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Spiritual Support for Survivors of Domestic Violence in the Catholic Church in Poland

The article aims to draw attention to spiritual consequences of domestic violence¹ and the possibilities of helping its victims by the Catholic Church in Poland. For this reason, the analysis of the phenomenon itself, characteristic of such fields as psychology, criminology or sociology, will be omitted. Nevertheless, their language and methodology will be used in the present discussion and their findings will be brought up to show the complexity of the problem. It should be noted, however, that although both the Church and various sciences use the same language when talking about manifestations of violence, they indicate different sources when discussing its causes. Spirituality² refers not only to the processes taking place in the psyche and interpersonal relationships that are subject to scientific research, but also to the very reason of their occurrence, i.e. the cause of the existence of the world and the human being³.

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¹ The concept of domestic violence used in this paper is defined as “an intentional act or neglect of one person towards another, who, using the advantage of strength, violates the rights of the individual, causing suffering and damage”, see: <https://www.niebieskalinia.info/index.php/przemoc-w-rodzynie/6-co-to-jest-przemoc> (accessed: 22.02.2023).

² The definition of “spirituality” used in this article has been taken from the Polish Society for Spiritual Care in Medicine, which defines it as “a dimension of human life that relates to transcendence and other existentially important values”. Spirituality includes: 1) human religiosity, especially the human relationship with God, as well as customs, practices and community life; 2) searching for answers to existential questions relating especially to the meaning of life, suffering and death, to questions about one’s own dignity and who one is as a person, questions about freedom and responsibility, hope and despair, reconciliation and forgiveness, love and joy; 3) the values by which humans live, especially their relations with themselves and other people, attitudes to work, nature, art and culture, human choices in the sphere of morality and ethics, as well as “life itself”. See: <https://ptodm.org.pl> (accessed: 22.02.2023).

³ See G. del Pozo, *Chrześcijańskie życie w Duchu i według Ducha*, in: *Duch Odnowiciel* (collection „Communio”, vol. 12), ed. by L. Balter, Poznań 1998, pp. 218-232.

So what are spiritual needs? The Polish Society for Spiritual Care in Medicine has developed a definition of spirituality, in line with the definition adopted by experts associated with such institutions as the George Washington University Institute for Spirituality and Health (GWish) or City of Hope, as well as the European Association for Palliative Care (EAPC)⁴. This definition can also be applied in the discussion on supporting survivors and perpetrators of violence. Spirituality is defined as “a dimension of human life that relates to transcendence and other existentially important values”. From this perspective, spirituality includes:

- 1) human religiosity, especially the human relationship with God, as well as customs, practices and community life;
- 2) searching for answers to existential questions relating especially to the meaning of life, suffering and death, to questions about one’s own dignity and who one is as a person, questions about freedom and responsibility, hope and despair, reconciliation and forgiveness, love and joy;
- 3) the values by which humans live, especially their relations with themselves and other people, attitudes to work, nature, art and culture, human choices in the sphere of morality and ethics, as well as “life itself”.

For the Church, the existence of each person is a gift of life offered by the Creator⁵. This approach has some important consequences. The teaching of the Church is based on the premise that every human life has a meaning because God does not act pointlessly; it has a special value because God does not create worthless works; the purpose of life is to achieve wholeness both temporarily (happiness) and eternally (salvation)⁶. What follows from this teaching is that even difficult human experiences are meaningful, whether their sense is perceived or not. The experience of a number of people shows that by strug-

⁴ See <https://ptodm.org.pl/> (accessed: 22.02.2023).

⁵ See M. Ozorowski, *Wartość życia ludzkiego w nauczaniu papieży Jana Pawła II, Benedykta XVI i Franciszka*, “Teologia i Moralność” 2017, vol. 12, no. 2(22), pp. 36. (35-52). “For believers, God is not only the source of all existence, but also of all life. Life is more than a simple fact of existence. God’s life is spiritual in nature and is the archetype of every being. Human being is distinguished from other created beings. Though molded from the same “clay”, human being was created in God’s image. The life that God gives to people is different and distinct from that of all other living creatures, because a human being, although related to the dust of the earth, is a revelation of God in the world, a sign of His presence, a trace of His glory”. *ibid.*

⁶ See John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*. On the Value and Inviolability of Human Life, Vatican City 1995, no. 2 (abbr. to: EV): “Man is called to a fullness of life which far exceeds the dimensions of his earthly existence, because it consists in sharing the very life of God. The loftiness of this supernatural vocation reveals the greatness and the inestimable value of human life even in its temporal phase. Life in time, in fact, is the fundamental condition, the initial stage and an integral part of the entire unified process of human existence. It is a process which, unexpectedly and undeservedly, is enlightened by the promise and renewed by the gift of divine life, which will reach its full realization in eternity (cf. 1 Jn 3:1-2)”. Biblical quotations throughout the article have been taken from: *Pismo Święte Starego i Nowego Testamentu*, Poznań-Warszawa 2002.

gling with difficulties one can come to the fullness of life. Finding a way to change one's life so that it is already filled with happiness and opens up the perspective of eternity is the main goal of Christian spirituality⁷.

Spirituality, not ethics

When assessing the moral value of human acts, the Church uses a codified axiology that is very much embedded in our culture. The state's system of values, as expressed by codified laws, takes the same position in relation to violence. Violence in any form, as a method of action, is unacceptable, especially in the circle of relatives and dependants. It strikes at the legally protected fundamental human values and healthy social relationships, and is contrary to the Christian command to love one another, oneself and God. Human actions are judged by people and institutions, people judge themselves. Mature adults bear, and should bear, consequences of their actions. The use of domestic violence may result in legal penalties, the breakdown of relationships, destruction of family members' lives, their suffering, as well as self-degradation and moral pain of the perpetrator. Violence leads to moral destruction of social relationships and the lives of individual people⁸.

However, spirituality cannot be equated with morality. Christian spirituality is rather a way of being, experiencing each moment as a unique opportunity to choose good, and not to judge others. Spirituality does not free one from the consequences of their actions. It does not negate the values just so as not to feel the discomfort of suffering harm or moral guilt. Spirituality liberates and allows one to stay in the truth about oneself and about one's existence. It opens people to God, despite all the baggage of various experiences⁹.

Regardless of how conduct is judged by the court, society, and the perpetrator, there is always an open path to conversion, forgiveness, and improvement. Spirituality does not judge, but allows people to distinguish between good and bad. Only deeds are judged. No one has the power to condemn another person. Evil, understood in spiritual terms, can be defeated if one is determined to do so and is supported by God's grace. From a spiritual perspective, conversion, a change of attitude, repentance, and improvement are all elements of the path that leads to salvation.

A similarly optimistic view of human nature, but with a different type of argumentation, lies at the heart of social rehabilitation. In this approach, what is most crucial is the social effect, i.e. causing the perpetrator to behave in a socially acceptable manner. In the case of a spiritual change, though, the society

⁷ See I. Kucharewicz, *Co z tym szczęściem? Psychologia pozytywna w praktyce*, Warsaw 2015, p. 54.

⁸ Further on the consequences of violence, see K. Korab, *Przemoc*, in: *Encyklopedia nauczania społecznego Jana Pawła II*, ed. by A. Zwoliński, pp. 410-413. See also J. Helios, W. Jedlecka, *Współczesne oblicza przemocy. Zagadnienia wybrane*, Wrocław 2017.

⁹ Cf. G. May, *Uzależnienie i łaska. Miłość, duchowość, uwolnienie*, Poznań 1995, p. 187.

will not always benefit from it. Sometimes, one's spiritual change takes place "on one's deathbed" but opens a way to eternal life.

Beyond science

Apart from the visible and material space of human life, the Church perceives the invisible mental and spiritual realms as well. For believers, transcendence, i.e. the sphere that can be known only through faith, is the ultimate explanation of what is happening with their existence, where it comes from and where it is heading. Transcendence expands cognitive apparatus with tools that the natural and social sciences do not use. They may aim to study the manifestations of spirituality in the lives of societies or individuals, but not to explore spirituality itself. The Church uses the achievements of these sciences, adding a spiritual approach developed over many centuries.

From this perspective, the Church perceives violence more broadly than science or law. When used as a wicked means to achieve an end, violence does not only affect the other person, but is an offense against God, who is the source of dignity for every human being¹⁰.

For a believer, committing a sin is not only the breaking of human standards; it is essentially an attack on the sacred. A sin always violates the majesty of the Creator, regardless of whom it is directed against. There are no sins indifferent to God. Moreover, a sin inflicted on oneself, i.e. self-aggression, is also considered a moral evil from the point of view of the Church's teaching¹¹. However, such an approach is not present in legal systems in which, for example, self-mutilation or self-destruction are not punished, but only entail civil consequences.

Two paths for a priest

There are two ways in which priests can provide pastoral help to people affected by domestic violence, which are not contradictory to each other. First,

¹⁰ EV 8: "At the root of every act of violence against one's neighbour there is a concession to the 'thinking' of the evil one, the one who 'was a murderer from the beginning' (Jn 8:44). As the Apostle John reminds us: "For this is the message which you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another, and not be like Cain who was of the evil one and murdered his brother" (1 Jn 3:11-12). Cain's killing of his brother at the very dawn of history is thus a sad witness of how evil spreads with amazing speed: man's revolt against God in the earthly paradise is followed by the deadly combat of man against man".

¹¹ John Paul II, *Christifideles laici*. Post-synodal exhortation on the vocation and the mission of the lay faithful in the Church and in the world, Vatican City 1988, no. 5; *ibid*, *Nauka Kościoła o grzechu pierwotnym*, in: *Katechezy Ojca Świętego Jana Pawła II. Jezus Chrystus*, Kraków-Ząbki 1999, Catechesis no. 5, p. 5. On the terminology and understanding of "sin", see: L. Stachowiak, *Grzech. W Piśmie Świętym*, in: *Encyklopedia katolicka*, vol. 6, Lublin 1993, pp. 265-267; S. Rosik, *Grzech w świetle antropologii biblijnej*, "Częstochowskie Studia Teologiczne" 1986, no. 14, pp. 57-97. See also Z. Sareło, *Destrukcyjne skutki grzechu*, in: *Moralność chrześcijańska* (kolekcja „Communio”, no. 2), Poznań-Warszawa 1987, pp. 295-304.

there is institutional help as defined in Art. 9.1. of the Act on counteracting domestic violence¹². This article stipulates that government and self-government administration bodies cooperate with non-governmental organizations, Churches and religious associations on providing support to people affected by violence and corrective measures towards perpetrators. Further, it indicates the possibility of cooperation between the Church and administrative bodies in order to raise social awareness of the origins and consequences of domestic violence. However, this element will be omitted in the present discussion.

Realizing this institutional form of help, a priest should, first of all, offer usual human support to all those in need, regardless of their worldview. It would be beneficial if priests were prepared to fulfill such roles. Today, however, it is not enough to reach out to those in need only with the authority of a clergyman and the rhetoric of consolation. Priests, in most cases, are not psychologists, but have an enormous experience, acquired, among others, in giving the sacrament of penance and listening to human problems and wounded souls. It is a value that goes beyond any worldview. For Catholics, it is perhaps not something that happens every day, but it is quite natural to contact a priest, whether through conversation or confession, when struggling with life difficulties.

No one can be forced to open up to a Catholic priest, yet the pastoral practice in providing hospice and hospital care shows that it is not only Catholics who want to participate in such deep and personal conversations. Spiritual needs are real, though very often people are insufficiently aware of them, and, even more often, they express them in a wrong way or do not express them at all.

In secularized societies, people have spiritual needs, however these increasingly take on a non-confessional character. Hence the need for priests to understand them more broadly compared to their traditional meaning¹³. A priest should be open and willing to help everyone, not only those who identify themselves with the Catholic Church, not only victims of violence, but also perpetrators. Spiritual care should include both the fulfilling of a person's religious needs as well as assisting them in finding a sense of meaning in life, strength to face difficulties and hope to make necessary changes. It should be noted, however, that the situation in which a person confides in a priest and talks about violence they experience or about violence they inflict themselves is different from the situation when a priest is to intervene in painful family matters. The intervention of a priest must require the consent of the person concerned.

¹² Act on counteracting domestic violence in the family of 29 July 2005, Dz. U. of 2020, items 218, 956.

¹³ According to M. Wnuk "since the second half of the twentieth century, the process of autonomization of spiritual experiences has continued, which have separated them from their religious context and combined with secular values". Ibid., *Religijność a duchowość – podobieństwa i różnice*, "Przegląd Religioznawczy" 2013, no. 2(248), p. 111.

The pain of honesty

The other way of helping survivors of domestic violence is the priest's ministry as a pastor of the Catholic Church. In Poland, where a significant part of society declares to be Catholic, spiritual help should be provided to people suffering from painful experiences. In addition to human support and conversation, a priest can offer the Catholics the sacrament of confession. It gives a penitent the opportunity to express their sorrow and pain in the confidentiality of the confessional. In many cases, this is what makes people open up, tell the truth about themselves, family relationships, harm they inflicted on others or harm they suffered themselves. Penitentiary practice shows that confession is not only about extensive justifications, rhetorical procedures and explanations of one's arguments. Confession is an opportunity to express enormous pain of existence, wounds experienced over the years by the loved ones or the wounds inflicted on them. Those who receive the sacrament of confession undertake the effort of self-reflection, discerning what is important and painful. Often, with time, they are able to forgive and reconcile. However, such effects of spiritual transformation sometimes cannot be achieved at all¹⁴.

Searching for the truth

It is very difficult to express the most fundamental truths about one's own life honestly and without exaltation. It often requires a long time to mature during therapy, meditation, prayer and conversations. An acute crisis helps to let go of repressed anger, regret, helplessness, but it does not always mean that a person understands what they are experiencing. Many years of passive endurance of violence cannot be screamed out in a single row or act of opposition. Sometimes the outburst of emotions is so violent that it turns a victim into a perpetrator. The consequences of their act are visible, readily judged and easy to prove. Yet, it is not easy to see years of being a victim of silent violence beneath what can be seen on the surface, expressed in violent emotions. After all, evident violence, which is punishable by the law, is only a tip of the iceberg¹⁵.

There is also fuzzy violence, which takes various, hardly noticeable forms. Such behaviors are very often treated by the family and environment as non-existent, unimportant, accidental or "normal". How hard is it to notice, for example, an emotional neglect of a child? How often does it seem very amusing to talk a little maliciously about a spouse or to address him or her in such a way? At first glance, nothing bad is happening. However, such behaviors are, in fact, acts of violence with similar consequences as "perceptible" violence.

¹⁴ Cf. V.E. Frankl, *Człowiek w poszukiwaniu sensu*, trans. by A. Wolnicka, Warszawa 2017, pp. 119-120.

¹⁵ Cf. D. Rode, *Psychologiczne uwarunkowania przemocy w rodzinie. Charakterystyka sprawców*, Katowice 2010, p. 30, 41.

A person treated in this way senses that there is something wrong but needs much more time to realize the wrong done. It is also difficult to react adequately, because it is difficult to grasp what the perpetrator actually did; after all, no one was hit, no one raised their voice, left a crying child, or made a row when drunk. The helplessness of unnoticed, unnamed and unspoken harm is often heard in conversations¹⁶.

No pretended repentance

A priest who intervenes in a situation of domestic violence must become familiar with the problems of a given family. A quick administration of the sacrament of penance is not always the best solution. The abused person will let go of their anger, and the abuser will promise improvement. They will apparently reach an “agreement”. After the crisis has reached its peak, adopting such an attitude is a fairly convenient way to take a pause in a conflict. An agreement that is obtained too quickly and easily is based on wishful thinking rather than a profound change. In case of domestic violence, family members usually need spiritual support for a long period of time. The use of violence is, after all, a deeply rooted mistake in life, which disorganizes the functioning of the family to the point from which it is impossible to recover for many years. Similarly, consent to violence and submission to it becomes a victim’s default mode of functioning and a severely distorted way of interpreting life, which is very difficult to self-verify¹⁷. Such attitudes may characterize one-way relations between a perpetrator and a victim, but they may also relate to, for example, both spouses or both sides of the parent-child relationship. As a rule, such an arrangement in the family escalates and is so hermetic that only a more serious crisis gives the parties a chance to open up, and an opportunity for intervention. Untangling these knots of pathological relations is a long-term task. Immediate absolution in the sacrament of confession can only sanctify apparent solutions. The best course of action would be to combine spiritual support with psychological therapy of all individuals involved in domestic violence¹⁸.

With a scalpel or a hammer

Violence, especially domestic violence, is a socially important but delicate issue. Intervention in this area, by the police or social services, requires special sensitivity and intuition, and so does the pastoral ministry to the survivors of domestic violence.

In the case of state entities authorized to intervene in situations of domestic violence – e.g. support centers for victims of domestic violence or the police – the provisions of statutory law define the scope of intervention and determine

¹⁶ See *ibid.*, pp. 399n.

¹⁷ See J. Mellibruda, *Przeciwdziałanie przemocy w rodzinie*, Warszawa 2009, p. 10.

¹⁸ See D. Rode, *Psychologiczne uwarunkowania przemocy w rodzinie*, op. cit., pp. 301-329.

the possibilities and methods of action. State bodies and officials can only act within the limits and on the basis of the law. The assistance they provide may ultimately take the form of authorized violence, i.e. penalties or compulsory corrective and educational measures applied to the perpetrators¹⁹.

The support provided to people affected by violence has its own dynamics. When an intervention towards a family starts with the “Blue Card” procedure²⁰, the consent of the person suffering from domestic violence is not required. The perpetrator’s consent to take measures preventing them from contacting the victim is not required either. Court proceedings have their own procedures that cannot be stopped by the will of the parties. As a result, seemingly reconciled families are willing to withdraw their complaints. This often leads them back to the rut of violence²¹.

Spiritual help, though, can only be given with the consent of the person involved. It can and should be provided to all parties affected by violence. The Church and priests should not limit their pastoral ministry only to the survivors. Accepting and realizing the gravity and consequences of their wrongdoings, the perpetrator should be given support in the process of nonviolence. Such a position was also expressed in Art. 9.1. of the Act on Counteracting Domestic Violence, regulating not only the issue of providing help to people affected by violence, but also abusers²².

Pastoral help in violent homes should be, to some extent, provided outside the victim-perpetrator categories. The priests should skillfully distinguish between “who beats and who is beaten”. They should also notice that the perpetrator’s acts of violence are only a distant consequence of the evil that could have occurred much earlier in their life and their family. It could be “sucked out with mother’s milk” or imprinted in the heart with the father’s yell of rage. It is often the result of a subtle, long escalation of mutual dislike between relatives, who, at least formally, should be the dearest to each other²³.

State authorities empowered to intervene in a situation of domestic violence rely on evidence. Without a proof of guilt, it is difficult to operate effectively in court, and even when the evidence is present, it only shows a piece of reality. Usually, it only represents one side of the problem. In the case of long-

¹⁹ Cf. Art. 4. of the Act on counteracting domestic violence, op. cit. With regard to the perpetrators of domestic violence, measures set forth in this Act aiming at preventing their contact with victims and corrective and educational measures are enforced.

²⁰ Act on counteracting domestic violence, op. cit., Art. 9d. 1.

²¹ Further see A. Chojnacki, *Wieloperspektywiczna superwizja w obszarze przeciwdziałania przemocy*, “Świat Problemów” 2021, no. 1, pp. 7-11.

²² *Supervision of the National Emergency Service for Victims of Domestic Violence “Blue Line”*. Aleksandra Przybora speaks with Wanda Paszkiewicz – psychotherapist, supervisor, head of the National Emergency Service for Victims of Domestic Violence “Blue Line”, “Świat Problemów” 2021, no. 1, pp. 12-15.

²³ See J. Bryk, *Przestępstwo znęcania się. Studium prawnokarne i kryminalistyczne*, Szczytno 2003.

term violent relationships, it is likely that one of the parties was lucky and, for example, found a witness, took a photo or made a recording. However, this can only be a snapshot of long-lasting and multidimensional violence, which is far from being objective. A court decision made on this premise may only deepen the frustration of the convicted person, instead of encouraging them to reflect. As a result, the conflict may grow in intensity or take more subtle forms of violence and provocations, i.e. further escalation of the conflict is most likely²⁴. The task of a priest is not only to support the victim temporarily or restrain the perpetrator, but – in the longer term – to lead them on the path on which they can live the life given to them by God.

Out of lack of love

Violence is evil. It is the opposite of love. Love, on the other hand, is the key to Christianity. According to psychologists, violence results from the inability to deal with emotions. However, emotions are neither good nor bad, so they are not subject to moral judgment. What is wrong, and therefore unacceptable by society, is certain ways of expressing them.

According to the Church, roots of violence are not only found in emotional states but also in an improperly formed conscience. There is a concept of sin in the teaching of the Church, which, as stated in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, is a voluntary and conscious turning away from God. The Catechism speaks of a grave sin which destroys love in the human heart through major violation of God's law and turns a person away from God, who is their final goal and happiness. Therefore, a grave sin is often referred to as mortal sin. On the other hand, a light sin, or venial sin, "allows charity to subsist, even though it offends and wounds it"²⁵. However, neither the Decalogue nor the list of the seven deadly sins contain the sin of violence. It is rather a form or an instrument of committing sin.

Violence – a tool of crime

Violence is a socially unacceptable behavior that should be punished by a legal system. For centuries, law has limited the use of violence, although it has probably never tried to eliminate it as much as in contemporary culture. The penal code regulates the liability for committing particular prohibited acts with the use or threat of violence.

Violence is behavior which is intended to influence another person's thinking, behavior, or physical condition without this person's consent. By inflicting violence to others, the offender wants to obtain some crucial resources. It is an

²⁴ See A. Filipek, *Wspomaganie człowieka dorosłego w sytuacji przemocy w rodzinie*, Białystok 2017, p. 96n.

²⁵ Catechism of the Catholic Church 1855.

intentional, rational and deliberate action²⁶. Chapter XXIII of “Offenses Against Freedom” of the Criminal Code includes perhaps the most abstract provision on violence. Article 191 § 1 stipulates that anyone who uses force or an illegal threat with the purpose of compelling another person to conduct themselves in a specified manner, or to resist from or to submit to a certain conduct shall be subject to the penalty of deprivation of liberty for up to three years²⁷.

Anti-violence laws are found throughout the Criminal Code. Acts of violence or threats to use violence are among crimes directed against peace and humanity, the Republic of Poland, life and health, sexual freedom and decency, the activities of state institutions and local self-government, the administration of justice, public order or against property. The list of values protected against violence is long. For example, personal values are classified as being at risk of five types of violence (as differentiated by the State Agency for Solving Alcohol Problems): physical, mental, sexual, economic violence and neglect²⁸.

Physical violence includes interfering with one’s body - violating its structure or the right to inviolability. The appropriate legal qualification of a violent act depends on the degree of intensity of these interferences. Pulling or pushing may be classified as a violation of personal inviolability, which is punishable by up to one year in prison. Causing permanent damage to health is punishable by a penalty of up to 10 years imprisonment, and causing death by a penalty of 25 years imprisonment or a life sentence²⁹.

Psychological violence can include very diverse types of behavior. It causes non-material harmful effects in the victim, including fear or loss of dignity. Due to their specificity, they are more difficult to prove than physical abuse. This group includes threats, the so-called *stalking*, extortion and insults³⁰.

Sexual violence refers to a forced intercourse, other unacceptable sexual behavior without the victim’s consent, using a handicapped person for these purposes, pedophilia or incest. In case of rape, the offender may be imprisoned for up to 12 years³¹.

Economic violence takes place when the abuser, for example, steals a spouse's personal belongings or destroys them. Another manifestation of economic violence is limiting access to financial resources or controlling the expenses of a spouse³².

²⁶ See J. Mazur, *Przemoc w rodzinie. Teoria i rzeczywistość*, Warszawa 2002, pp. 41-42.

²⁷ Criminal Code Act of 6 June 1997, Dz.U. of 1997, no. 88, item 553, as amended in Dz.U. of 2020, items. 1444, 1517.

²⁸ See D. Kubacka-Jasiecka, *Interwencja kryzysowa. Pomoc w kryzysach psychologicznych*, Warszawa 2010, p. 332.

²⁹ Cf. Criminal Code Act of 6 June 1997, op. cit., Art 217, 153, 157 § 2, 157 § 1, 156, 148.

³⁰ Cf. *ibid.* Art. 190, 190a, 191, 216, 212.

³¹ Cf. *ibid.* Art. 198, 200, 201, 202.

³² Cf. *ibid.* Art. 278, 284 i 288.

Neglect is a crime of omission, i.e. it occurs when the perpetrator does not perform certain duties, e.g. they abandon or expose the child to the risk of loss of health or life³³.

The offender can use violence in various life situations towards their next of kin. We can then speak of a crime of mistreatment³⁴.

Violence – a tool of evil

If a “penal code” were to be created in the Catholic Church, it would not be difficult to notice that, as in the case of criminal law, the use of violence is characteristic of a number of different sins. Among the commandments of the Decalogue, the one that seems to be connected most with violence is the fifth commandment “do not kill”. However, “honor your father and mother”, “do not steal”, “do not commit adultery” or “do not bear false witness against your neighbor” are the laws of God that are most often broken using violence. Violence is a form of transgression, and, simultaneously, the deepest contradiction of Christ’s commandment “love your neighbor as yourself”³⁵.

In its moral teaching, the Church promotes the idea of nonviolent communication³⁶. It even proclaims that it is not hatred, but violence that is the deepest denial of love. Because love is not about emotions, and neither is violence. Human life is fully realized – physically, spiritually and emotionally – only in love. Violence is an obstacle to this.

The goal of Christian spirituality is to achieve the fullness of life that God has given to human beings here on earth and to enter His kingdom after death. One of the topics discussed by St. Paul is *pleroma*, that is, the experience of living fully in Christ, being in union with God as the source of all life. It is the state of being in love. Its fruits are described by St. Paul’s in the following way:

Love is patient,
 Love is kind.
 Love is not boastful
 or envious or
 arrogant or rude.
 Love does not insist on its own way;
 it is not irritable or resentful;
 it does not rejoice in wrongdoing,
 but rejoices in the truth³⁷.

³³ Cf. *ibid.* Art. 209, 210 and 160.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, Art. 207.

³⁵ Cf. E. Kowalewska-Borys, *Problematyka przemocy w rodzinie*, Warszawa 2012, p. 14.

³⁶ This is largely in line with the ideas of a deeply empathetic mode of communication – nonviolent communication – as developed by the American psychologist, philosopher and mediator Marshall B. Rosenberg. In Poland, his work, *Non-violent Communication*, among others, was published. *Ibid.*, Warsaw 2017.

³⁷ 1 Corinthians 13: 4-6.

The attributes of love listed above are incompatible with violence. Giving spiritual help to people suffering from violence, a Catholic priest must also look at the problem from the perspective of the fullness of life. Violence has its roots at the very heart of human existence and the eternal struggle between good and evil. Every human existence is part of this tragedy. That is why the Church does not punish for the committed sins, but constantly reminds of the need to convert. The Church teaches that this must be a permanent process. Although the decision to turn away from evil, the breakthrough, is crucial, it is just as important to constantly reflect on the nature of the sin a given person is struggling with in every decision and choice they make; to constantly and carefully destroy its roots before it has fully grown in their hearts. A spiritual struggle consists precisely in the conscious choice of every moment free from evil. Spirituality is not knowledge. It is the very matter of being³⁸.

Self-love

Many people today do not recognize their wrong and sinful behavior. John Paul II, when asked by a journalist what is the gravest sin today, replied: confusion of values³⁹. Reversing concepts semantically is much easier than turning away from wrong thinking and perception of the world. A violent person may want good, but achieves evil. They may be convinced that their actions bring good, but the cost of this “gain” is the suffering of another person and, simultaneously, an offense against God. Although violence is willing to disguise itself from the world, it intentionally acts to achieve its goal at least at someone else’s expense. From a spiritual perspective, such an attitude ultimately turns against the wrongdoer.

“For what will a man profit if he gains the whole world and loses his soul?”⁴⁰ These words of Jesus are the essence of spiritual loss: there are no values worth acquiring wickedly. And violence is a wicked way of achieving goals. From the practical point of view its effectiveness does not change its moral evaluation, nor does it eliminate the destruction in the perpetrator’s spiritual life, i.e. in the very matter of their existence. Christian spirituality leads to self-understanding and, as a result, to self-limitation, even in using violence. Its goal is to achieve the fullness of life. God Almighty created humans so that they might have life in abundance. People should be aware of their own needs and that they should meet them using appropriate and right tools⁴¹.

³⁸ M. Daniluk, *Duchowość chrześcijańska*, in: *Encyklopedia Katolicka*, Lublin 1983, vol. 4, kol. 317.

³⁹ “Learn to call white what is white and black what is black; evil what is evil and good what is good. Learn to call sin a sin, not liberation and progress”. Cf. EV 58, and also John Paul II, *Reconciliatio et paenitentia*. A post-synodal exhortation on reconciliation and penance in the mission of the Church today, Vatican City 1984, no. 18.

⁴⁰ Matthew 16: 26.

⁴¹ Cf. V.E. Frankl, *Człowiek w poszukiwaniu sensu*, op. cit., pp. 151-152.

Bad thoughts, bad life

At the heart of Christian spirituality lies the tradition of the desert fathers who confronted the nature of evil in solitude and explored ways to overcome it. Their knowledge is not only based on intellectual intuition, but above all on existential experience. In their contemplative life, they experienced the influence of evil thoughts themselves. For Evagrius of Pontus, one of the most influential desert fathers, a bad thought is a kind of a wrong way of perceiving reality; a specific dimension of its perception in which a person sees the key to solving their problems. Bad thoughts have their own kind of autonomous energy that flows further and ignites new areas of temptation⁴².

Eight patterns of evil thoughts are eight evil ways of living and solving problems. What an evil thought aims for is important to a given individual, but efforts to meet their needs through a bad attitude have the opposite effect. Gluttony, lust, greed, anger, sadness, acedia, vainglory, and pride mentioned by Evagrius are extremely wrong approaches to meeting human real needs, such as the need for satiety, closeness and carnal pleasures, financial security, a sense of dignity, joy, and sense of being appreciated⁴³.

Evagrius speaks of eight kinds of evil thoughts, but not sins. Sin is the fruit of such thinking. The purpose of Evagrius' teachings is not to fight individual wrong deeds, but to reflect on what causes them. Evil thoughts cascade over human beings⁴⁴. The first three thoughts discussed by Evagrius tempt people to absorb the world, use people, and take possession of material goods. Unrestrained gratification in these spheres opens the way to physical, mental, sexual or financial violence. It is also clear that the unrestrained satisfaction of consumer, sexual or financial needs is the basic lifestyle pattern promoted in mass culture today. It is interesting that, on the one hand, legal systems define protection against violence more and more precisely, but on the other hand, the mentality of achieving happiness at any cost, even at the cost of abuse against others, is expanding.

According to Evagrius, anger is easily directed against others and oneself. It occurs when a person's needs in the first three areas cannot be fully satisfied. Anger is a rebellion against the world that cannot be controlled and against oneself for not coping with one's own lives. It is also aimed at the "unjust God" who does not do our will. Anger is blind. It is the best inner justification for the use of violence. It induces irrational actions aimed at acquiring things not yet possessed or destroying what cannot be possessed. Thus, anger is born in a person, which destroys them and their relationships. It absorbs a lot of life

⁴² See L. Misiarczyk, *Osiem duchów zła i sposoby walki z nimi według Ewagriusza z Pontu*, Kraków 2015, pp. 17-108.

⁴³ See *ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ewagriusz z Pontu, wybór z traktatu o praktyce ascetycznej*, ed. Sz. Hiżycki, Kraków 2015, p. 12.

force, and when it burns out, it drives into further evil thoughts – sadness and discouragement with life.

Forgiveness to others and oneself, reconciliation

Spirituality is not a tool of moral judgment or justice. It is a way to transform and improve human life. Its most desirable effect on human existence is the individual's return to being close with God again, integrating their inner life and repairing relations with others. For this to happen, one needs to understand the wrong done, repent, regret and transform. These are the key elements that can bring forgiveness, self-forgiveness and reconciliation. For a Catholic, the mediator of reconciliation in relations with God is the Church, which celebrates the sacrament of penance and reconciliation⁴⁵. In the Catholic Church today, it is included among the sacraments of healing, along with the anointing of the sick⁴⁶.

The faithful who come to the sacrament of penance and reconciliation individually reveal their sins to the confessor. The conditions of a good confession are an examination of conscience, accepting an attitude of repentance, i.e. repentance for sins and making a strong decision to correct, sincere confession of sins, as well as compensation to God and neighbor for the harm done.

If a person who uses violence goes to confession, it may be assumed that they agree to a moral or legal judgment of their actions, and to bear their canonical or civil-legal consequences, and that they want to repair the damage caused to God and other people. A relief from guilt does not absolve the person from the consequences of their actions. In the social dimension, it makes sense to apply penalties and corrective measures as they can become a turning point in the perpetrator's life and prevent further acts of violence. It is worth noting, however, that they are based on violence as a tool of persuasion or restriction. If the offender is able to understand the messages from society, psychologists and priests, they will have the opportunity to get rid of the mistake that devastated the lives of their loved ones⁴⁷.

The priest administering the sacrament of reconciliation has no tools to verify the authenticity of the penitent's attitudes. Giving absolution and assigning penance, the priest assumes that the penitent has developed a mature sense of responsibility. However, if he is in contact with the offender and the victims, he can take further care of the family. Supporting all family members, the priest's spiritual work could result not only in a change of the perpetrator's

⁴⁵ Catechism of the Catholic Church 1423.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, no. 1421.

⁴⁷ The cross here is admitting to the shameful truth, the risk of calling the emergency service for victims of violence, reporting a crime, deciding to separate, enduring misunderstanding on the part of the loved ones. All this is difficult, it is a way of the cross, which, however, leads to the liberation of oneself and the closest persons from the evil loop.

behavior, but also in forgiveness on the part of the victims as well as self-forgiveness by the offender⁴⁸.

Lack of forgiveness, long-lasting regret, and the feeling of hurt are emotions that hit victims with a ricochet and can paralyze their lives. Forgiveness requires going beyond the measures of justice, one's own reasons, the need for revenge, or compensation for the wrong and harm done. No one will force the victim to truly forgive the offender, and apparent forgiveness will not bring any lasting results. Jesus encouraged forgiveness. The words of the prayer He taught us: "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors" are a daily reminder for Christians that forgiveness is an act that frees one's heart from burden. An enormous effort to forgive brings a great relief and opens a person to God's grace⁴⁹.

Forgiveness is inscribed in the human spirituality. A well-formed spiritual attitude allows to enjoy life to the fullest and achieve those values that are not guaranteed by moral or social pressure, or punishments established by law. It not only helps the victims to forgive for the harm done, but to reconcile with the offender as well. It is precisely a sincere reconciliation in families that should be a long-term but primary goal of the help provided by the priest in case of domestic violence⁵⁰.

From the point of view of both science and the Church, all violence is evil and no circumstances would make an exception to this statement. The law resolves this issue unequivocally in terms of guilt and punishment, while the Church, respecting the legal approach, must fulfill a much more difficult task – healing the soul wounded by violence, the soul of the victim and the soul of the perpetrator, or at least attempt to do so. Like psychology, faith is there to help people "work through" the trauma and get back into a mental balance, but it is also about forgiveness – that is the most difficult task. The guidance for Catholics and priests, whose role is to accompany the faithful in the difficulties of spiritual life and in their life problems, should be the words of St. Paul about love. Love is not angry, but is patient, it does not act shamefully, and does not remember anything wrong. This is the key to real repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation.

⁴⁸ John Paul II, in the apostolic exhortation *Familiaris Consortio* concerning the role of the Christian family, emphasizes that violence is an attack on stability, balance, happiness and the real good of man and family (cf. FC 76). The Pope reminds the priests that their pastoral commitment should be "more generous, intelligent and prudent, modelled on the Good Shepherd, in the case of families which, often independently of their own wishes and through pressures of various other kinds, find themselves faced by situations which are objectively difficult" (FC 77). See *ibid.*, *Familiaris consortio*. Post-synodal exhortation on the role of the Christian family in the modern world, Vatican City 1981.

⁴⁹ See K. Chappel, *Mogę wybaczyć, jeśli tylko chcę*, Warszawa 2008.

⁵⁰ Cf. John Paul II, *Message for the celebration of the XXXV World Day of Peace (1 January 2002)*, <http://niedziela.pl/artykul.php?id=110313915900003001005006> (accessed: 7.02.2021).

Spiritual Support for Survivors of Domestic Violence in the Catholic Church in Poland

Summary

Spiritual consequences of domestic violence and the possibility of helping its survivors by the Catholic Church differ from the ones provided by the state. The Church sees every human being as a gift of life offered by the Creator. According to His teachings, the purpose of life, the purpose of Christian spirituality, is reaching fullness both temporally and eternally. Therefore, all human experiences – good and bad – have a deep sense and purpose. Violence, which has been with us since the very beginning of humanity, is evil that we have to renounce and atone for; it is a contradiction of love. However, no matter what penalty is administered on a guilty person, God gives a sacrament of confession, which is one of the healing sacraments that open the way to repentance and forgiveness. One has to bear in mind that regardless of its form – physical, psychological, economical, or self-destructing behavior – every act of violence is, for a believer, not only a violation against human norms but also a sin against God's majesty. Clerics can and should help both victims and perpetrators of violence because they have experience and knowledge of human problems and tragedies; on the one hand, they perform the sacrament of reconciliation, on the other hand, they can work with families struck by violence, supporting them on the way to reconciliation and forgiveness.

Keywords: family violence, spiritual support, love, evil, sin, repentance, reconciliation.

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