the culture of personalism and subjectivity by relying on the use of freedom in which a subject, in fact, does what he or she wishes. He/she does not wish to “give,” to become a real “selfless” gift in truth. Individualism, regardless of its verbal declarations, which call upon empathy and interpersonal solidarity, remains egocentric and egoistic while the ethos of personalism is deeply altruistic, predisposed to being a joyous gift to others, filling them with happiness.¹¹

The latter account is characterised by completely different but equally fallacious, and opposite to personalism, assumptions. We may notice the absolute submission of an individual to society, which – as a matter of fact – deprives them of any real rights and becomes a system based on violence. Any good done in these conditions by an individual and contributed to the community is often simply forced upon them. In both of these erroneous social systems, we may observe a serious alienation of a substantial part of societies, which leads to a lack of participation and consequently to the disappearance of genuine community.¹²

While totalitarianism, at least in its overt form, does not seem to pose a threat in our cultural background, in the case of individualism, the situation is totally different as it is related to the principles of liberalism. The prerequisite for overcoming the individualistic mentality, so widespread in today’s world, also in the context of the operation of democracy, are actions based on solidarity and love, which in the most natural way are carried out in the family, both by the mutual support of spouses and the inter-generational care.¹³ Since the family, to the largest degree, consists in “being together,” we may thus describe it as the subjectivity’s good. The person is a subject and the family is a subject because it is made up of persons in whom it is “subjectified.” The family constitutes a subject even more than other communities, being greater in this regard than a nation, state or society, which enjoy subjectivity

¹¹ See: LF 14.

¹² See: K. Wojtyła, *Osoba i czyn*, Lublin 1994, pp. 355–357 (English version: K. Wojtyła, Pope John Paul II, *The acting person*, transl. A. Potocki, Dordrecht 1979 [Analecta Husserliana. The Yearbook of Phenomenological Research, 10]).

¹³ See: CA 49.

only because they were given it by a particular group of people.¹⁴ Thus, in the catalogue of different social structures, the family should be attributed a completely special position since such macro-communities as a nation, state or the Church are determined, at least indirectly, by its being. The family bonds with society by means of living and organic ties which are not only limited to procreation. Even though the family is the most grounded and characteristically sovereign community, constituting the first school of social life, it remains a community which is in many ways dependent.¹⁵ For this reason, state authorities on different levels need to support it. This community, by remaining the soul of each state, ought to constitute, in relation to it, the subject of the principle of subsidiarity.¹⁶

Human subjectivity, as well as values connected with it: the need for participation and dialogue, openness to others, may fulfil, above all, in the family. The family is the place in which every human emerges in their singleness and uniqueness, as the only being in the world whom God willed for themselves. The family is superior to all other communities as it is not artificial but rather primeval and natural.¹⁷ The family is the foundation for all other communities while its major contribution to society is, first and foremost, the experience of communion and participation, which should characterise its everyday life.

Having discerned the, in fact, irreplaceable role of the family in shaping the real subjectivity of man in modern society, we should also acknowledge that the existence of the family occurs in the vast context of the social life. This context often determines the way and character of the family being, and even, as it happens today, the way in which it is defined. No doubt, various internal and external factors determining the family life may often hamper or facilitate its functioning and carrying out tasks attributed to this kind of community. Among these factors, the ones of great importance today are a lack of mutual social trust, and disappearance of solidarity and reference to the common

¹⁴ See: LF 15. Cf. M. Smereczyńska, *Rodzina podmiotem działalności państwa i organizacji pozarządowych*, in: *Rodzina jako Kościół domowy*, red. A. Tomkiewicz, W. Wieczorek, Lublin 2010, p. 571.

¹⁵ See: J. Wilk, *Pedagogika rodziny*, Lublin 2002, p. 74.

¹⁶ See: M. Poborski, *Jana Pawła II koncepcja katolickiej nauki społecznej*, in: *Mysł społeczna Jana Pawła II...*, p. 43.

¹⁷ Cf. C. Bartnik, *Personalizm*, Lublin 1995, p. 192.

good. It cannot be overlooked that societies existing at the beginning of the 21st century are threatened by depersonalization and massification, the sense of atomization and impersonal anonymity. It seems that these factors share, as it were, a common denominator, which is a lack of personalism, which disturbs or even destroys the tissue of individual and social life.¹⁸

We must also consider the contemporary ideological and existential determinants, which compel us to mention clear indications of the crisis of the family, not only with regard to its Christian vision. It suffices to refer to attempts at redefining the family or promoting alternative forms of conjugal and family life, which pose a threat not only to Christianity but, in John Paul II's opinion, constitute an element creating favourable conditions for "sick" civilisation.¹⁹ The instability of marriages, caused by divorces, is an extremely dangerous phenomenon for retaining the real subjectivity of particular persons, as well as the proper functioning of society. Other hazardous phenomena include attempts of interference and usurping the family by societies and states. It is worth stressing that family rights ought not to be identified as a mathematical sum of rights of its members because the family is something more than just a group of individuals. The family should be seen as a community of parents and children and also, though less frequently as in past centuries, a community of many generations. Thus, the family's subjectivity demands its own specific rights, recognising its identity and accepting it as a social subjectivity. However, the family should also be supported in order to be truly recognised as a basic and, in a way, "sovereign" community.²⁰

While making an effort to define the character of relations connecting the family community, we must acknowledge that its interpersonal bonds are the strongest and encompass the whole human personality. You may only be a teacher or a trader only for a particular period of time. You cannot, however, even for a moment, stop being a son, brother, mother or spouse.²¹

¹⁸ See: K. Olbrycht, *Istota wychowania personalistycznego*, in: *W trosce o rodzinę. W poszukiwaniu prawdy, dobra i piękna*, red. M. Ryś, M. Jankowska, Warszawa 2007, pp. 43–44.

¹⁹ See: CA 39. Cf. F. Adamski, *Czy rodzina ma przyszłość*, in: *Rodzina. Dobro uniwersalne*, red. U. Bejma, Warszawa 2015, p. 31; A. Doboszyńska, *Zagrożenia zdrowia i życia rodziny*, in: *W trosce o rodzinę...*, pp. 263–265.

²⁰ See: LF 17; CA 49.

²¹ See: M. Witalis, *Największa wartość najbardziej zagrożona*, Szczecin 1993, pp. 92–93.

From the point of view of Catholic theology, the personalist principles of the family get to its very roots i.e. to the life of the Persons of the Holy Trinity.²² Insofar as humanity means existence in communion of a man with a woman and their offspring, the Divinity also means existence in communion of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. For this reason, while the term “man” is ascribed to the communion of human persons, the term “God” represents the Communion of the Divine Persons. A human, being in communion with someone, is also an icon of the Holy Trinity, the living image of God. As in the Mystery of God, there is *Communio* and *Missio*, i.e. the Father sends the Son, who after His death and resurrection sends the Holy Spirit, a unity and a call to love emerges in the mystery of man. Thus, the two aspects, the affirmation of a person for the person themselves, as well as the selfless gift of oneself, not only are not mutually exclusive but they mutually confirm each other and contain each other.²³ Therefore, the goal of education provided by the Christian family may not only be an introduction to the mystery of salvation but also deepening the communal life of the family.²⁴

In the act of conjugal love, a human discovers a person who is distinct among others, who is unique – as if on a different, higher plane of their existence and values. In the opinion of the human in love, the respect owed to the loved person, seems to demand more than the affirmation of all other persons. It appears to require a fuller gift from the one who got to know the person and their value. The awareness of the right of gift, which is inscribed into the very personal being, while protecting it from an appropriation of the person. The right of gift has no connection with the right of ownership, even though we can talk here about affiliation and unity of persons.²⁵ Discovering the truth about another person’s dignity, as a gift for me, cannot be associated

²² See: B. Gacka, *Personalości amerykańscy*, Kraków 1996, p. 14.

²³ See: Jan Paweł II, *Przekroczyć próg nadziei*, Lublin 1994, p. 150 (English version: John Paul II, *Crossing the threshold of hope*, transl. J. McPhee, M. McPhee, New York 1994).

²⁴ See: *Religious education/catechesis in the family. A European perspective*, red. E. Osewska, J. Stala, Warszawa 2010; J. Stala, *Der Mensch als Person: Die bestimmende Grundlage für Johannes Paul II. in seinem Bild von der Familie*, “The Person and the Challenges” 2 (2012) No. 2, pp. 41–59; J. Stala, Osewska E., *Anders erziehen in Polen. Der Erziehungs- und Bildungsbegriff im Kontext eines sich ständig verändernden Europas des XXI. Jahrhunderts*, Tarnów 2009; J. Stala, *Towards religious education in the family in the 21st century*, in: *The contemporary family: local and European perspectives*, eds. E. Osewska, J. Stala, Kraków 2015, pp. 309–318.

²⁵ See: T. Styczeń, *Urodziłeś się, by kochać*, Lublin 1993, pp. 31–33.

with the utilitarian attitude. It involves an obligation of affirming a person for the person themselves. This obligation is unconditional and uncompromising. An act of affirmation of one person by another, performed in the name of his/her dignity, has an aura of selflessness, takes on a new, exceptional moral brilliance. Therefore, affirming another person for any reason other than the person themselves means treating that person in an instrumental way, betraying the establishment of a genuine communion.²⁶

While analysing the very core of the term “community,” it is difficult not to see the interpersonal reality of the family, a reciprocal act of giving by all members comprising this community. The category of a selfless gift of oneself takes on a whole new dimension in the matrimonial *communio personarum* as man and woman were created in such a way as to mutually exchange their dissimilarity, specific wealth of their humanity. The mutual exchange of humanity, determining the personal character of the conjugal community, by a fertile intercourse between spouses, leads to parenthood. Parenthood, the first and fundamental fact of granting humanity, offers incredible, new perspective to parents and children. Having been born in flesh means the beginning of further gradual and multilateral “procreation” through the entire process of upbringing. What is extremely important, the commandment of the Decalogue does not only require a child hold their parents in reverence but also imposes an almost “symmetrical” duty on parents. Therefore, parents are obliged to “revere” their children in every period of their lives.

As a personalist value, parenthood actualizes itself exclusively through a mutual gift: spouses bestow fatherhood and motherhood upon each other in a selfless act of a gift of a person and also receive this gift. The genuine family communion constitutes the proper world for a human being and allows it to experience its identity and uniqueness. This communion is rooted in the natural bonds of body and blood, develops and improves itself in a very human manner by establishing and strengthening even deeper and richer spiritual bonds. Each family member, depending on the kind of gift he or she receives, is responsible for building the family communion.²⁷

²⁶ See: T. Styczeń, *Urodziłeś się...*, pp. 31–33.

²⁷ See: Pope John Paul II, Apostolic exhortation *Familiaris Consortio* on the role of the Christian family in the modern world (henceforth FC), 15, 21, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_19811122_familiaris-consortio.html.

“The communion of persons,” which at the beginning of a family assumes the form of the conjugal love, becomes supplemented by upbringing and, in its unique way, extends to children. It is important to accept all of this potential wealth, which is every human developing within their family.²⁸ It will not be possible if the family is not something more than just a place of coexistence, similar to a hotel. The prerequisite of a genuine *communio personarum* is home which is hospitable to all its members who need the atmosphere of a familial community. This community must be characterised by the directness of interpersonal relations, simplicity and specificity, intimacy and the depth of feelings.²⁹

The greatest power of the family as a communion of persons is always love, which constitutes the internal rule of this community. Only in the context of relations founded on love, a family may grow as a community of persons. Being the source and principle of the community, love assumes mutual acceptance, including all the abilities and limitations, and mutual supporting in personal development. Man enters this world completely helpless; he or she is doomed to love or rejection. Soon after birth, a human discovers the truth that they cannot live their life in a complete loneliness: he or she needs other people: physically, emotionally and intellectually. The first task of the family, a community of persons established and rejuvenated through love, is living faithfully the reality of communion through continuous efforts to develop the depth of this community. Insofar as, without love, the family is not a community of persons, without love it cannot live, grow or perfect itself as such a community, either.³⁰ Love between man and woman, and in the extended form, love among all family members is rejuvenated and sustained by the inner, continuous dynamism, leading the family into an even deeper and stronger communion, which is the foundation and principle of the marital and familial community.³¹

²⁸ See: B. Parysiewicz, *Wychowanie do miłości. Studium z duszpasterstwa rodzin*, Lublin 2010, p. 341.

²⁹ See: LF 16.

³⁰ See: M. Ryś, *Miłość jako psychologiczna podstawa wspólnoty małżeńskiej*, in: *Rodzina jako Kościół domowy*, p. 497.

³¹ See: Pope John Paul II, Encyclical letter *Redemptor Hominis* (henceforth RH) 10, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_04031979_redemptor-hominis.html; LF 7–8; Jan Paweł II, *Mężczyznę i niewiastę stworzył ich*, Watykan 1986, p. 39.

While remaining a deep community of persons, the family in no way threatens the subjectivity of its individual members. The specificity of the family communion makes the situation be quite the contrary. The true unity in the family occurs only when each member constituting the *communio personarum* remains themselves; when nobody loses themselves, their true selves, but what is more – thanks to the other person, he/she, in a way, becomes totally for others.³² The giver and taker stand on the same plane, offering each other trust, respect for the other person's choices and overcoming their limitations. Only this perspective of the communion guarantees the personal and spiritual growth of each member of the family, which contributes to the deepening and strengthening of bonds between them. Shaping this communion in accordance with the principles of selflessness, respect, encounter, dialogue and deep solidarity, we allow the family to become an irreplaceable school of social life, based on personal principles.³³ In this context, the question about the future of the world without families being genuine communities of persons is purely rhetorical. Therefore, concern for the family remains something more than just an argument in the ideological and religious debate. Families founded on love building the community give the world hope that the civilization of love may be something more than just a utopian idea.

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³² See: FC 18, 22.

³³ See: K. Olbrycht, *Rola bezinteresowności w rodzinie*, in: *Obudzić (nie)odkryty potencjał małżeństwa i rodziny*, red. A. Rynio, K. Braun, M. Jeziorański, I. Szewczak, Lublin 2015, pp. 39–52.

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