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The Crisis of Social Ties as a Challenge for the Christian Vision of Social Life

Abstract

The author of this article analyses the crisis of social ties as a huge challenge for the Christian vision of social life. Firstly, he refers to the moral and religious crisis of the postmodern era, and the depreciation of the social status of the human. Then, he presents the uniqueness of human being as well as potentiality. According to the Christian integral anthropology, presented by personalism, man remains a spiritual and material coexistence. In the last part, the author underlines the Christian idea that a society should acknowledge the dignity of each of its members, as well as guarantee the optimal functioning of human communities. Consequently, social procedures and institutions should be preceded by a consensus assuring the ethical minimum. If a society does not accept the fundamental values like: the dignity of every human being, the protection of their life, justice, equality, solidarity, it cannot function, at least not as a community of persons.

Keywords

Society, social life, a human being, Christian vision of social life.

One of the most fundamental and natural qualities of man is striving for contact with others, building strong and lasting social ties. From the beginning of their existence, intentionally to a greater or lesser extent, every human functions in numerous social systems by entering into various interpersonal relations. Hence, forming interpersonal relations must be acknowledged as one of the basic human needs. Only when this need is properly satisfied can man function in a society with kindness and openness: professionally and, more

importantly, within their family and in their circle of friends. The paradoxical nature of interpersonal ties stems from the fact that they are part of the social system as well as the elements constituting it. Admittedly, the elements are co-creators of the system, but it provides a background against which they orient their actions.[1] On that account, every human is invariably confronted with the task to develop their otherwise natural ability to reach out to others. Without it, man may not recognize the value of other people and creatures, and will not be able to set their own boundaries for egoism. At the same time, developing positive relations with other people remains, despite appearances, a condition for one's own happiness and personal fulfillment. Particularly with regard to effectiveness at work, which occupies a great share of human life nowadays, there is an increasingly perceptible necessity to cope with people and not with things, as it had been the case in earlier eras. A conviction has become apparent that in order to transform reality: external and internal, competences for interacting with other people are required.[2] The modern society is becoming a gradually more complex organization, which is directly connected with the fact that the organization of activity of modern social entities is also becoming more complicated. Trust and openness to contact with others seem to be necessary conditions for the entire social activity.

1. The moral and religious crisis of the post-modern era

The post-modern world, in which the contemporary man exists, is characterized by great technological advances, immense changeability and its consequence – instability, which demands of the modern man to be more "flexible" than in the past. This dynamic and radical social change is related to the emergence of successive generations that develop in new living conditions. Profound transformations in the ways of working, forms of family, models of participation in the political life or means of communication seem to occur almost overnight. The world is evolving into being increasingly more dissimilar to the one in which previous generations lived. The reality of a bazaar, of sorts, is becoming apparent.

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[1] Cf. M. Marody, A. Giza-Poleszczuk, *W uwięzi więzi (społecznych)*, „Societas/Communitas" 1 (2006), p. 25.

[2] Cf. P. Sztompka, *Kapitał społeczny. Teoria przestrzeni międzyludzkiej*, Kraków 2016, pp. 334-336.

It offers a great array of goods, this variety is not really controlled and it lies wide-open to the expansion of individualism, which significantly hinders building social relations and the common identity of human communities.[3]

By proposing the deconstruction of the established systems in nearly every aspect, postmodernity does not aspire to, at least not in a specified form, offer people anything in exchange.[4] The obvious argument seems to be the relativity of the truth, openness to all, even the most irrational narrations, which is accompanied by the rejection of any universal aspirations of metaphysics or ethics. The mass culture, promoting a life devoid of any deeper moral or spiritual references, strongly favors emotivism and contests reason, disregards the fundamental questions on the meaning of human life and existence.[5]

The ideological orientations, clearly opting for laicization and secularization, and, above all, the pragmatics of life of the great majority of modern society, seem to take precedence over the Christian interpretation of morality, even among declaratively religious people.[6] Catholicism is becoming merely an outlook, and even an exceedingly exigent one, it is, therefore, defied around the world where tasks that are overdemanding are avoided. The aforementioned crisis of religiousness affects a number of levels of the present-day reality, including those associated with interpersonal relations and functioning of man in a community. The consequence of the anthropological agnosticism, according to which man creates God, and not vice-versa, is not only a crisis of religion but also numerous symptoms of depreciation of the human person. By dissociating themselves from God, often even entire societies cannot find the sufficient grounds to shape the social order so as to acknowledge the dignity of every human being, including those born with intellectual disabilities or terminally ill. By questioning the image of God in ourselves as well as in the other, many people deprive themselves, to a large degree, of the possibility of living their humanness to the full, and establishing relations of solidarity and community with other people, but also with nature, which is manifested in the ecologic crisis.

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[3] Cf. M. Szymański, *Edukacyjne problemy współczesności*, Kraków 2014, pp. 56-57.

[4] Cf. A. Szołtysek, *Filozofia wychowania moralnego*, Kraków 2009, p. 327.

[5] Cf. S. Chrost, *Homo capax Dei jako ideał wychowania*, Kraków 2013, p. 84.

[6] Cf. J. Mariański, *Rozpad czy rekonstrukcja wartości moralnych w społeczeństwie polskim*, in: *Jakość życia studentów*, ed. A. Rumiński, Kraków 2004, p. 37.

The egoistic modern societies do not leave much space for human solidarity by nearly "sacralizing" the economic and sensory sphere of life.[7]

The consumer society, deliberately or not, questions the Christian tradition calling for sharing one's goods with others, perhaps those in need. It is reflected in the "sacralization" of consumption, within which the broadly-defined consumption is seen as an end in itself. What is particularly dangerous is that consumerism treats human beings like objects, violating their full dignity, reducing them to the material dimension, not acknowledging all of their rights and dignity, focusing only on satisfying sensory needs, which are, on top of that, stimulated and intensified by consumerism. Regrettably, it may be stated that the contemporary people, functioning in the global village, seem to unite almost exclusively with regard to consumption.

2. Depreciation of the social status of the human nature

By avoiding to reach out into the core of their nature and to search for the similarly intricate truth about the reality, many modern-day people, who live in highly atomized societies and steer clear of becoming involved in and forming lasting bonds, gladly take advantage of the possibility of the relatively unproblematic breaking of the superficial ties. It has become increasing more challenging to build the uncontested, and more deeply understood, common good. It is difficult to be surprised by this turn of events since it is often exacerbated by the ruthless fight for the material and social status, as well as a lack of mutual trust. Strong social communities are replaced by occasional, transient and temporary ones in which individuals are bound only by a common interest or cause.[8] As a consequence, plenty of people do not really feel at home even in the affluent, democratic and liberal societies.[9]

In the underspecified, never truly ultimate reality, the process of acquiring a social identity by individuals, which is important from the perspective of human social ties, is hampered. It does not really come as a surprise since the

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[7] Cf. M. Sztaba, *Świętość czy jakość życia? O wartości i sensie życia w nauczaniu Jana Pawła II*, in: *Wartość życia a wychowanie. W XX rocznicę encykliki Jana Pawła II „Evangelium vitae"*, eds. M. Parzyszek. D. Opozda, B. Kiereś, Lublin 2015, p. 313.

[8] Cf. Z. Baumann, *Płynna nowoczesność*, (trans.) T. Kunz, Kraków 2003, pp. 308-309.

[9] Cf. E. Potulicka, J. Rutkowiak, *Neoliberalne uwikłania edukacji*, Kraków 2012, p. 10.

indicators of the post-modern mentality still remain the paradigms: personal freedom from everything and everyone, individual life success, and, above all, the right to the personal "happiness". [10] Postmodernity appears to stipulate that people may normally develop and function while being detached from the truth, love and values, as well as from the family and bonds with other people. Despite the fact that under such circumstances many people who are afraid of loneliness seek their secure social space, at the same time, they manifest anxiety about forming close relations with others based on the fear of failing to achieve their own, often egoistic, aspirations.

As a consequence, over the recent years, the number of divorce cases has increased dramatically. However, it is often overlooked that they concern nearly every sphere of family life, particularly children, which makes divorces transgressions against the natural law and God. Marriage itself is becoming a kind of cultural mosaic, relations between spouses undergo revolutionary transformations, which result in a difficulty of establishing a universal model of marriage. [11] From the perspective of the social, and, especially, the sacramental way of life, cohabitation as well as the phenomenon of 'singles' are particularly dangerous. Indeed, equality of the sexes, partnership, division of family duties are positive phenomena, however, it may not be disregarded that within the radical feminism or the gender ideology, sex is perceived only as sex stigmatization coded in the body and constituting, especially for women – due to the possibility of motherhood, a source of oppression. [12] Many people, including Christians, seem to encounter problems with fulfilling the Catholic ethos with regard to performing parental roles and relations. [13] In spite of the fact that young people still declare aversion to living in informal relationships and resigning from parenthood, it must, nevertheless, be stated that they prefer such behaviors. [14] Having recognized the problem of the weakening of interpersonal

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[10] Cf. Z. Zarembski, *Troska Kościoła w Polsce o małżeństwo i rodzinę po Soborze Watykańskim II*, Toruń 2013, p. 256.

[11] Cf. A. Rogalski, *Współczesne meandry problematyki rodziny*, in: *Rodzina dobro uniwersalne. Księga pamiątkowa dedykowana księdzu prof. W. Majkowskiemu*, ed. U. Bejma, Warszawa 2015, p. 191.

[12] Cf. P. Morciniec, *Rodzina wobec idei gender*, „Teologia i Moralność" 4 (2008), pp. 117-118.

[13] Cf. W. Majkowski, *Czy kryzys rodzicielstwa*, (in): *Rodzina i rodzicielstwo między tradycją a współczesnością*, eds. A. Skreczko, B. Bassa, Z. Struzik, Warszawa 2014, p. 170.

[14] Cf. A. Zwoliński, *Zanik współczesnej rodziny*, in: *Rodzina w kontekście współczesnych problemów wychowania*, ed. B. Muchacka, Kraków 2008, pp. 11-12.

relations in numerous present-day families, a conclusion must be drawn that it not infrequently assumes the form of a dysfunction. Indeed, conflict situations happen in every family by serving the purpose of a test of its integrity and functioning, still, it is the concentration of pathological factors which reveals the destructive character of interactions of its members.

3. Persons and their social genealogy

Man is the final and most exquisite of God's creations, His likeness and image. This uniqueness and distinctiveness from other creatures, as well as potentiality, must however be discovered and fulfilled by everyone. According to the integral anthropology, presented by personalism, explicitly rejecting materialism, man remains a spiritual and material coexistence. As a psychosomatic being, a person fulfils oneself through physicality and mental life, and the unity and identity of the personal "I" are constituted by elements which are correlated with each other. Christianity, from the beginning, has stood opposed to the temptations of the dualist anthropology, defending the truth about the Divine origins of not only the spiritual but also the physical plane of man. An evident manifestation of the person must be seen in it, the focal point of its presence in the natural world and among other people. The realistic Christian personalism dissociates itself from depreciation of the body and the common, currently, manifestations of its cult.[15] The status of the person, dating back genealogically not to biology but to God's eternity, is connected with the completely unique human dignity, unrelated to race, religion, education and even moral standards. The human being, the only being whom God wished only for itself and revaluated by Incarnation, manifests the greatest concentration of the quality of the created being and sanctity.[16]

Every person, remaining a unique being, discovers both the natural bonds and responsibilities towards the community. Christian personalism, following classical philosophy, perceives man as a social being, whereas the social life as stemming from nature, not a contract, but constituting the plane of the genesis

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[15] Cf. A. Świerczek, *Jana Pawła II nauka o oblubieńczym znaczeniu ciała ludzkiego*, in: *Człowiek drogą Kościoła. Moralne aspekty nauczania Jana Pawła II*, ed. K. Gryz, Kraków 2004, p. 143.

[16] Cf. R. Buttiglione, *Myśl Karola Wojtyły*, (trans.) J. Merecki, Lublin 2010, pp. 280-281.

and existence of the human person.[17] The human person will not become fully complete without the presence of other people, without the space created by others. The need for being around other people that manifests itself "partially", as it were, after a person's birth, develops throughout their entire life. Without social coexistence, man would not leave the state of animalism and would not become a self-aware being. Social relations constitute the most natural environment for a person. Every human "I" is discovered only in the context of "Another I" that is similar but still distinct. In the process of the formation of a person, two moments may be observed: objective and subjective, remaining in the dialectical tension with each other.[18]

Social relations were promoted in the 20th century as a completely constitutive condition for the development of human personality by the philosophers of dialog: Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas. Buber saw the "I" and "you" meeting as a reflection of one person's meeting with God Himself[19] whereas Levinas concluded that the moment of meeting and laying responsibility indicates the inception of subjectivity.[20]

School, peers and, above all, family create the space of personal relations, which allows for opening a perspective for fulfilling the potentiality of individual persons.[21] The community in which man receives the greatest opportunities for participation is family – a community establishing a multilateral system of ties of one person with another, one generation with another generation, and binding the human being in all phases of their life with the society. Family usually possesses the kind of energy that is capable of freeing man from anonymity, enriching their humanity and including them into a social community while preserving their distinctiveness. It is confirmed by the fact that within every family there exist interpersonal relations thanks to which man easily acquires models of behaviors and attitudes that are similar their own.

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[17] Cf. J. Chorowski, *Wychowanie moralne według pedagogiki neotomistycznej,* Toruń 2015, pp. 367-374.

[18] Cf. G. Mead, *Umysł, osobowość, społeczeństwo,* (trans.) Z. Wolińska, Warszawa 1975, p. 189.

[19] Cf. M. Buber, *Ja i Ty. Wybór pism filozoficznych*, (trans.) J. Doktór, Warszawa 1992, p. 56.

[20] Cf. E. Levinas, *Etyka i nieskończony*, (trans.) B. Opolska-Kokoszka, Kraków 1991, p. 55.

[21] Cf. B. Gacka, *Znaczenie osoby w teologii Josepha Ratzingera – Benedykta XVI*, Warszawa 2010, p. 25-30.

4. The introception of Christian rules of social life as an indication of the existence of the society of persons

By appreciating the human person, Christian personalism believes in building a social life that would acknowledge the dignity of each of its members as well as guarantee the optimal functioning of human communities. From the point of view of personalism, social procedures and institutions should be preceded by a consensus assuring the ethical minimum. If a society does not accept the fundamental values: the dignity of every human being, protection of their life, justice, equality, solidarity, it cannot function, at least not as a community of persons.

The ethical and religious criterion that has to be regarded as the synthesis of social personalism is the focus on the common good. At the core of this tenet, there is a conviction that by serving the common good every human person saves oneself. By building good, particularly the good that is difficult, a person consolidates oneself in one's being. Not only is this good not in opposition to the real good but it constitutes a condition for its existence. There is also a relation between the common good and partial and individual goods, which sometimes have to be sacrificed, but not through violence as it is the case in various totalitarian systems. By following the common good, man discovers interdependence between people in protecting and securing particular goods and values. It is essential to also refer to justice and interpersonal solidarity, which is not merely an act of affection or sympathy, but rather something real and defined by a responsibility.

The rule of love, whose origin is God, must be regarded as the quintessence of justice and the meaning of a person's life. By preferring love as the principle of human and Christian life, Catholic personalism refers it to the One who revealed to man some aspect of the mystery of His own internal life established by love and unity of the three Divine Persons. It is God's love that the Decalogue comes from, i.e. the fundamental rules for social life, which originate in love and call to follow them. Accepting Christianity has its genesis not in an ethical decision or idea but in the meeting with a Person, who, as love, gives life a new perspective, a duty to love. Love, which transcends the sensory and utilitarian dimension, prefers altruism – the foundation of all interpersonal activities. Since Christianity is a religion of love, it is love which ought to constitute the primary criterion differentiating Christians from others. Building the "civilization of love" is to be perceived as an alternative to the common manifestations of the civilization of death.

Personalism cannot lack any reference to a very special form of community, i.e. motherland. Not only does a family of families – a nation, respond to the human nature but it also constitutes an optimal place for the development of personal potentialities of individuals. Motherland is, both in the local and general domain, a "creditor" whose debt may never be paid back by those individuals.[22] It is also the case, even presently, when the understanding of motherland or patriotism is associated with a serious dispute, also not uncommon in previous ages.[23] Indeed, patriotism still means the readiness to make sacrifices for one's motherland, however, currently – during the time of peace, one has another duty also associated with patriotism – fulfilling the obligations of day-to-day life, especially through hard work.

5. Marital and family relations as a source and a reference point for social relations

The wider perspective of social life is clearly, and predominantly, determined by the level of relations constituting marriages and families. The Christian reflection, consistent with regard to defining relations between a man and a woman, mainly refers to the thesis of distinctiveness coded in human nature, but also to the complementarity of the sexes. Manhood and womanhood are regarded as complementary gifts, sexuality is perceived as a tool for integrating the ability to love, which was coded in a man and a woman by God.[24] A human being in the image of God in one's uniqueness and communion, in a way, reflecting the loneliness of a person ruling the world and, at the same time, the divine communion of persons.[25]

Within Christian personalism, as opposed to the ideas of the postmodern world, motherhood and fatherhood emphasize a special dimension of personal relations. The continuity of human existence is associated with the ability, but also the obligation, to transmit life, which is part of every man and woman's

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[22] Cf. K. Nycz, *Patriotyzm w Katolickiej Nauce Społecznej,* Kraków 2014, pp. 7-9.

[23] Cf. J. Szacki, *Patriotyzm jako 'błąd' i jako 'cnota',* in: *Maski i twarze patriotyzmu,* ed. M. Karolczak, Kraków 2012, p. 105.

[24] Cf. Jan Paweł II, *Mężczyzną i niewiastą stworzył ich*, Watykan 1986, pp. 75-76.

[25] Cf. J. Stala, E. Osewska, *Anders erziehen in Polen. Der Erziehungs- und Bildungsbegriff im Kontext eines sich ständig verändernden Europas des XXI. Jahrhunderts*, Tarnów 2009, Polihymnia; *Focus on Family and Education*, ed. E. Osewska, Split 2016, Crkva u svijetu.

calling. The possibility of procreation is a specific gift that God endowed the human being with. Thanks to this grace, under a marital covenant, a man and a woman find their parental identity by cooperating with the creative love of God. It is not possible to invoke the issue of parenthood within Christianity without referring to the Theology of God as the Father, which enables gaining insight into the mystery of family relations.[26]

As a main witness to God's active love in the world, family is, by nature, capable of building the civilization of love in the world. It should, however, be remembered that human life, particularly in the domain of family community, requires effort to verify its ontic power every day. It is in one's family existence that man usually learns proper relations towards other people, and where interpersonal relations are predominantly selfless, personal and cordial, and, most importantly, impossible to recreate in the conditions of other environments of life. The relations that are established here are characteristic only for the family. What is more, they take the form of the completely unique: the betrothed, fatherhood and motherhood, filiation, brotherhood. Within the space of these relations, there can be no question of ownership but only the belonging and unity of persons.[27]

While searching for a term that would best describe the ethos of family, it would have to be concluded that it is the notion of "communio personarum", deriving from love and founding its existence on it. What is concerned here is not a semblance of love but a force embracing all planes of life. A mature person, conscious of their real relations with the world, is aware of the fact that as a personal being they transcend it, and, above all, they are able to select the subject of their cognition and love. It is this entirely unparalleled ability of man, distancing oneself from the world, and thus, the readiness to enter into human relations with it which makes man a complete person. Only through opening to other humans and respecting their dignity, showing justice, kindness and, ultimately, love, can one become a person in the strict sense of the term.[28]

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[26] Cf. *Rodzina i edukacja w zmaganiu o przyszłość Europy*, ed. E. Osewska, Tarnów 2016; J. Stala, *Familienkatechese in Polen um die Jahrhundertwende. Probleme und Herausforderungen*, Tarnów 2008, Biblos; J. Stala, *W kierunku integralnej edukacji religijnej w rodzinie. Próba refleksji nad nauczaniem Jana Pawła II w kontekście polskich uwarunkowań*, Tarnów 2010, Polihymnia.

[27] Cf. J. Stala, *Personalistyczny charakter życia i wychowania rodzinnego*, in: *Dzisiejsze aspiracje katechezy rodzinnej. Problemy i wyzwania*, ed. J. Stala, Kielce 2005, p. 375.

[28] *Strengthening Families*, eds. J. Stala, J. Garmaz, Kraków 2016, UPJPII; *The Contemporary Family: Local and European Perspectives*, eds. E. Osewska, J. Stala, Kraków 2015, UPJPII;

6. Conclusion

While interpreting man's existence in the personal sense, particularly within the reflection inspired by the Catholic religion, it cannot be forgotten that its fundamental reference point remains a meeting with other people and, above all, a meeting with God. Only when one fosters a close relation with Him can one more easily recognize the core of their relations with other people since one will look at them not just with one's own eyes and feelings but from the perspective of God, Jesus Christ.[29] Establishing an interpersonal relation refers to discerning a person in another man. To recognize a person in another man means to perceive an a priori space of relation. Only through this space can we discover ourselves as persons completely. We may also achieve it by the established relations of a person in other people. The essence of the human nature also includes the specific ability to develop, which occurs in a special way of opening oneself up. It has two dimensions: transcendental – opening to God, and interpersonal – opening to others in cognition, aspiration and action.[30] In today's world, characterized by the numerous symptoms of the negation of the person and ties between people, this way of perception of interpersonal relations is the Catholic personalism's attempt to incline towards anthropology allowing for shaping the truly human world.

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[29] Cf. M. Kluz, *Katolickie podstawy formacji moralnej człowieka w świetle posoborowych publikacji teologicznych*, Kraków 2012, p. 158.

[30] Cf. J. Wal, *Kultura dialogu*, Kraków 2012, p. 148.

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