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Role of Religion Didactics in the Religious Education of Children and Adolescents

Introduction

Religion didactics is a subdiscipline of the integral catechetics. It has a long tradition and has been developing rapidly since the return of religion teaching to Polish schools in 1990. Obviously, in the current educational and social situation, there is a need for increased interest in religion teaching in Poland, both in theory and in practice. Successive education reforms in Poland, changes in the standards for educating religion teachers and in conducting classes as well as expectations from the public and the development of new information and communication technologies – all these are the most important factors on which the development of modern religion didactics is based. Moreover, the concern of both researchers and practitioners about the effectiveness of religion teaching to children and adolescents at the school implies changes in the perception of religion didactics.

No one needs to be persuaded of the importance of religion didactics in the religious education of young people. Each educational activity of a religion teacher aims at attaining certain objectives and tasks specified in the religion teaching syllabus. It requires following the didactic principles, proper planning of the students' work organisation, applying various forms, methods, techniques and teaching resources as well as properly conducted checking and marking the students' knowledge and skills. These are important elements that define the quality of the teacher's educational activity. They also affect the teacher's methodological decisions.

There have been few studies which focus on the role of religion didactics in religious education of children and adolescents¹. However, there are ongoing

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¹ See e.g. R. Czekalski, R. Murawski (oprac.), *Bibliografia katechetyczna 1996-2000*, Warszawa 2002; R. Czekalski (oprac.), *Bibliografia katechetyczna 2001-2010*, Warszawa 2012.

debates concerning traditional and modern teaching solutions². Catechetics refer to proposals developed in general didactics³. General didactics provides a lot of information about the methodological solutions which largely affect the effectiveness of learning-teaching⁴. It is based on what is familiar to children and adolescents. Religion teaching uses methodological solutions similar to those applied in general education. Moreover, especially with respect to the subject matter concerning the Bible and liturgy, didactic methods, techniques and resources used in religion teaching are typical of preaching God's word⁵.

The following question appears in the context of what has been said above: what is the role of religion didactics in the religious education of children and adolescents? Seeking the answer to this question requires an analysis of the basic literature on religion didactics. These analyses will take into account major research conducted by Polish catechists, who have been dealing with religion didactics and religious education of children and adolescents for a long time. When seeking the answer to the question put above, the first part of the process must deal with the following: what is the subject matter of religion didactics research? Subsequently, attention must be paid to the functions of teaching in the religious education of children and adolescents and the place of religion didactics in the educational activity of a religion teacher. This will provide grounds for the final comments.

The question about the subject matter dealt with in religion didactics research

“Religion didactics” in the Polish literature is usually considered in association with religion lessons at schools⁶. It is among the basic areas of modern integral catechesis. It is associated with the systematic religious education of children and adolescents. Some researchers use the term “didactics of catechesis”⁷ rather than “religion didactics”, with the former term having a wider range. It covers the activities performed as part of parochial catechesis, especially sacramental catechesis. It is sometimes regarded as identical with formal catechetics. The area of catechesis didactics research is not limited to the school environment and cooperation of the family with the parish. It goes

² Ibid; W. Kubik, *Zarys dydaktyki katechetycznej*, Kraków 1990; J. Szpet, *Dydaktyka katechetycznej*, Poznań 1999.

³ See e.g. S. Łabendowicz, *Dydaktyka katechezy*, Radom 2019; M. Korgul, *Dydaktyka dla katechetów*, Świdnica 2014.

⁴ See e.g. A. Zellma, *Dydaktyka dla katechetyki*, „Studia Katechetyczne” 9(2013), pp. 103-124.

⁵ Ibid; compare: R. Chałupniak, *Alfabet metod biblijnych*, „Katecheta” 55(2011), nr 7-8, pp. 67-74; S. Łabendowicz, *Metodyka katechezy*, Radom 2019, pp. 137-162.

⁶ See e.g. S. Dziekoński (red.), *Dydaktyka w służbie katechezy*, Kraków 2002; S. Łabendowicz, *Dydaktyka katechezy*, dz. cyt., s. 13-40; M. Korgul, *Dydaktyka dla katechetów*, dz. cyt., pp. 25-27.

⁷ Ibid.

clearly beyond the purely didactic approach to the teaching and rearing in faith. It also emphasises issues related to the Christian initiation⁸.

It is justified to isolate the term “religion didactics” and associate it with religious education of children and adolescents. The presence of religion teaching in Polish schools makes catechetics pay more attention to various aspects of the teaching-learning in the course of a lesson and as part of various forms of educational activities performed by the religion teacher at the school⁹. Moreover, they analyse the procedural and content-related elements associated with pedagogic supervision. There is also perceptible multi-directional dynamics in studying religion teaching in a Polish school and in designing new didactic solutions¹⁰.

Considering the definitions of “religion didactics”, which is the most frequently used in the Polish literature, one can claim that this term defines a branch of science isolated from general didactics¹¹. It points to the didactics of a subject. So far, in Poland, only the Roman Catholic Church has developed a comprehensive concept of religion teaching. Due to its specific objectives, content, methods, resources, forms and organisation of religion teaching, religion didactics studies and describes education and self-education goals associated with the reality of faith. Researchers have pointed out the education content that focuses on the truths of faith, the Decalogue, moral standards, principles of life in the society and religious practices¹².

Like with didactics of other subjects, religion didactics regards didactic principles, course of lessons, methods and techniques of learning-teaching as important. Apart from that, it analyses issues related to the organisational forms, within which educational activities performed by the teacher and by students take place. Much attention is paid to didactic resources, control, evaluation, measurement, assessment and didactic planning¹³. Depending on the assumptions regarding the elements mentioned above and their implementation, religion didacticists who conduct these studies increasingly often describe various didactic concepts and analyse them in conjunction with the principles of religion teaching at Polish schools¹⁴. They also explain the relation-

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ See e.g. J. Stala (red.), *Dydaktyka katechezy*, cz. I-II, Tarnów 2004.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ S. Łabendowicz, *Dydaktyka katechezy*, dz. cyt., s. 13-39; M. Korgul, *Dydaktyka dla katechetów*, dz. cyt., pp. 25-27.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ See e.g. ibid; R. Chałupniak, *Muzyka i katecheza – kilka metod katechetycznych*, „Katecheta” 46(2002), nr 11, pp. 21-25; S. Kulpaczyński (red.), *Środki audiowizualne w katechezie*, Lublin 2004; E. Sozańska, *Metoda projektów w praktyce szkolnej*, „Katecheta” 51(2007), nr 6, pp. 20-27.

¹⁴ S. Kulpaczyński, *Uwarunkowania powstawania nowych metod katechetycznych*, „Katecheta” 50(2011), nr 11, pp. 12-16; A. Krasieński, *Teoria kształcenia wielostronnego Wincentego Okonia w dydaktyce szkolnej i katechetycznej*, „Seminare” 17(2001), pp. 89-98; A. Zellma, *Konstruktywizm w szkolnym nauczaniu religii – moda, wymóg edukacyjny czy zagrożenie?*, „Katecheta” 52(2008), nr 3, pp. 16-26.

ships between individual elements of the teaching-learning process (e.g. didactic objectives, content, methods, forms and resources), specified in the religion teaching core curriculum and syllabus. They also point to the relationship between the conditions of a religion teacher's and students' work and religious education outcomes¹⁵. This provides the basis for formulating specific generalisations, which apply to the religion teaching-learning process.

The functions of religion didactics in the religious education of children and adolescents

As has been pointed out above, studies of religion didactics deal with didactic activities of the religion teacher and students. It covers all the components and actions which comprise the religion teaching-learning at the school. Religion didactics assists in the religion teacher's professional activity, especially his/her effective work with students¹⁶. It has both a theoretical and a practical aspect. Researchers discover the principles of the religion teaching process and, at the same time, they formulate effective proposals concerning didactic activities of religion teachers and students. They also develop new theories of effective religion teaching. They also propose how to apply them in practice¹⁷. Therefore, religion didactics not only improves the teaching methods applied by a religion teacher, but it also improves the quality of religion teaching and contributes to effective organisation of the cognitive, emotional, social activity of students during the course of the lesson¹⁸.

Religion didactics provides religion teachers with the knowledge necessary to develop detailed directives which specify the methods of the proper performance of the teaching activities in the process of transmitting the faith contents, developing skills and moulding attitudes in participants of religion lessons. Religion teachers, involved in the religious education of children and adolescents, need to know the general principles of teaching processes so that they can use them to design – while adapting to specific features of religion teaching – and implement their curricular and extracurricular activities.

While making use of not only the achievements of theology but also – and mainly – various disciplines of humanities and social sciences, catechists bear in mind a specific target (children and adolescents) at a specific stage of the school education and various factors affecting their human and Christian development¹⁹. Therefore, they create – in a systematic and scientific manner – the theoretical foundations for the work of a religion teacher. This is attested to, for example, by studies of the effectiveness and adequacy of teaching-learning

¹⁵ S. Łabendowicz, *Dydaktyka katechezy*, dz. cyt., pp. 41-253; M. Korgul, *Dydaktyka dla katechetów*, dz. cyt., pp. 28-348.

¹⁶ S. Łabendowicz, *Dydaktyka katechezy*, dz. cyt., pp. 22-24.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

and self-education methods in the course of a religion lesson²⁰. Moreover, the issues that concern various methodological solutions and new information and communication technologies play an important role in the religious education of children and adolescents²¹. They always perform both cognitive and practical functions because they increase the effectiveness of implementation and performance of didactic tasks and objectives. They provide methodical tools which facilitate discovering and understanding the reality and remembering knowledge and developing skills²².

Proposals developed by religion didacticicians also perform diagnostic and motivational functions. Religion didactics provides tools necessary to measure students' knowledge and skills. At the same time, it indicates the importance of didactic methods and techniques, which motivate children and adolescents to learn by stimulating their curiosity and interest in religious matters²³. Of considerable importance are all the proposals that serve the multi-directional activation of students and which evoke positive experiences, make one reflect, evaluate and control oneself.

Considering the specific nature of religion teaching at the school, which is a direct consequence of the objectives and content related to the reality of faith, attitude of faith, developing the bond with God and with the Church community, religion didactics specifies the criteria of selecting such methodical solutions that support proper implementation of the curriculum principles of religion teaching at the school. It specifies the didactic forms, methods, techniques and resources that improve the effectiveness of the religion teaching process. It also specifies the regularities related to the course of the religion lesson considering the educational nature of religion teaching. It also specifies the regularities concerning the developing of attitudes and education for prayer during the religion lessons. In this manner, it performs ancillary and auxiliary functions. "Its task", as Stanisław Łabendowicz rightly points out, "is to serve (...) the meeting"²⁴ of children and adolescents with God and establishing a personal bond with Him and finding such methods of didactic activity that will lead to the dialogue between the religion teacher, the lesson participants and

²⁰ See e.g. S. Kulpaczyński, *Memoryzacja w katechezie*, „Roczniki Teologiczne” 55(2008), z. 6, pp. 133-147; S. Łabendowicz, *Realizacja zasady aktywności w strukturze procesu dydaktycznego*, „Zeszyty Formacji Katechetów” 18(2018), nr 2, pp. 63-76.

²¹ See e.g. P. Mąkosa, *Mass media narzędziem czy środowiskiem katechezy?*, w: *Katechetyka i katecheza u progu XXI wieku*, red. A. Kiciński, Poznań 2007, pp. 375-395; M. Zając, *Możliwość wykorzystania technologii informacyjno-komunikacyjnych w edukacji religijnej*, „Biuletyn Edukacji Medialnej” 2015, nr 2, pp. 85-96.

²² S. Łabendowicz, *Dydaktyka katechezy*, dz. cyt., pp. 139-277; A. Zellma, *Wielostronne aktywizowanie młodzieży w szkolnym nauczaniu religii. Studium w świetle Programu nauczania religii katolickiej z 2001 roku*, Olsztyn 2006.

²³ S. Kulpaczyński, *Uwarunkowania powstawania nowych metod...*, art. cyt., pp. 12-16.

²⁴ S. Łabendowicz, *Dydaktyka katechezy*, dz. cyt., p. 23.

God²⁵. Therefore, religion didactics does not focus only on cognitive functions, but it also emphasises the methodological solutions that serve the development of skills and attitudes. Proposals aimed at inducing changes in personalities of children and adolescents and supporting in discovering and internalising values are regarded as important. Therefore, didactics of religion teaching perform practical functions, which have clear educational and catechetical dimension.

The place of religion didactics in the educational activity of the religion teacher

Every educational activity of a religion teacher is always embedded in religion didactics. Designing and conducting religion lessons remains closely related to scientific and individual knowledge as well as didactic skills and experience of a religion teacher. It is not important how aware the religion teacher is of such associations. Regardless of more or less conscious references to the religion didactics, whenever a religion teacher initiates any didactic activities (e.g. plans a lesson, selects didactic methods and techniques, applies specific methodological solutions), he is driven by certain convictions regarding how – from the didactic perspective – his educational activities should look like.

Emphasising the role of religion didactics in the educational activity of the religion teacher can be practical or interpretative-constructivist²⁶. Each focuses on different reasoning and different attitude of the religion teacher to didactic theories. Orientation towards practical use of religion didactics research findings can make the teacher pay more attention to and use only those methodological solutions which he finds effective in the religious education of children and adolescents. In such a case he chooses from the didactic offer what – in his opinion – can be helpful in good and effective religion teaching. Such an approach to religion didactics poses a threat of pragmatism and subjectivism. There is also a great risk that the religion teacher will only find those didactic solutions valuable that focus on the organisation of the religion teaching process and student activation. Although a practical approach to religion didactics is inevitably a part of the religion teacher educational activity, limiting oneself to it can lead to reductionism. In practical terms, the religion teacher leaves out or reduces the value of the didactic content, methods and resources, which – in his and his students' opinion – are not very interesting, but they are of educational and catechetical value. This is mainly about the curricular assumptions (didactic goals, forms, methods, resources) associated with the development of the knowledge of faith, conscience formation, education for prayer, liturgical education, education for community life, introduction to missions²⁷. Methodologi-

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ See e.g. and compare: M. Czerepaniak-Walczak, *Funkcje koncepcji pedagogicznych w pracy nauczycieli i nauczycielek*, „Refleksje” 2014, nr 6, pp. 10-14.

²⁷ See e.g. and compare: Konferencja Episkopatu Polski, *Podstawa programowa katechezy Kościoła katolickiego w Polsce*, Częstochowa 2018.

cal pragmatism can become apparent in the educational activity of the religion teacher, which negates the importance of the didactic and catechetical theory. The religion teacher who adopts such an attitude picks only such solutions from the religion didactics which are effective instructions or are simple in application and seemingly attractive.

The interoperative-constructivist approach to religion didactics is of a different nature. The solutions proposed in religion didactics are regarded by the religion teacher not as an effective tool and a recipe for the effective religious education of children and adolescents, but as guidance which requires a reflexive and creative approach. In such a case, the religion teacher reflects both on the educational reality, dynamics of the religion lesson, the lesson participants, events that take place during the lesson and on himself and his methodological activities. This helps him to develop his professional competences, as well as personality, individuality and creativity. At the same time, he sees the need for a creative approach to the theory of religion didactics. Importantly, he designs his lessons in a more creative and conscious manner, constructs his practical knowledge and tries to implement new methodological solutions. When seeking various methodological solutions, the religion teacher is open to new theoretical concepts and practical innovations. However, he does not use them as instructions, with no reflection. On the contrary, he observes the educational reality and analyses it to plan and apply what – in his opinion – can help him in the effective religious education of children and adolescents. These activities are accompanied by reflections before, during and after the activity. The religion teacher does not focus only on practical skills. On the contrary, he applies a critical approach – both to the theory and practice, reliable interpretation of the educational events and reasonable combination of the theory and practice. Such an approach to religion didactics is helpful in the religious education of children and adolescents. It emphasises constructing and reconstructing various methodological solutions, which are based on good theories of religion didactics. By referring to current scientific knowledge, the teacher examines his own practice. He also uses his individual knowledge. He uses all this to design the religious education of children and adolescents in a purposeful, reflexive manner. He constantly asks himself this question: “What methodological solutions am I going to use in the course of a specific lesson and why?” Seeking an answer to it is a source of creativity in the religion teacher’s thinking and actions. It stimulates his activity in interpreting individual theoretical offers and creating original didactic solutions. It also helps him to recognise the individual knowledge of children and adolescents and to create opportunities for the students to participate actively in the course of religion lessons. A creative religion teacher allows his students to express their opinions. Moreover, he organises classes in such a way as to enable them to discover the contents of the faith themselves and to solve existential problems in light of the word of God.

Owing to assigning proper value to the religion didactic theory, the educational activity of a religion teacher is not the product of stereotypes, spontaneity and intuition, or a current fashion. On the contrary, it is scientifically justified. The religion teacher refers to the theory which he learned during the theological studies and which he constantly enriches and updates in the process of professional development. The religion teacher chooses from religion didactics what – in his opinion – is important and develops his own understanding of the methods of implementation of religious education of children and adolescents. Importantly, he also evaluates the proposals which are developed in religion didactics. It is the basis that the religion teacher uses to design lessons (goals, methods, forms of students' work organisation, didactic resources) and to conduct them. After a lesson is completed, he reflects on it and evaluates his own educational practice with a view to improving his own personality and teaching methods.

Final comments

Religion didactics requires constant critical thinking. This should help not only to show the importance of theory in the educational activity of the religion teacher but also to integrate the theory with practice. Both researchers (religion didacticists) and practitioners (religion teachers) constantly experience the tension between sticking to traditional solutions and opening to novelties and innovations. Correct choices can be made owing to reliable theoretical assumptions. Owing to the rooting of the theory and practice in the patterns of methodical procedure and teachers' professional experience of religion teachers, it is possible to approach creatively the new educational challenges and develop proposals different than those adopted in religion didactics. Religious education during the COVID-19 pandemic can be mentioned as an example. Both the theory and practice provide a few methodological proposals that can be used in remote religion teaching. The changing educational situation required that religion teachers initiate new actions, different than those usually performed in religion teaching. They were associated with the use of e-learning platforms and new information and communication technologies. Various methodological proposals have appeared on the Internet²⁸. They do not negate the traditional approach to religion teaching, but they suggested using new information and communication tools to provide religious education to children and adolescents. A decision regarding the choice of one among the proposals or sharing one's own ideas required critical thinking, knowledge of new information and communication technologies, openness and creativity. This situation has shown that contemporary religion didactics faces new tasks. More attention should be

²⁸ See e.g. eKai, *Zdalne nauczanie religii. Prezentujemy pomoce dla katechetów*, <https://ekai.pl/zdalne-nauczanie-religii-publikujemy-niezbedne-pomoce-dla-katechetow> (dostęp: 15.04.2020); compar: B. Bilicka, M. Gurzyński, *iPad na szkolnych lekcjach religii*, Toruń 2019.

paid to the tools used to create teaching aids supporting e-learning. Such tools include webinars and multimedia methods and teaching aids (educational games and online quizzes, multimedia presentations, interactive e-tasks). They are intended to support traditional methodological solutions.

The range and form of new teaching tools use depends solely on the competence and creativity of the religion teacher. Therefore, these issues should be emphasised in the teaching and professional development of religion teachers, because reliable theory, without excessive didacticism, is the foundation. Religious education of children and adolescents cannot be implemented competently and effectively without it. It seems that it is best to combine traditional proposals with methodological innovations. Specific experiences and individual knowledge of religion teachers should be used and theory should be integrated with practice. Moreover, conveying knowledge of modern methodological solutions requires giving up traditional methods of educating and professional development of religion teachers in favour of new information and communication technologies. Various e-learning aids and webinars can be useful.

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Summary

Religion didactics is one of the main and important subdisciplines of the integral catechetics. Recently, since the return of religion teaching to Polish schools (1990), intensive, interdisciplinary and multi-faceted religion didactics research has been conducted. The analyses performed in this study aimed at presenting the role of religion didactics in the religious education of children and adolescents. Analysis of the basic literature on religion didactics and religious education of children and adolescents was used to first point out the proper understanding of the object of studies of religion didactics. Subsequently, the functions of religion didactics in the religious education of children and adolescents were analysed and the place of the religion didactics in the educational activity of a religion teacher was shown. The final comments pointed out the need for taking up new issues associated with e-learning and the use of new information and communication technologies in religion teaching research. It is also important to emphasise the importance of combining traditional issues with those associated with methodological innovations, including new information and communication technologies.

Keywords: religion didactics, religious education, religion teacher, catechetics.

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