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Missionary Formation of Children in the Virtual World

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Abstract

The article shows that the virtual world has become a very important space of children's daily life as they seem to spend quite a lot of time there. It seems to hold a role in their enculturation and that's why it is crucial to use it in missionary formation. Catholic Church uses the Internet to inform about missions, missionary actions and work all around the world as well as to inform about "support" web-sites. Through those, She makes available various means and tools for religion teachers, catechists and ministers like lesson scenarios, stage productions, movies, photos or PowerPoint presentations and encourages to take part in different competitions on missions and missionary life, such as The White Week of children that received their First Holy Communion. Though one can find in information on missions a noticeable lack of various games both on-line and board, as well as quizzes and interactive applications. The task of creating new, interactive multimedia becomes an extra challenge that Catholic Church in Poland faces today.

Keywords: missions, catechesis, children, missionary formation, the Internet.

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Streszczenie

Artykuł wykazuje, że świat wirtualny stał się niezwykle ważną przestrzenią codziennego życia dzieci, skoro spędzają w nim stosunkowo dużo czasu. Wydaje się spełniać rolę w ich inkulturacji, dlatego jest istotny w zastosowaniu do formacji misyjnej. Kościół Katolicki stosuje Internet do informowania o misjach, akcjach misyjnych i działalności na całym świecie, a także do informowania o tak zwanych „wspierających” stronach internetowych. Poprzez nie Kościół udostępnia rozmaite sposoby i narzędzia dla nauczycieli religii, katechetów i duchownych takie jak scenariusze lekcji, przedstawienia teatralne, filmy, zdjęcia lub prezentacje PowerPoint. Zachęcają także do udziału w konkursach o tematyce misyjnej i życia misyjnego takich jak, chociażby, Biały tydzień dzieci, które przystąpiły do Pierwszej komunii. Jednakże można zauważyć, że w informacjach o misjach w zauważalny sposób brakuje rozmaitych gier, tak online, jak i planszowych, a także kwizów czy aplikacji interaktywnych. Zadanie utworzenia nowych, interaktywnych multimediiów staje się dodatkowym wyzwaniem, przed którym stoi Kościół Katolicki w Polsce.

Słowa kluczowe: misje, katecheza, dzieci, formacja misyjna, Internet.

Introduction

The 21st century is often called a time of mobile society. It is a very particular time when the development of media and means for mobile communication is moving forward rapidly. New equipment, apps and means simplify access to information as well as on-line communication between people. Because of these means it is much more effective to gather, process, share and forward all needed knowledge. It is also much easier to receive news and updates. Online schooling is getting more and more popular and simplified than before. The Church also uses the Internet. It is used as a tool for teaching, preaching, catechizing, evangelizing and for various forms of ministering. It is popular to use the Internet for ministry work or even spiritual guidance. This all can be seen while surfing through a multitude of websites, broadcasting sites (online radio and TV alike), new communication tools and apps as well as social networking that gather people of faith and those who seek God. There are also available several of games and quizzes, with faith and religion as their background, easy to find while browsing through the Internet. This, by all means, can become a place for contemporary people to find answers they are looking for, especially for youth. It is clearly noticeable that present society is open for virtual ways of communication. On the other hand, the growing need for

Internet accessible teaching, spiritual guidance, catechesis, evangelization and for various forms of ministering is more and more apparent. It is because children, youth and adults spent more and more time in virtual reality – instantly connected to the Internet through their mobile devices all day long. There seems to be a puzzling question that raises from this all, how to reach and meet in the virtual world those who seek and how to help them to get involved in a real-life spiritual commitment. Especially since children seems to be a target group for an on-line formation. They are often ever present in the virtual world through their smartwatches, iPads, tables and smartphones. We are especially interested in missionary formation of children through this virtual reality. More often than before can be seen the need for safe use of the Internet as well as the need for new meaningful content that can fulfil children's needs. There is also clearly seen the need for training them in safe and responsible use of the instant information channels throughout the Internet.

Theological teachings naturally assume writing and teaching about missionary formation of children as part of ongoing formation and are confirmed through practice. It can be seen in documents such as "General Directory for Catechesis" (Kongregacja ds. Duchowieństwa, 1998), "Catechetical Directory of the Catholic Church in Poland" (Polish Bishops Conference, 2001), "The religious education core curriculum of the Catholic Church in Poland" (Polish Bishops Conference, 2018) as well as in "The religious education program for teaching Catholic faith in kindergartens and schools" (Komisja Wychowania Katolickiego, 2019). However, no one, so it seems, has taken upon himself or herself the challenge of scientific reflection on missionary formation of children in the virtual world.

In such context raises a question on a role that virtual reality poses in missionary formation of children. Before we will address this problem we need to look at virtual world and missionary formation of children and characterize our subject of this reflection that is children attending schools. This should allow us to choose proper offer present already on the Internet that is connected with this particular formation. To present this all we will evaluate and discuss it through didactic, educational and catechetical point of view. We will apply means of analysis and synthesis to chosen test material, especially present widely on the Internet. We will focus also on related literature as it will be crucial for our deliberations. It is difficult to write about missionary formation without understanding this key concepts that is why, for the sake of proper scientific discussion, we will focus also on presenting those briefly.

The core of missionary formation and virtual world

As it was already presented, before we will go to a proper discussion we need to understand properly those two concepts. To use something that has multiple meaning and can be understood in different ways can create various complications and understatement, both in methodology and conceptual understanding, as we operate in post modernistic world where everything seems to be relatively uncertain, and the truth, as an objective value, does not exist. Catechetical practice already shows quite a number of such problems connected with lack of proper definitions in particular issues. These widely clouds the scientific discussion itself. To avoid this all, we strive to present this issue at hand earnestly.

As the base for our reflection on missionary formation of children, we will use the very definition proposed by Waldemar Wesoly. As far as it is known nobody else has characterized the issue of missionary formation of youth. Various aspects of the term "missionary formation" are nowhere to be found. In his work "Missionary Formation and Awareness of the Catechized Youth. Sociological and Pastoral Study"² Wesoly thoroughly analysed the term and content of missionary formation. Coming from the core word "formation", and through its variety of forms and meanings, Wesoly highlighted main elements of missionary formation (Wesoly, 2005, p. 11-20). For the purpose of this article we choose to focus on all that author connected with missionary formation of children in the context of integral religious instruction which has the principle of faithfulness to God and to man as its base.

In this scientific reflection, based on Wesoly's research, we adopt understanding that missionary formation is a complicated process that has preparation to become fully engaged in Church's mission as its goal (Wesoly, 2005, p. 11-20). This process includes not only passing on an information but also presents values as well as motivates to internalize those values and information and to work on melding of one's personality in missionary spirit. This kind of formation is intrinsically a part of personal and Christian formation. Its intellectual aspect includes teaching on the baptized having his or her particular place in the community of the Church, and his or her calling to be the witness of Christ for the world, being at the same time co-responsible for missions of the Church ("ad intra" and "ad gentes"). It is important to spread among children the knowledge of missionary works of the Church in this contemporary world (Wesoly, 2005, p. 11-20). Spiritual

² This volume has been published in 2005 in Olsztyn, by the Metropolitan Seminary of Warmia "Hosianum". It comprises of 331 pages.

dimension of this missionary formation includes awakening among children the need for and regular practice of prayer for the missions. It is crucial to stir and to lit the spark of missionary vocations already in young children as many adults testify that it was then, in primary or secondary school, when the thought was implanted or dream awoke in their hearts (Wesoły, 2005, p. 11-20). All of the above is important in missionary formation that is intertwined with stirring up a motivation in children to get engaged in missionary works of the Catholic Church (John Paul II, 1990, nr 83). In these aspects one can clearly see connection to melding of attitudes as missionary formation of children is truly an educational and catechetical work. Not only a child but also a teacher, catechist or minister is the subject here. The work of the latter should have "as its goal to exert an influence on pupils in both emotional, behavioural and also knowledge wise, areas. During this process pupils not only gain the knowledge that becomes their foundation for life and opinions but also internalize particular personal relationship with God, Decalogue, Sacraments, Community of the Church, another human person, themselves and to life [including also missionaries with their work in and for the Church - J.K]; children learn as well certain attitudes towards people and phenomena" (Zellma, 2020, p. 7) such as missionaries and missionary work of the Catholic Church.

The meaning of the term "virtual world" with its synonymous phrase "virtual reality" has its source in the contemporary culture of social media. So far no one can pinpoint its one particular definition of this term (see i.e. Kiepas et al., 2009). In a wide range this term describes superficial reality, created with the use of technology. It consists of created unrealistic objects, space and events that only exist with the computer itself and particular computer program and it does not exist outside of it. Broadly understood virtual world "describes (...) technologies that allow interaction with superficial, thus, fake reality, created with the help of innovative technologies that presents this «reality» through animated visual and audio effects and presents it on the computer's screen. This intended superficial, fantastic environment is fully responsive so much so that when an user «acts» his or her «actions» are received through computer and thus imposes on it to react accordingly through complicated visual, animated and acoustic means" (Wiszwaty, 2014, p. 90).

In a narrow understanding "virtual world" pertains to a world within the computer's system that is a reality that does not exist in a physical world but only created on a computer's (laptop, iPad, iPhone, smartwatch, smartphone) screen and is so realistic that it

seems real enough (Stepniak, 2020). Using this understanding of a term “virtual world” one would need to include all programs and computer games that are accessible for a person even without the Internet connection (so called off-line games/programs). However, in this scientific reflection we will speak about a narrow idea of the “virtual world” thus about this technology that allows to use all present resources on the Internet itself. This will allow us to show what the Internet has to offer in this widely spread, and at the same time, most important area of the Catholic Church that pertains to missionary formation of children.

Children of the present time - the subject of missionary formation

As it is seen thanks to contemporary research, children of school age (approximately 6 through 12 years old) are not much different from previous generations (Ames et al., 1992; Kulpaczyński, 2009). Thus, this is not going to become a part of this article as it seems unnecessary to analyse here children’s physical development, memory, imagination or speech development and thinking. The development of children’s emotions, feelings as well as development of moral and religious knowledge and convictions is not that crucial either. In present times development of the above mentioned is not so much different now than it was in the past. What is very interesting is the social behaviour and engagement. Social activity is crucial to the issue presented in the title of this work.

Enculturation (or socialization) of children happens not only in the actual world but in virtual as well (Filipek, 2009). Nowadays they spend a lot of time on the Internet not only watching programs but also searching through content that is displayed widely in the net. They live simultaneously in two realities. Having easier access to novelties such as iPad, iPhone, tablet or smartwatch, just to mention a few, they function both in virtual reality and in the real world. Children use those means not only to communicate with their parents, caretakers or friends and families but also to play games, interactive quests, listening to favourite music and surfing through different websites (Andrzejewska, 2014, p. 9-58).

Older children and youth use the same technologies to search for information needed to accomplish given tasks, homework, not only as a source of knowledge but also to strengthen one’s memory (Andrzejewska, 2014, p. 32-55).

New technologies and devices give children multiple possibilities. They allow quickly and efficiently gain needed knowledge and straightforward answers. Unfortunately, they also introduce an unreal world of illusion that gives a child an impression of ruling, and owning the world. Here, in a virtual world, a child has everything at the hand's reach.

"It moves (...) independently, finding things it looks for, learns what he or she wants. It chooses movies, games and topics. It doesn't need a teacher. (...) And even if the need for such a tutor arises, a child chooses on its own those who will pass the knowledge and rules it is in need for" (Smolińska-Theiss, 2005, p. 158).

In this virtual reality, a child does not feel the necessity to obey rules of their guardians (teachers, parents, etc.). It is exposed to different forms of violence, both from peers and adults. That is why more and more actions such as educational and preventive lessons that are based strongly on making a child aware of multiple threats present on the internet, also include trainings on safety while using the network as well as responsible usage of newest technology (Smolińska-Theiss, 2005, p. 157-159).

We would like to focus on positive aspects of the Internet itself. Thus, we look for answers to the question on what role can a virtual world fulfil in the missionary formation of children? This issue, as it was mentioned before, has a clear catechetical and educational dimension.

Chosen proposal of missionary formation for children

As one can see and search through different sites the Internet fosters formation of children towards missions (*Dzieci na misjach*, 2019; *Misyjne*, 2020; *Dzieci – dzieciom misji*, 2019). Different proposals can be found in this virtual world that varies in methodical and substantial content. Aforementioned proposals are addressed towards children as well as catechists, ministers and entire families. They have clear formative character. The Internet offer is not limited to passing on information about missions. Even though there is a lot of "missionary stories" and media coverage on missions of the Catholic Church as well as particular missionaries (*Misje*, 2020), children can watch quite a number of well recorded movies treating about missionary life (*Dzieci z Afryki*, 2013; *Ziarno Misje*, 2020; *Jak zostać misjonarzem. Dzieci komunijne dzieciom misji HD*, 2020). Thus the emphasis is put on the intellectual area of missionary formation. At the same time one can find multiple ideas

and propositions on how to join missionary voluntary work through financial and spiritual help. I.e. Pontifical Association of the Holy Childhood – also known in different circles as Missionary Childhood Association (*Papieskie Dzieło Misyjne Dzieci*, 2020) – is quite worthy to be considered as part of ongoing missionary formation of children. This concrete website of this Association is addressed especially toward catechists and ministers. Its purpose is to carry on a program of this Pontifical Association. The goals and functions of this Association were written very clearly: “create in children burning hearts for missions, maintaining the sense of solidarity both, spiritual and material, with peers around the world” (*Papieskie Dzieło Misyjne Dzieci*, 2020). Pontifical Association of the Holy Childhood “strives to focus attention of the youngest Christians on needs of their brothers and sisters that still do not know Christ Jesus. To fulfil this goal Association issued a periodical as well as various articles to inform about missions and carry on missionary formation of Catholic boys and girls” (*Papieskie Dzieło Misyjne Dzieci*, 2020).

Children are encouraged to take part in spiritual support of the missionaries, such as prayer, little sacrifices, good deeds, testimony of life, as well as in financial aid like “save your penny” action that gives children possibility to give up something in order to put aside this amount to help missions. Other initiatives include giving away some gifts received from friends and family on the occasion of their First Holy Communion, putting aside some financial aid during so called “White Week”, collecting donations while carolling, taking up different initiatives with missionary support as its goal, carnivals, garage sales, rummage sales, sale of seasonal handmade creations – Christmas and Easter times (*Papieskie Dzieło Misyjne Dzieci*, 2020). The website of this Association gives a possibility to learn about different initiatives such as Missionary Carolling, Missionary Children’s Day, The Bridge of Missionary Fellowship that carries out various national competitions with missionary topics (i.e. artistic, music) as well as missionary college for little ones. Catechists and ministers that uses this website will find multitude information on projects and contest, quizzes and such, with missions as their topics as well as means that help to start and register Missionary Circle that helps in missionary formation of children. A variety of materials are available for them like scripts and lesson plans on missions. Especially one initiative is worthy to be mentioned, and that is so called “White Week” that became a main formative occasion to set children’s hearts on fire for missions. It is the idea of children’s gift for missions.

“One chosen day during the week after the First Holy Communion, is meant to be dedicated to children from different missionary countries around the world, that still do not know who Jesus is. Children who received their First Holy Communion pray for them on that day, receive Communion during mass in their intention. They also give away some of the received gifts from friends and family to children from missionary country” (*Papieskie Dzieło Misyjne Dzieci*, 2020).

Looking at the web-site of so called “Ad gentes” Initiative one can find multitude information about missionary actions of the Catholic Church as well as tools and ideas for formative meetings and lessons for youth group leaders, catechists and ministers that work with children (*Dzieło Pomocy*, 2020). Both children and catechists alike can join in the contest under patronage of Department of Education and Apostolic Nuncio in Poland and Catholic Bishops Conference on Missions. Each year there is also a competition called “My friend from the mission” that focuses on various topics concerning missions (*Dzieło Pomocy*, 2020). At its heart this contest has been “awakening among students of Middle Schools the interest in missions that are led by Polish missionaries all around the world. Its goal is to meld an attitude of solidarity with peers that live in those countries, encourage to learn more about their culture, habits, social and political situation and also conditions they often live in. Charitable focus of this contest creates innovative attitude and kindred spirit so that one can join in or support chosen educational projects in those missionary countries” (*Dzieło Pomocy*, 2020).

Initiatives like, but not limited to, establishing a school or a kindergarten, supplying needed means to start early education, supporting schools with equipment are concrete initiatives that children can participate in. Additionally, for catechists working with children there are various lesson scenarios on missions and missionary topics (*Dzieło Pomocy*, 2020).

The Salesian Order of Missionaries created a website that offers children various articles and photos from different missionary countries and missions, short movies about the everyday life of missionaries, PowerPoint presentations and various animations on the topic of missions (*Misje. Salezjanie*, 2020; *Misje. Salezjanie. Animacja*, 2020). One can choose to download and use their free app called “Salesian Missions!” that informs about different actions taken by Salesian Missionary Center in Warsaw and also allows to join in the prayer for missions. Through this app one can receive news about missions and work of the International Voluntary Initiative of Don Bosco (*Misje. Salezjanie. Aplikacja*, 2020). The App allows as well to financially support

chosen actions and missions via online donations (*Misje. Salezjanie. Aplikacja*, 2020).

In the virtual reality sporadically are promoted online games based on missionary life. One of the very few that can be found is actually a board game called "Mission. Became a leader" (*MISJA. Gra o przywództwie*, 2020) created by Jesuits. There seems to be an enormous lack of games, quizzes, interactive apps on missions, available on-line. This does not encourage wide missionary education of children supported with interesting virtual or online aids. This situation also does not answer particular needs of contemporary children.

Conclusion

Missionary formation of children in the virtual world presents itself as a very important task. It creates a challenge for those who design new web-sites and catechetical portals. At this present moment one can use only websites that show main, usual information and topics on missionary life, actions and work using means such as movies, photos, and other like quizzes and competitions. Youth leaders, ministers and religion teachers can access various materials such as lesson scenarios, short videos, testimonials, presentations and photos. One can easily notice a lack of online games and quizzes, so much so that the catechetical propositions and offers should be enriched widely. It could be profitable to create family online games as it could be a key to success in missionary formation of children through the virtual world.

While working on new series of catechetical workbooks and textbooks for primary and middle school the traditional program of missionary formation could be definitely enriched. Some QR codes could be incorporated within the textbooks that connect lesson with particular missionary web-sites and stories accessible on the Internet. Religion teachers could also learn to create such QR codes and use them during class or as a homework. It could be about a particular missionary, his or her work, place of service, or it could be about particular action. These QR codes could be used as a way of checking what students visited and learned while surfing through fresh information on missions, missionary societies and such. By using those codes one can create field games with missions as their base, or can become a way of supporting one person that is far away doing missionary work. It is enough to connect such code with a link to a particular web-site and put it in the textbook or workbook. But for this all to happen

there is emerging a need for formation of the teachers themselves. And it is not only important to encourage them to join the Papal Association but also to make it almost obligatory to attend workshops on virtual means and tools, workshops on creating interactive and personal apps. The virtual world is a contemporary and interesting place for modern missionary formation of children. Foremost, it creates an element of surprise and stirs up curiosity about missions, awakes positive feelings and encourages engagement in different missionary actions. Through this all, it helps solidify and strengthen knowledge, develop skills and form attitudes.

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