

# People with disabilities as a gift and a challenge for the church

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A person with disabilities is a person suffering from some acquired or congenital dysfunctions in the development or in his mobility, mentality or sensual perception, which prevent his normal functioning in the social, cultural and religious life. Although disability strongly influences the life of a person with disabilities, it does not influence his dignity. A person with disabilities is fully equipped with human features: he is the subject of his life and has unlimited human rights. God gives life to the persons with disabilities and creates them as his children, as his helpers and co-workers. When the people who suffer from disability accept it and give testimony of suffering, they thus participate in the ecclesial apostolate in the church and in the world. The apostolate of suffering is perceived as one of the greatest gifts for the church. At the same time, people with disabilities receive the support from the Christian community. This support concerns both everyday existence and the realisation of the vocation given by God. The families of the people with disabilities should receive particular aid. This aid should mainly be provided to the children with disabilities in the family.

**Keywords:** disability; people with disabilities in the church; care of people with disabilities; pastoral work of people with disabilities; congenital dysfunctions; apostolate of suffering.

## Introduction

A person with disabilities is a person suffering from some acquired or congenital dysfunctions in his mobility, mental health or sensory perception, which prevent his normal functioning in the social, cultural and religious life (Kiciński 2009). Regardless of the kind and the degree of disability, a person with disabilities is unreservedly a human being, and he possesses his proper specific human structures such as physical, mental and spiritual features. They are the sources of his activity. Disability can cause disruption or even loss of some human functions, but not the total atrophy, so it does not influence the depth of his personal existence (Otrbski 2009). In fact, the actual change in the functioning of people with disabilities is caused by factors such as the kind of disability, the degree of disability and the time when the disability appeared. These factors also influence the conditions of the person's life.

Apart from the factors mentioned above, the inner condition of a person with disabilities is also influenced by the environmental factors, the attitudes of the people around and by individual conditions.<sup>1</sup> What is more, disability influences the way of functioning and the presence of people with disabilities in the community of the church. The article deals with the specific conditions of the Catholic Church; however, the position of the people with disabilities in other Christian communities is similar.

## People with disabilities

God created human being in his image and likeness. God's image is present in people with disabilities and in the able-bodied alike. God's image in every human grants the human dignity to everyone. It concerns the person with disabilities to the same extent as it does for an able-bodied person, and it results from being human. The human dignity of a person with disabilities does not differ from the dignity of other people (Chudy 1988). The human is entitled to it from the moment of conception to the natural death, regardless of his physical and mental condition. Disability must not disrupt the personal construction of the human.

In God's eyes, the life of a person with disabilities has an inalienable value. Such a person is a full-fledged subject who possesses inalienable inborn human rights in the church and in the society.

1. The conditions concern the natural, technical and cultural environment. The attitudes of the environment of a person with disabilities are influenced by the system of education, rehabilitation, revalidation and the social assistance for people with disabilities. The individual factors include the age, sex, education, profession, genetic predisposition, lifestyle, the ways of dealing with difficult situations, education, life experience, features of character and so on.

However, this subjectivity imposes certain duties on a person with disabilities in both the ecclesial and lay society in which he or she lives.

With the act of creation, God gives testimony of the human dignity of a person with disabilities. The more disability the person has, and the more negative effects it influences on his or her life, the more expressive God's testimony is. We can notice that God ennobles the human being with disabilities in front of other people, and he confirms his or her value amongst others. People with disabilities who are perceived by others as weak and who are underestimated in God's eyes are perceived as important and valuable. They are led by God in their lives just like the able-bodied ones (Herbst 1999).

Disability and its results are the source of suffering for the person who suffers from it. For non-believers, such suffering is unnecessary and senseless. However, for Christians, suffering caused by injustice is the source of hope and joy. The hope of people with disabilities comes from Christ who created a different reality: it is the world full of grace and love. A person with disabilities, who is in a relationship with God in his faith, can experience joy. He will experience the fullest joy that results from the communion with the Saviour in his future life; however, in his life on the earth, he will experience the pledge of the eternal life (John Paul II 1984). This joy is incomprehensible for the people who experience their disabilities without uniting with Christ (Rak 2000).

The condition of disability can result in experiencing contempt and fragility of the human existence.

A person with disabilities can intensively and deeply experience anxiety, helplessness and life-threatening feelings. Disability causes various obstacles in everyday life of a person with disabilities. They concern the possibility of self-realisation, self-service, implementation of the vocation for marriage and family life as well as participation in the social life. Disability often limits the person's interest in the current affairs and limits his self-care (Chudy 1988).

On the other hand, because of their condition, people with disabilities can find new sources of motivation and inspiration for their self-development. They can experience change unexpectedly for them and for their environment. Thanks to them, the concept of happiness and the meaning of life and the life hierarchy can also change. They can change their attitudes towards life, health, career, suffering and death. Such transformations are called 'post-traumatic growth' (Otrębski 2009).

The greatest obstacle that separates people with disabilities from the able-bodied people is anxiety. It causes helplessness and leads to inertness. People with disabilities should be enabled to take action, they should have equal chances and they should integrate with society. They should not be replaced when they take independent initiatives and they should receive proper care only when it is really necessary. The aim of that is to help the people with disabilities to take

their proper positions in the lay society and in the ecclesial community (Przygoda 2004a).

Suffering caused by disability is an invitation for the cooperation with Christ in the work of salvation of the world. The conscious experience of disability in unity with God is complementing the passion of the Saviour (Przygoda 2000). Christ calls people with disabilities to endure their own suffering to participate in his sacrifice. Such a unity with suffering Christ enables the full development of supernatural life of a person with disabilities, and it guarantees that his sacrifice will bring good results in other people's lives.

## The gift of suffering of people with disabilities

A Christian who suffers from disabilities can give the testimony of salvation only under certain conditions. He must find and understand the meaning of his suffering and accept it in his life. Searching for the meaning of suffering is inscribed in God's plan for every human. It is one of the tasks of a Christian who takes responsibility for the mission given to him by God. Such a task is also inscribed into the lives of the disciples with disabilities of Christ – the sick, the ones with disabilities or the elderly. However, in case of such people, the question Why do I suffer? arises from their personal experience of physical and moral suffering. The question Why? concerns suffering, it refers to the source and aim and in the final perspective, it is the question about the meaning of suffering. The answer to the question about the origin of one's suffering can easily be found. It can be provided by medical science and, in many cases, the reasons for disability and illness can be found in the past events from the lives of the suffering people. It is much more difficult for a person to find the origin of suffering in the world. In contemporary times, people are trying to find the origin of suffering in the finiteness of the human body, which means that suffering is organically connected with the nature of the human body and of the world he lives in (Rak 2000). In fact, a Christian should find the origin of suffering in the fall of Adam. Suffering is evil and as all the evil in the world originated in the original sin of Adam and Eve, it resulted in the disorder in every human and in the world.

Asking a person with disabilities about the meaning of his suffering is connected with the question of the meaning of suffering in general. Although for a non-believer, suffering can seem useless and meaningless, a Christian should look for its meaning in the saving mystery of Jesus Christ. He, although being innocent, accepted all the sins and suffering of all people to take away the sins through his suffering. In his 'substitute' suffering, the sins are taken away because his love for his father is greater than the evil of any sin and than any suffering which results from the sin. Christ and only Christ is capable of accepting the sin, the evil and suffering of all people and he can overcome them with his infinite Divine love. The deep sacrifice of Christ is manifested in the great suffering which he accepted being innocent himself (John Paul II 1984). Suffering of Christ, which results from accepting

all the evil caused by the man's turning away from God and which leads to suffering, reached the apogee in his death on the cross. Christ's suffering turned back the previous sinful order and led to reconciliation between God and man. Thus, suffering became the source of the good (John Paul II 1984).

As Christ collected all the human suffering in his suffering, we can claim that 'Christ has also raised human suffering to the level of the Redemption' (John Paul II, *Salvifici doloris* 1984). Overcoming suffering on the cross and making the good of salvation out of it indicate the charitable nature of suffering.

It results from every type of human suffering. A human can complement the suffering of Christ with his own suffering, and thus he can contribute to the salvation of the world (John Paul II 1984).

The most important condition under which the suffering can be charitable and under which a Christian can give the testimony of salvation is the acceptance of suffering in unity with suffering Christ.

The acceptance of suffering is not easy. A human refuses to suffer because suffering is evil. It also reflects human's natural tendency to experience good and happiness and to avoid the things he fears. The fear of suffering connected with illnesses, with disability and with old age is particularly understandable, as it is usually intense and long-lasting, sometimes even lasting till the end of one's life.

The acceptance of suffering by a Christian does not mean resignation and submission to fate. On the contrary, it means uniting with Christ. Through the Paschal mystery, he wants to be united with all people, especially with the suffering ones. This wish of the Saviour is an invitation for the human to endure suffering in the unity with Christ and for complementing 'what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions' (Col 1:24). The acceptance of one's suffering by a Christian should therefore be a consent for participating in the sacrifice of Christ for the sake of the world salvation (John Paul II 1984).

Such an acceptance of suffering results in, at first, the cooperation of a Christian with Christ in the process of the world salvation, and then in the personal conversion. Such a conversion means rebuilding the good in the human. It consists in (John Paul II 1984):

[O]vercome[ing] evil, which under different forms lies dormant in man. Its purpose is also to strengthen goodness both in man himself and in his relationships with others and especially with God.

People with disabilities are able to experience 'this *spiritual tempering* of man in the midst of trials and tribulations' as well as 'suffering [which] contains a special *call to the virtue* which man must exercise on his own part' (John Paul II 1984; Rak 2000).

Christian vocation of people with disabilities requires from them a greater effort in its implementation. This multiplied effort, in comparison with the effort made by the able-bodied people, often results in the greater spiritual development and in the personal holiness. However, the most important aspect of the cooperation with the supernatural reality is the deeper unity with God. It is also a source of a visible testimony for the people from their environment, for both believers and non-believers, especially for the young, physically fit and strong people.

## People with disabilities as a challenge for the church

Being members of the God's people, Christians with disabilities implement the mission of the church. On account of the physical or mental limitations, they require adaptation of the pastoral forms and methods to their needs so that they could make proper use of the ecclesial goods given to them by Christ and engage into the life of the ecclesial community, serving them with the received charism.

Participation of people with disabilities in the church as the community of faith requires adaptation of the preaching to the possibilities of their perception and enabling them to give testimony suited to their possibilities. Polish children and young people with disabilities take part in special catechesis in the special educational institutions (Kiciński 2007). The catechetical programmes are suitable for the type and degree of the disability (Szagun 1983). The catechists are chosen amongst priests, nuns, laymen or consecrated who, apart from the degree in theology, also have a degree in the special education. The catechesis in the educational institutions is organised by the parsons of the parishes that each institution belongs to.

However, one of the unresolved pastoral problems is preaching God's word to the adult people with disabilities. Only a few of them can participate in the catechesis for adults, and it is usually limited to listening to homilies. These homilies are usually given during the systematic or occasional meetings of people with disabilities. Unfortunately, these are usually observed by very few of them.

People with disabilities should undergo proper formation so that they could give the testimony of faith. It is very valuable for other people with disabilities who can thus be motivated to break down the barriers, supported with their trust in God. The testimony of faith is also important in the environment of the able-bodied people who can be inspired by people with disabilities attitudes in their way of deepening their spiritual life.

Participation of people with disabilities in the church as the community of the cult requires adjustment of the sacraments distribution to their needs and possibilities and introducing them into the life of the prayer (Kamiński 2000). Preparation for the First Communion and for confession, for confirmation

and for the proximate preparation for marriage usually takes place in the educational institutions, in the limited groups in school classes. In many cases conditioned by the type and degree of disability, each person with disabilities receives proper individual preparation. The further participation of people with disabilities in liturgy and receiving the sacraments requires particular aid from the priests and from the faithful. What is more, the church buildings also require adaptation to the needs of people with disabilities.<sup>2</sup> Ministers of sacraments and their helpers must also be properly prepared.

Pastoral care of people with disabilities has to deal with many various tasks. It is a great challenge in the contemporary times to work on the ecclesial and social integration of such people. It concerns the integration of people with disabilities in the local communities and in the parish communities and in the communities of people with the same kind of disability. In the service for the integration in the local community and in the ecclesial community, pastoral care faces the necessity to support the dignity of people with disabilities and to give assistance in their comprehensive development, which results from the principle of personalisation. The principle of optimisation results in the need for the formation of the local communities to teach them to accept people with disabilities and to let them engage into the life of the community.

Pastoral care also works on the service of integration and mobilisation of the community of people with the same kind of disability. Although there are many different social organisations for people with disabilities, they do not do enough to satisfy all their needs, especially those of the religious members. Pastoral care should associate all the people with disabilities, as well as their families, their neighbours and friends.

Pastoral care of people with disabilities offers material, didactic and educational aid as well as rehabilitation. People with disabilities are described by the church as 'the poor', and therefore, they are provided proper ecclesial aid (Przygoda 2004b). The necessity to receive material aid results from the fact that many people with disabilities survive on their invalidity pension. Only a few of them are able to take up a job. The financial support from the church consists of mainly material goods that are offered systematically or currently. Diocesan institutions provide subsidies to pay for the food and repose for people with disabilities and for their families. They also organise cultural and recreational events for them.

The Catholic Church in Poland takes numerous actions for the benefit of the versatile rehabilitation of people with disabilities. Moreover, although the most comprehensive

<sup>2</sup>The adaptation of church buildings usually means getting rid of architectural barriers to make it possible for people with disabilities who can only move in the wheelchair to get there. Apart from building drives or elimination of the thresholds, it is necessary to prepare a proper place for confession for the deaf mutes, install induction loops, prepare the places for confession for the blind and introduce all the other useful improvements.

rehabilitation is provided by specialised centres, the church also gets engaged into psychological, social and occupational rehabilitation. They are invited to occupational therapy workshops, disability-friendly workplaces, counselling centres and other similar institutions (Przygoda 2004b).

In their pastoral service for people with disabilities, the church authority should act according to the principle of helpfulness (Drożdż 2002). Establishing the personal bond with God and building the ecclesial community by the Catholics in Poland are mainly realised in the parish; therefore, pastoral care of people with disabilities should be realised mainly at the parish level. The diocese should support the parish in their pastoral ministry for people with disabilities (Lipiec 2018).

Each Catholic diocese needs a pastoral programme that covers the aspects of the ministry for people with disabilities. It should concern the issues such as the organisation of pastoral care in every group of people with disabilities, as well as the forms and methods of work. It should also specify the range of aid provided by the diocese for the parish and settles the conditions for participation of the parish in the efforts of the whole diocese. It is also necessary to work out the methods of proper formation of the clergy, the consecrated people and the laymen who will work with people with disabilities at the diocesan and parish levels, especially of the pastoral and spiritual formation.

The extraordinary pastoral care is complementary and inspiring for the ordinary pastoral care. In their service for people with disabilities, the extraordinary pastoral care aims at satisfying the needs of people with disabilities which have not been satisfied in the parish. These needs usually concern listening to the word of God, participation in the liturgy and, in particular, receiving the sacraments. Moreover, the extraordinary pastoral care enables creating a community of people with the same kind of disability and their families. To implement these aims, every diocese should organise a separate extraordinary pastoral care group for each group of people with disabilities with the same kind of disability. It should be implemented under the proper guidance of a well-prepared priest. The forms and methods of work with people with disabilities should be suitable for the needs and abilities of these people. Pastoral care ministry should concern the whole life of the people with disabilities and their families and it should concern not only the religious sphere but also the spheres concerning culture, work, education, recreation and so on.

Polish parishes are not able to cope with the problem of financing the rehabilitation, care and provide constant material aid for the people with disabilities. Such service can only be provided by the diocesan-specialised institutions that are called for that purpose. One of such institutions is the diocesan caritas, which runs centres of aid, occupational therapy workshops, disability-friendly workplaces, counselling centres and other similar

institutions that offer recreation to people with disabilities and their families and also offer them material aid (Drożdż 2009). Such ministry is also offered by special diocesan associations that offer aid to people with various kinds of disabilities (Herbst 1999).

Congresses, symposia, conventions and various meetings are the most favourable initiatives that enable the integration of the communities of people with disabilities and the social and ecclesial integration. They are an occasion to inform the able-bodied about the problems of people with disabilities and for making them aware of the needs of people with disabilities in the religious and social life. Such initiatives, which seem to be a kind of manifestation of people with disabilities and of their communities, raise the awareness of their presence in parishes and of their undertaking apostolic activity in their own communities.

## The family of a person with disabilities as a challenge for the church

The family of a person with disabilities is of particular concern for the church. The concern should relate to every aspect of their life and should also involve spiritual and material aids and influence the environment in which the family lives. This demand is particularly addressed to the Parish Pastoral Council. A Catholic parish is a community and an institution. Because of that, the parish is an external and available entity. It can proclaim the word of God, celebrate the liturgy and implement brotherly love. Its community nature is connected with the inner life of the parish; its life with grace and charism influences its development and constant activity (Kamiński 2000).

One of the most important challenges for the parish is the necessity of the proper preparation of its members for marriage. The community of believers should help people with disabilities in recognising their vocation, taking into account their inborn predispositions and skills as well as their health condition. The decision of a person with disabilities to start a family or to remain single should be made in a totally independent way, and therefore, priests and laymen must not hide or give limited information about the duties of a spouse or a parent as well as about the efforts that are necessary to fulfil these duties.

The concern for marriage and for the family in case of the disability of one of the members is also a great challenge for the church. The community of believers is expected to help them accept their disability. Spiritual aid provided to a spouse who has disability concerns the acceptance of the limitations brought by the disability, the new life conditions and the realisation of the previous roles in the new conditions. It is a challenge for the community of believers to help in rebuilding the emotional attachment of the spouses after the occurrence of disability. The emergence of

disability, especially if it appeared suddenly, was a great shock for both spouses.

Children of parents with disabilities should be provided with particular care. This mainly concerns the relationship between parents and children as well as between the children. In case when a parent suffers disability suddenly, the children find themselves in a new and difficult situation. Sometimes, the children are ashamed of their parents' disabilities because people with disabilities are the subject of jokes or raillery of the children's peers from the families with able-bodied parents.

It is the church's mission to help the parents to resume the care and upbringing of the child in the original dimension if it is possible. Christian community should explain the children their new condition and the changes in the life of their family which result from it. They should particularly emphasise the fourth commandment of the Decalogue and the ways of implementing it in case of living with a parent with disabilities.

A family with a child with disabilities requires proper aid from the church. The difficulties in functioning of the married couple that result from their child's disability usually begin before the child is even born. It is shocking for the parents when they learn that their child will be born with a disability. It is difficult for them to accept the disability and otherness of their child. The difficulties in accepting the suffering child are present in the life of the parents before and after the child is born, and they strongly influence their attitudes towards the child. There are various improper attitudes of the parents towards their children with disabilities, which are mainly connected with the difficulty to accept the child and his or her disability.

The presence of the families with children suffering from disabilities is a challenge mainly for the parish. Priests and laymen should take proper care for such people; they should often contact and comfort them. The most important task is to comfort the parents who experience a shock when they get to know about the disability of their child. Proper external aid can help them take proper care of their child, grow in recognising the child's personal dignity and serve his or her rights with particular reverence and generosity.

It is an important Christian task to help the parents in accepting their child and his or her disability.

The tasks of the church also include providing the parents of a suffering child with proper help or at least helping them receive medical or psychological aid. With proper help from doctors and psychologists, such parents are able to provide their child with appropriate education and therapy, which will suit him or her best. All of those supporting such families should fulfil their duties in the spirit of service and solidarity with people with disabilities (Papal Council for Family 2001).

## Conclusion

Disability is not desired by humans. It is some kind of a lack that is perceived as suffering. Disability is a very important feature of a person who suffers from it that strongly influences his or her whole life. Although there is no vocation for disability, it can be perceived as a vocation in the condition of disability because God calls every human, people with disabilities or able-bodied alike, for cooperation. A person with disabilities is always God's beloved child; therefore, his presence is a gift for the church. A person with disabilities who cooperates with God brings a valuable gift of his presence and gives the testimony of suffering. At the same time, the presence of people with disabilities is a challenge for the community of Christians who acknowledge their dignity and are obliged to help them in a proper way.

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The author has declared that no competing interest exist.

### Author(s) contributions

I declare that I am the sole author of this research article.

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