

## *Christian Context of Disability and Special Education Nowadays*

*It is people that matter; to love and care for the people that are there, just as they are. It is to care for them in such a way that they may grow according to the plan of God and thus give much life. And it is not just caring in a passing way, but in a permanent way. Because people are bonded one to another, they make up one family, one people, one flock.*

*Jean Vanier, Community and Growth, p. 20*

### ABSTRACT

Disability studies and special educational needs studies are becoming more and more popular nowadays as researcher got more evidence about both needs and potential of persons with disabilities. Investigating new possibilities and way of normalisations should be definitely based on stable anthropological principle as only then one can be sure that persons with disabilities are treated with brotherhood, dignity and respect, not as object of therapy, rehabilitation and medical procedures, but fully human subjects at every stage of their life.

The aim of the paper is to draw fundamentals of Christian special education as a perspective that may form a basis for both research and counselling and rehabilitation practice. This perspective founded on principles of Christianity enriched with writings on disability of such persons as John Paul II and Jean Vanier is a guarantee of full development of persons with disabilities and/or special needs.

*KEYWORDS: disability, John Paul II, Jean Vanier, mercy, brotherhood.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Subject of special pedagogy is formulated as care, therapy, education and formation of people with different disabilities (Dykcik 2001). Its main aim is to support integration and inclusion within society where both disabled and nondisabled people could enjoy good conditions for personal and social development. In Poland special pedagogy usually includes also pedagogy of people with special educational needs and there are ten groups of persons included into this category: students with different kinds of disability, persons with somatic or mental diseases, students with specific learning difficulties and school failure, people who are socially maladjusted or endangered with this condition, students in difficult crisis or traumatic situation, students with language and communication difficulties, students with adaptation difficulties based on cultural issues (migrants or refugees) and students from socially and culturally disadvantaged communities.

Special pedagogy – understood both as a scientific research and practical activity – is usually perceived as deeply humanitarian and professionals involved in it as those who are devoted to the most important human values of loving and supporting those in need. Even though, Christianity can add a kind of a new dimension to special pedagogy enlarging the scope of pedagogical values to these based on personalism and Christian faith.

The aim of this chapter is to analyze special pedagogy principles in the perspective of Christianity. Such Christian special pedagogy has been cultivated at Institute of Pedagogy of the John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin. Being a catholic university we understood its unique mission also in the field of special education. Questions about “mercy” and “commitment” have got a special meaning in this field – they should not be understood in simple categories of Church charity activities, but more in the context of the “creativity” and full personal acceptance.

The chapter consists of four parts. In the first one contemporary trends in special pedagogy are presented and discussed. The second part shows the anthropological fundamentals of Christian special education. In the third one John Paul II's teaching on disability and human suffering is analyzed. The last part presents uniqueness of the conception of Christian special pedagogy as it is cultivated at the Institute of Pedagogy of KUL.

#### CHARITY OF BROTHERHOOD? – CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES OF SPECIAL PEDAGOGY

Special pedagogy nowadays undergoes a serious evolution. Traditionally, the "magical" model prevailed in which disability or disease was regarded a sign of misfortune of gods' punishment for the person's sins or the sins of his ancestors. There was no other way to avoid it, but use some magical rituals or try to bribe gods. Later the medical model was introduced in which disability or disease was perceived as an unfortunate medical condition. Its causes were to be explained scientifically (like e.g. genetic disorders, influence of hypoxia, drug overuse or mechanical injury) and patients were offered appropriate medical treatment. Many of such centers were led by Church charity organizations or philanthropic institutions. Unfortunately, it often meant long periods of hospital care, far from the patients' families and everyday activities. It was also a common practice to suggest disabled or chronically diseased children's parents to leave their offspring for care and education in institutions. They were so called total institutions – boarding centers located far away from towns or villages, equipped not only in accommodation places but also their own educational units, alimentation facilities, laundry e.tc. There was no need and no opportunity to leave such an institution and this no possibility for family or social integration. In Poland this situation lasted up until the transformation time of 1989.

Nowadays the social model of disability started to prevail (Barnes 2003, Rieser 2008) which is based on the idea of diversity. It is assumed that person's biological condition which makes some of us more vulnerable than others is just a sign of this diversity and nobody is to be blamed for this. Consequently, it is not the disabled person that has to undertake the maximal effort to become like the other members of society, but it is the society that has to change in order to welcome this diversity. Another words: it is not the disability which is a problem, but unwelcoming environmental and social structures that create a handicap for certain groups of people. Common examples of such handicapping structures are (Rieser 2008): inaccessible environment, lack of useful education, discrimination in employment, segregated services, poverty, "belief" in the medical model of disability, inaccessible information and transport, prejudice and de-valuing. To create an inclusive society, welcoming also its sick or disabled members – to create a certain kind of brotherhood among the disabled and non-disabled – means to eliminate the architectural, urban, legal, communication and mental barriers and make it possible for all people to participate freely in different educational, social and cultural activities.

It seems like the social model of disability is throwing the weight of sickness and disability from the person to the society, that is why some scientists propose to use the psycho-social model of disability (Kirenko 2001). According to this model disability or disease is both a personal and social responsibility, mainly because of the fact, that they are in many cases also a result of personal risky behavior. Thus, it is both a person with a disability and society who have to try to integrate, undertake this effort and initiate the dialog.

The above described models do not suit fully the model of Christian special pedagogy. From its perspective it is not possible to accept unreservedly any of the models. Our God is not a vicious shaman of the magical model who is trying to punish

us for the slightest offence, but a loving Father who knows what is best for each human being, and thus sometimes allows some of the people experience a disability of a disease. The medical model, with its concentration on biological issues solely seems not to perceive a human being as a biological – psychological – social and spiritual being who needs a harmonious integral development in order to fulfill its existence. Even the social or psychosocial models do not take for granted the real nature of a human being which is directed not only to social integration and psychological well-being but also to respecting and cherishing some spiritual values.

#### JOHN PAUL II'S TEACHING ABOUT DISABILITY AND HUMAN SUFFERING

Support for people with disability and disease was one of the most important themes of John Paul II's social teaching. In 1984 he wrote an Apostolic letter *Salvifici Doloris* – on the Christian meaning of human suffering and since 1992, when the World Day of the Sick was established to be celebrated on the 11<sup>th</sup> of February, he wrote 14 special letters to the sick and disabled people from all continents. Since the very beginning of his pontifical he assured the suffering people that they constitute the core of the Church and their presence in the Church and their prayers are necessary for the Christianity to exist. The Pope remembered to meet and greet the disabled and the sick during each of his pontifical pilgrimages. Many times in his life, but especially after the assassination attempt of May the 13<sup>th</sup> 1981 and in the last years of his life he was a patient himself – having to fight for performing even the smallest everyday activities, dependent on others, suffering both physically and psychologically.

In John Paul II's teaching about disability and disease six main pedagogical themes can be found (Domagala-Zysk 2005): 1. The

most important thing is not to go away, but to be present; 2. Professional relationship with the disabled should be full human relationship, based on innate human dignity of each person; 3. This relationship is an element of building “a culture of life”; 4. Professional relationship with the disabled is witnessing the Gospel; 5. Encounters with the disabled show us our littleness; 6. For a pedagogue it is important not only to be a witness but also to teach others to cherish work for and with the disabled and the diseased.

The first aspect about Pope’s teaching is about being present with these in need. It is a natural human instinct to search for health and comfort and it means that if only we can – we try to avoid disease, disability and suffering. In consequence – we naturally do not feel like looking for the possibility of spending our time with these who are diseased or disabled. Showing a real way of Christian living, John Paul II points out that a fundamental form of support for the disabled and the diseased is to be present – authentically and actively present (John Paul II 2000). As models of such presence two persons are showed – Jesus Christ himself, who stopped many times to serve the diseased and the poor and the Samaritan from Christ’s parable who is not passing by the hurt wanderer, but offers him oil, takes him to the guest house and pays for his accommodation there. On the basis of this parable the Pope teaches: we are not allowed to pass by the suffering person. We have to stop and take some of this burden of suffering on our backs (John Paul II 1984) – not because of curiosity, but because of the “disposition of the heart” that can be recognized by our love, respect, understanding, compassion and selflessness spirit of service and simplicity (John Paul II 1984, 1999a, 2004a). During the 3rd pilgrimage to Poland in 1987 John Paul II analyzed for the faithful Christ’s attitude when he was summoned to go and heal the centurion’s daughter. Jesus Christ is answering then “I will come” and John Paul II comments on that: *The most important thing is to come, to be together with the suf-*

fering person. It is even more important than physical healing – to have a person around, to feel human' compassionate heart and human solidarity (John Paul II 1987). The Pope adds that this simple Christ's answer "I will come" can be understood as an exclamation of sensitivity, willingness to help but also pure joy of helping other person, of being a gift of love.

Karol Wojtyla (later John Paul II) was known among philosophers as a personalist who stresses the significance of human relationships with other people (Wojtyla 1982). It is not different when he speaks about the diseased and disabled: he perceives the professional relationship with them not only as a formal relationship, but as a real encounter of two persons. The basis for this is Pope's unchangeable conviction that each human being, despite his or her disease or disability is fully a human being: *intrinsic value and personal dignity of every human being do not change, no matter what the concrete circumstances of his life are. A man, even if seriously diseased or disabled, is and always remains a man, he will never become a 'vegetable' or 'animal' "* (John Paul II 2004b). This is true for people of all races and all age – both the unborn babies endangered with termination after negative outcomes of the pre-natal diagnosis and terminally diseased elderly people whom an euthanasia is offered as a "solution".

Taking this into account, professional pedagogical care for the diseased and disabled persons should be integral (Kunowski 1981), involving both the biological, psychological and spiritual dimension. The Pope's advice for the suffering is not to concentrate on disease but to set new goals and strive to fulfill them despite the disability of disease. He pointed out that the diseased and disabled persons can also serve other people and perceived suffering persons as signs of unusual greatness of human spirit, which can win over the weakness and fragility of human body and teach the nondisabled how to value their health and use it for the common good (John Paul II 1984).

Professional care for the disabled and the diseased can be perceived as a sign of “the culture of life”, of building “a civilization of life”. In many of his speeches and documents John Paul II named the contemporary civilization as a *civilization of death*, where the main values are egoism, individualism, utilitarianism, negation and indifference of transcendence and human transcendental destiny and deep crisis of moral values (John Paul II 1995). In such a society, the Pope concludes, there is no space for these who are in need, and to say it reversely – *the measure of the culture of a society is its attitude towards the disabled, the diseased and the elderly* (John Paul II 1987).

John Paul II sees professional work for the diseased and disabled not only as a social duty, but also as witnessing the Gospel. He named this work as “truly Evangelical” (John Paul II 1999) and encourages the professionals to include spiritual values into their work. He notices that for many people religious perspective of their suffering gives them hope, comfort and certainty that their fate is not a biological or cosmic mistake but an element of the God’s plan to save the world (John Paul II 1999b). Such professional work with a Christian perspective is a part of rich Christian tradition of serving these in need in hospitals, shelters or hospices and includes not only medical or psychological support but also praying for and with the people whom we serve and including Christian perspective in everyday activities.

Encountering the needs of the disabled and the diseased almost nobody feels an expert and definitely nobody is an expert on performing the role of becoming disabled, diseased or totally infirm. That is why even the Pope notices, that both in his early years and later meeting a disabled or diseased person he experienced strong emotion and uncertainty. Human suffering even for professionals is still a mystery. Nobody knows why it touches innocent children or righteous citizens (John Paul II 1983). In the face of this mystery we should not escape, but try to perceive

each human experience as meaningful and given by a good and almighty God.

#### ANTHROPOLOGY OF CHRISTIAN SPECIAL PEDAGOGY

Christian special pedagogy is strongly based on Christian and personalistic anthropology. It is deeply rooted in the classical Aristotle and Boecius' conception of a human being (Krapiec 1991,2004). In this anthropology each human being is viewed as a psycho-physical unity, a person who possesses a unique innate human dignity based on the very fact of becoming a human being. Christian personalism, additionally to the above mentioned facts derives from the content of Revelation. The features which distinguish it from other types of personalism, according to Krapiec (2004), are the following: recognition of the ultimate goal of life which is salvation and eternal union with God, care about following the example of Jesus Christ and his teaching, and the use of characteristic Christian means of development such as liturgy and sacraments. Christian personalism is stressing not only the importance of each individual person but also interpersonal relationships: what is essential in the educational process exists between human persons: relationships, communications, actions and intentions are important factors constituting the process of Christian growth (Chudy 2007). Staying in the relationship, in turn, builds the community, which is created by participation. As John Paul II taught, participation means "to be together with others and at the same time it means to be more yourself" (John Paul II 1985).

Christian personalism calls for using as an ultimate measure of humanity the so called "personalistic norm" it should shape all types of human relations, both private and formal. The core of personalistic norm is covered in the principle that in any situation or circumstances a human being cannot be used as a means to

achieve one's goals. Human being is such a creature that cannot be treated as a thing to be used. The only possible attitude towards a human being is the attitude of love (Wojtyła 1982, 24-25, 42).

What is important in the context of disability is the fact that personalists assume that a human being can be characterized in two basic dimensions: potentiality and fortuitousness. Each person is potential in its nature – he/she has not been created as ideal but is developing all his/her life – since the prenatal phase till the death. There are natural differences among people as far as the level of this actualization of one's potentialities is concerned, e.g. there are people who are more or less intelligent, creative or talented in certain domains, but as for the essence of dignity – the status of each human being is definitely the same so we are equal – a teacher and a student, a disabled child and his therapist, an unborn baby and his parents.

Each human being always lives in the perspective of fortuitousness (cf. Chudy 1988, Krapiec 1991). Every day we experience how vulnerable and weak we are in the face of nature and fate. All the material goods or deeds created by men are fugitive and perishable. Paintings, sculptures or architectural masterpieces can be easily destroyed, nobody remembers poems, novels or papers which used to be popular and well-known. We also experience how imperfect we are in our behavior, how many mistakes we commit in building relationships – despite our relative good intellectual capabilities. Concerning the feature of fortuitousness, it is also imminent to both disabled and non-disabled people, however, it is in a way more visible in life of these with some level of disability and it makes them our “mentors”. In their life the meaning of fortuitousness is clearly visible – just one chromosome more, a few seconds less to cross the road, several minutes of inattentiveness – and a non-disabled person can become a disabled one. At the same time disabled persons teach us about human potentiality – development of very simple skills like walking, talking a few words more or being able to read – can bring storms

of joy into the disabled persons' life and life of his or her family, care takers or teachers. Sobolewska (2003), a linguist and a mother of a daughter with Down's Syndrome calls this phenomenon "a Christmas star which lasts all year round". She notices that with a non-disabled child his parents quite quickly recognize all the child's achievements as "typical" and "regular". It is only with a disabled child where his parents and care takers all the time, even when they are adult people, motivate them strongly to develop different skills and are proud and excited even of very simple achievements like making some art crafts or getting higher levels of personal independence.

In such a perspective, special pedagogy can be called a "metaphysics of support" (Chudy 2007), as a special educator it is simple a person who should help the student, who is in a certain moment more touched with the consequences of his/her fortuitousness. Christian values such as affirmation of each human being and Christian tradition of millions of people who lived according to these values can be recognized and basics of Christian special pedagogy.

CHRISTIAN SPECIAL PEDAGOGY AT JOHN PAUL II CATHOLIC  
UNIVERSITY OF LUBLIN, POLAND

Special pedagogy at Institute of Pedagogy of the John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin has been cultivated in different forms since the restoration of the Institute in 1981. The basic for that was prepared by its first director, professor Teresa Kukolowicz who was greatly interested in sociology of medicine and considered by many as a co-founder of this discipline in Poland. Her main ideas which influenced her co-workers in the field (the most important of them for many years have been professor Zofia Butrym-Kawczyńska, professor Dorota Kornas-Biela and professor Wojciech Chudy) were the ideas of disease as a mechanism

changing the model of social roles performed by a person and the conviction about a possible positive meaning of each difficult human experience, disability and disease among them. Chronic disease or disability Kukolowicz understood as *a subjective experience of a person who is derived of performing his or her usual social roles* (Kukołowicz 1987, p. 388). Explaining this concept she notices that a disease it is not only a bad medical condition but also a social phenomena – it is visible for other people and it changes the pattern of social relationships – e.g. a sick worker is not longer an efficient employee. What is more, a disease or disability changes the family structure e.g. a disabled woman has problems in performing her role as a mother, it is difficult to be a brother of a sibling with incurable disease etc. Kukolowicz adds that the process of recovery also depends on social factors which might be very much connected with the person's relationship with *significant others* or motivation to become more efficient in everyday life. Innovation of Kukolowicz's approach is also the conception of supporting not the patient himself, but the patient in his or her family environment (Kukołowicz (1977) and as a main goal of this support she perceived creating a positive attitude to disease and suffering. What is important is to welcome this difficult situation not as a defeat, but a chance of growth, both for the person himself and their families. It can also be used as an educational situation in which children and adolescents can learn positive social attitudes not theoretically but simply by observing the behavior of their parents and other adult family members to those who are in need. Kukolowicz very precisely points out that the ultimate aim of each Christian educational activity is to help the educated to achieve the ultimate aim of our existence – eternal life with God. It is a consequence of life directed not on fulfilling one's own needs and whims, but serving others, first of all these who need our support most. Her ideas of personalistic education were based on "pedagogy of everyday presence" and everyday

activities which – when performed with love – can bring not only practical effects, but also salvation.

This model of Christian special pedagogy is now being continued in Institute of Pedagogy of KUL. It takes a form of methodological scientific reflection on important issues of special pedagogy like the meaning of disability and suffering (Rynio 2004), affirmation of life even after (prenatal) diagnosis of lethal disease (Kornas-Biela 2012a, 2012b), John Paul II's teaching on human suffering (Kornas-Biela 1999, 2001, 2014; Domagala-Zysk 2005, 2006, 2007, 2010), disabled persons' subjectivity and dignity (Kornas-Biela 1988; Sidor- Piekarska 2009) or Jean Vanier's philosophy and practice of supporting the persons with intellectual disabilities (Kornas-Biela 2012c, 2014; Domagala-Zysk 2006, 2009, 2013).

Educationally, since 2015 it has taken a form not only of regular lectures and classes led in this model, but also a new field of study – special education. It aims at equipping students with knowledge and skills necessary for working with persons with different disabilities (intellectual disabilities, autism, hearing impairment, learning difficulties and social maladjustment). The most important issue, however, is to create a space for reflection on metaphysical and religious meaning of disability so as to be prepared to serve this group of persons in accordance with truly Christian perspective.

## CONCLUSION

The aim of the chapter was to draw a fundaments of Christian special pedagogy. It is based both on personalism and Christian revelation, but also on contemporary ideas of special pedagogy, special education and the contemporary condition of a person with disability. Christian special pedagogy has its implication both in creating scientific theory and in pedagogical everyday

practice where Christian norms and values, especially those proposed by John Paul II, can be cherished and used as fundamental, to the greater good of people with disabilities or diseases.

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