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## THE SOCIAL DIMENSION OF CHRISTIAN MERCY

**A b s t r a c t.** The article shows that mercy in the contemporary social teaching of the Church has been raised to the rank of an ethical and social principle. Similarly to other social principles, it is set on the grounds of Christian anthropology. This refers to the horizontal dimension of mercy, which takes different forms in interpersonal relations, resulting from well-recognised conditionings of time and place. A method of Catholic social teaching 'see – evaluate – act' is of great assistance here. However, one must not forget that mercy also has a vertical dimension. Jesus Christ, who reveals the mystery of God as the Father of mercy, becomes the incarnation of God's infinite mercy himself. In his teaching and deeds, he demonstrated free God's mercy, which saves and gives birth to a new life. As his disciples, we are called to live as He did, thanks to the gift of the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, who engrains in our hearts the lifestyle of Jesus Christ himself. Only in the perspective of God's love and mercy can human efforts in the social, cultural, political and economic spheres contribute to the creation of a true civilisation of love.

**Key words:** mercy; social justice; social love.

Announced by Pope Francis the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy has been met with vivid reaction of pastoral initiatives and with the interest of the world of science. In the latter case this reaction adopts the form of a reflection upon God's mercy and charity in interpersonal relations undertaken in the field of theology, philosophy and social sciences. The proclamation of God's mercy is permanently inscribed in the evangelising mission of the Church. There have been, however, times in history when the Church reminds of the truth of God's mercy with greater intensity. This message has taken on special significance due to the revelations of St Faustina Kowalska and

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the teaching of St John Paul II. Pope Francis believes that today our eyes also need to be more intensely fixed on mercy in order that we ourselves become an effective sign of God's action. For this reason, he announced the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy as the time full of grace for the Church. For Pope Francis, the concept of mercy contains the entire synthesis of the mystery of the Christian faith. In the bull entitled *Misericordiae vultus* he reminds that the mystery of mercy is the condition for our salvation. Mercy is the highest and final act in which God comes to meet man. It is the path that connects God and man, because it opens hearts to the hope that we will be forever loved despite the limitation in the form of our sin.<sup>1</sup> Mercy as God's attribute and the way of the revelation of his love is the subject of analysis in dogmatic theology. Spiritual theology and pastoral theology also undertake a reflection on the issue of mercy while moral theology and Catholic social teaching focus on mercy in human relations.<sup>2</sup> The following considerations refer to the last one and their aim is to present the social dimension of mercy. Experts in this field pinpoint that the very message of God's mercy contains a deep social dimension to such an extent that its omission would threaten to impoverish or even distort the whole message.<sup>3</sup>

## 1. ANTHROPOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF SOCIAL PRINCIPLES

According to the social teaching of the Church, the principles of social life are an expression of the truth about man learned by reason and faith. They derive from an encounter of the evangelical message and its requirements, especially the commandment to love God and neighbour as well as justice, with the problems arising from the life of society.<sup>4</sup> In the area of Christian

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<sup>1</sup> FRANCISZEK, Bulla *Misericordiae vultus* o nadzwyczajnym jubileuszu miłosierdzia (Wrocław: TUM Wydawnictwo Wrocławskiej Księgarni Archidiecezjalnej, 2015), 4.

<sup>2</sup> Wojciech ZYKAK, "Miłosierdzie jako termin teologiczny" [Mercy as a theological term], *Polonia Sacra* 19(2015), 1:151–152.

<sup>3</sup> Jerzy GOCKO and Sławomir CHRZEŚCIJANEK, "Wezwanie do miłosierdzia w życiu społecznym. Studium na kanwie *Dzienniczka* św. Faustyny Kowalskiej i nauczania społecznego Jana Pawła II" [The call for mercy in social life. A study based on the *Diary* of St Faustina Kowalska and the social teaching of John Paul II], *Seminare. Poszukiwania naukowe* 26(2009): 185.

<sup>4</sup> *Kompendium Nauki Społecznej Kościoła* [Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church] (Kielce: Jedność, 2005), 107 (from now on abbrev: KNSK).

social philosophy one may find various ways of explaining the relationship between an individual person and society. Nevertheless, it is always emphasised that social life creates the possibility to complete the human person and his/her development. The roots of social life are found in the man himself, in his individuality and personality. Social life is a natural and primary state for man, which involves the creation and communication of values. By means of his or her dynamism, the human person is always a social being. Social life is a necessity, but its concrete forms are the result of a personal choice of values, goals, lifestyle. Thus, it has a moral character.<sup>5</sup> This vision is opposed to collectivist and liberalistic interpretations which carry dangerous reductionism. Christian anthropology which considers man from the perspective of philosophy and theology shows the overall concept of man. A man is a person and therefore a being created in the image and likeness of God, endowed with reason and combining both the spiritual and physical nature as well as individual and social dimensions. From this perspective, the community may be perceived as a community of persons who in mutual cooperation create values that aim to serve the realisation of their personal goals in the end. In the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the modern world *Gaudium et spes* the Fathers of the Council accentuate the interdependence between the development of the human person and the society. "The subject and the goal of all social institutions is and must be the human person which for its part and by its very nature stands completely in need of social life."<sup>6</sup>

The integral vision of man portrayed by Christian anthropology gives specific features of social order. St John Paul II stated that "the correct vision of society necessarily flows from the Christian conception of the person."<sup>7</sup> Together with others, man creates values which become a condition for his own improvement and development. These are social, economic, cultural and political values. However, they always have a personal character due to the fact that they are targeted at the participants of social life.<sup>8</sup> Capa-

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<sup>5</sup> Stanisław KOWALCZYK, *Człowiek a społeczność. Zarys filozofii społecznej* [Man versus society. An outline of social philosophy] (Lublin: RW KUL, 1994), 120–121.

<sup>6</sup> Konstytucja duszpasterska o Kościele w świecie współczesnym *Gaudium et spes*, in *Sobór Watykański II. Konstytucje, Dekrety, Deklaracje. Tekst polski* (Poznań: Pallottinum, 2002), 544.

<sup>7</sup> JAN PAWEŁ II, Encyklika *Centesimus annus*, 13, in *Encykliki Ojca Świętego Jana Pawła II* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Znak, 2005), 638 [see: [http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_01051991\\_centesimus-annus.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_01051991_centesimus-annus.html) (5.01.2016)].

<sup>8</sup> Władysław PIWOWARSKI, *ABC katolickiej nauki społecznej. Część I. Podstawy i kierunki*

bilities and inclinations guiding people to take appropriate actions are ingrained in the social nature of man and although they themselves fail to create social principles, they constitute the foundation for normative principles of the natural law. It should be noted that not only purely rational reflection plays a role in their discovery: “Human transcendence—emphasises J. Krucina—the reference of human consciousness to the ultimate being, to God, makes the conscience discover values, also social ones, achievable only in fusion with others. These are the principles derived from the makings of a rational human nature. If they are properly understood, they reveal some binding effect, some degree of duty, obligation or moral necessity in the intuition of social life participants. They do not constitute only random ideas or statements, but natural and legal norms that are binding in the moral order and from which ways of behaving and acting in social life arise in concrete circumstances.”<sup>9</sup> In other words, they guarantee the existence of a social order which enables the fulfillment of humanity to all those who belong to a given community. A fairly common definition of a social principle presents it as “an order of a practical reason to create common values as a means to achieve personal objectives.”<sup>10</sup>

The principles of common good, subsidiarity, solidarity, love and fundamental values of social life such as truth, freedom and justice are most frequently mentioned in today’s social teaching of the Magisterium of the Church.<sup>11</sup> Somewhat differently and in a more diverse manner ethical and social principles are portrayed by representatives of the Catholic social teaching. They first enumerate the principles considered as natural and legal norms that express the essence of social life such as the principle of subsidiarity, the common good and solidarity. The second group comprises moral principles which include justice and love. They function in the area of social life organisation, shaping relations between people and also in the field of broader societies and nations.<sup>12</sup>

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[ABC of the Catholic social teaching. Part 1. Basics and trends] (Pelplin: Wydawnictwo Diecezjalne, 1993), 58.

<sup>9</sup> Jan KRUCINA, *Wyzwolenie społeczne* [Social liberation] (Wrocław: TUM Wydawnictwo Wrocławskiej Księgarni Archidiecezjalnej, 1995), 17.

<sup>10</sup> Władysław PIWOWARSKI, *ABC katolickiej nauki społecznej* [ABC of the Catholic social teaching], 61.

<sup>11</sup> KNSK, 107–139 (no. 160–208).

<sup>12</sup> Tadeusz BORUTKA and Jan MAZUR and Andrzej ZWOLIŃSKI, *Katolicka nauka społeczna* [Catholic social teaching] (Częstochowa–Jasna Góra: “Paulinianum” Wydawnictwo Zakonu Paulinów, 1999), 51–52.

The above remainder is necessary for the reflection on mercy as a principle of social life. This is so because one must clearly distinguish whether we undertake the discussion in the field of anthropological statements based on philosophical and theological reflections enriched by the theological view or in the field of very detailed measures leading to the implementation of standards of moral character. In the latter case an accurate diagnosis of time and place conditionings is required.

## 2. MERCY AS A PRINCIPLE OF SOCIAL LIFE

From the perspective of the characteristics of social and ethical principles outlined above, it seems that mercy should be placed among the principles existing in the organisational sphere of social life. As already mentioned, these principles shape relationships between individuals in a social group and between social groups in a broader society and country as well as in the international community. Justice and social love, which are found in this group of principles, are correlative so that the implementation of one is impossible without the implementation of the other.<sup>13</sup> In modern theological and moral reflection on the issue of mercy in interpersonal relationships it is more increasingly mentioned as one of the guiding principles of social life. This adjudication is mounted on the social teaching of the Church, especially the one of St John Paul II but also on the revelations of St Faustina Kowalska recorded in the *Diary*. “The call to practise mercy in social life—as J. Gocko and S. Chrześcijanek state—indicates its new dimension, raising it to the level of a fundamental social principle necessary in mutual relations of different people to achieve the common good. It may be said that mercy is becoming one of the main indications for the modern man and the source of hope and trust in God, which can be a source of his salvation.”<sup>14</sup>

The treatment of mercy as a principle of social life is consistent with the entire experience of the historical development of the social teaching of the Church. The principles of social life have not been formulated in a single

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<sup>13</sup> W. PIWOWARSKI, *ABC katolickiej nauki społecznej* [ABC of the Catholic social teaching], 68.

<sup>14</sup> J. GOCKO and S. CHRZEŚCIJANEK, *Wezwanie do miłosierdzia w życiu społecznym* [The call for mercy in social life], 189.

document but throughout the entire historical evolution of this teaching. They were formulated in various historical contexts and at different levels of generality. In the subsequent social documents, authors slowly shifted away from this approach focused on the social structures to more personalistic approaches which rediscovered the value of a person in a community. Similarly, proposals for specific socio-political models were more and more infrequent, while the reflection on ethical and social principles constituting a criterion for the proper evaluation of actually functioning social orders was deepened.<sup>15</sup> One may, therefore, talk about the expandability of ethical and social principles, which is expressed, firstly, in stronger emphasis on certain principles in specific historical conditions. Secondly, expandability may be regarded as the deepening of knowledge in terms of contents and the functioning of social principles. Thirdly, it is disclosed during the application of social principles to the changing conditions of time and place.

St John Paul II with his encyclical *Dives in Misericordia* decisively contributed to the indication of mercy as a principle of social life. Commentators of the encyclical note that not only is it a novel approach to merciful love of God revealed in Jesus Christ, but also to the Christian conception of social liberation.<sup>16</sup> The Pope's considerations are undoubtedly a pastoral tractate of mercy, but the encyclical itself should be regarded primarily as a social encyclical because it was written with a view to man, family as well as larger and smaller communities. The Pope appreciates all principles of social life; he specially exposes merciful love, which is much greater than charity or almsgiving.<sup>17</sup> The message of this encyclical is an essential complement to the existing horizontal perspectives for solving social problems since it takes into account the vertical factor in the form of God's mercy, which surpasses all sins, hatred and social injustice.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Władysław PIWOWARSKI, "Ewolucja kwestii społecznej od *Rerum novarum* do *Centesimus annus*" [Evolution of a social issue from *Rerum novarum* to *Centesimus annus*], *Roczniki Nauk Społecznych* 19–20(1991–1992), 1:11–12.

<sup>16</sup> Józef MAJKA, "Miłosierdzie jako zasada społeczna w świetle encykliki *Dives in misericordia*" [Mercy as a social principle in the light of *Dives in misericordia* encyclical], in *Dives in misericordia. Tekst i komentarz* [*Dives in misericordia. The text and commentary*], ed. S. Grzybek, M. Jaworski (Kraków: Polskie Towarzystwo Teologiczne, 1981), 178.

<sup>17</sup> Kazimierz RYCZAN, "Miłość-miłosierdzie w życiu społecznym" [Love-mercy in social life], in *Jan Paweł II. Dives in misericordia. Tekst i komentarze* [John Paul II. *Dives in misericordia. The text and commentaries*], ed. S. Nagy (Lublin: RW KUL, 1983), 232.

<sup>18</sup> J. SIEG, "Encyklika *Dives in misericordia* na tle nauki społecznej Kościoła" [*Dives in misericordia* encyclical against the social teaching of the Church], in *Dives in misericordia*.

The treatment of mercy as a principle of social life does not entail the introduction of a new triad of principles: love—mercy—justice. The social teaching of the Magisterium of the Church as well as the scientific reflection taken by social ethicists dictate that we speak rather of a new deeper interpretation of love as a social principle. Only this new approach to social love reveals its new relations with respect to the principles of social justice and shows the very principle in a new light.<sup>19</sup> Love often remains at the level of the fascination with the good, value and dignity of another person. Mercy goes further. As an act of merciful love, mercy is a common experience of good, i.e. a person and his/her dignity. John Paul II notes that “mercy is manifested in its true and proper aspect when it restores to value, promotes and draws good from all the forms of evil existing in the world and in man.”<sup>20</sup> Mercy is an indispensable dimension of love, like its second name. Understood as merciful love it becomes a factor influencing interpersonal relationships in the spirit of brotherhood. Such love is also an important feature of Christian vocation, which “consists in the constant discovery and persevering practice of love as a unifying and also elevating power despite all difficulties of a psychological or social nature: it is a question, in fact, of a merciful love which, by its essence, is a creative love. [...] Merciful love is never a unilateral act or process. [...] the one who receives, who obtains a benefit, who experiences merciful love; he too can find himself the object of mercy.”<sup>21</sup> Participation in the good of a person, mutuality of experiencing this good, equalisation of persons while maintaining their ontological identity and loyalty to themselves are the attributes of mercy understood as above. In the full and proper form, mercy is realised in relation of God to man; however, in an analogous manner it takes place in relations between people who follow ‘rich in mercy’ God.<sup>22</sup>

The new interpretation of merciful love as a principle of social life allows to investigate more thoroughly its relationship to social justice. The mutual

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*Tekst i komentarz [Dives in misericordia. The text and commentary]*, ed. S. Grzybek, M. Jaworski (Kraków: Polskie Towarzystwo Teologiczne, 1981), 198.

<sup>19</sup> J. MAJKA, “Miłosierdzie jako zasada społeczna” [Mercy as a social principle], 181.

<sup>20</sup> JAN PAWEŁ II, “Encyklika o Bożym miłosierdziu *Dives in misericordia*”, 6, in *Encykliki Ojca Świętego Jana Pawła II* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Znak, 2005), 103 [see: [http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_30111980\\_dives-in-misericordia.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_30111980_dives-in-misericordia.html) (9.01.2016)].

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

<sup>22</sup> W. ZYZAK, “Miłosierdzie jako termin teologiczny” [Mercy as a theological term], 143.

relationship of justice and love in social life has long been the subject of discussion in the field of Catholic social teaching. Also Catholic social activists referred to these principles in practical programmes to alleviate the social issue at the beginning of the capitalist social order (the workers' issue).<sup>23</sup> Justice and love as principles of social life should be recognised conjunctively. Justice demands to give everyone what he is owed, while social love transcends the boundaries of justice. Equality is the ideal of justice whereas love does not know limitations.<sup>24</sup>

A complementary approach to love and social justice should take into account the fact that in today's world justice must be complemented by love, whose culmination is in mercy.<sup>25</sup> The social teaching of the Church, which is a response to the signs of our times, clearly puts the primacy of love, also merciful love, over justice.<sup>26</sup> In particular, St John Paul II emphasised the above in his encyclical on God's mercy. Analysing the parable of the Prodigal Son, the Pope notes that "the relationship between justice and love that is manifested as mercy is inscribed with great exactness in the content of the Gospel parable. It becomes more evident that love is transformed into mercy when it is necessary to go beyond the precise norm of justice-precise and often too narrow"<sup>27</sup> (DM 5). In another place he emphasises that love is greater than justice: "greater in the sense that it is primary and fundamental.

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<sup>23</sup> Czesław STRZESZEWSKI, *Katolicka nauka społeczna* [Catholic social teaching] (Lublin: RW KUL, 1994), 213–253.

<sup>24</sup> Wiesław PRZYGODA, *Posługa charytatywna Kościoła w Polsce* [Charitable service of the Church in Poland] (Lublin: Wydawnictwo KUL, 2004), 120.

<sup>25</sup> Janusz NAGÓRNY, *Posłannictwo chrześcijan w świecie*, t. I. *Świat i wspólnota* [Mission of Christians in the world, vol. I. The world and community] (Lublin: RW KUL, 1997), 246–248.

<sup>26</sup> Pope Benedict XVI drew attention to this issue in his encyclical *Caritas in veritate*: "On the one hand, charity demands justice: recognition and respect for the legitimate rights of individuals and peoples. It strives to build the *earthly city* according to law and justice. On the other hand, charity transcends justice and completes it in the logic of giving and forgiv. The *earthly city* is promoted not merely by relationships of rights and duties, but to an even greater and more fundamental extent by relationships of gratuitousness, mercy and communion. Charity always manifests God's love in human relationships as well, it gives theological and salvific value to all commitment for justice in the world" [no. 6]. [see: [http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_enc\\_20090629\\_caritas-in-veritate.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate.html) (5.01.2016)]. Wydanie polskie: *Encyklika "Caritas in veritate" Ojca świętego Benedykta XVI* (Tarnów: Biblos, 2009), 9–10.

<sup>27</sup> JAN PAWEŁ II, "Encyklika o Bożym miłosierdziu *Dives in misericordia*", no. 6, in *Encykliki Ojca Świętego Jana Pawła II*, 100.



Love, so to speak, conditions justice and, in the final analysis, justice serves love”<sup>28</sup> (DM 4).

In the Catholic ethics, mercy is treated as a virtue which accompanies love of neighbour and completes acts of justice. John Paul II in a way inverts the parts of the relation between justice and mercy. For him, authentic Christian mercy is like a profound source of justice. Mercy is not only a supplement, not only alleviating the stringent principles of justice, but the foundation on which justice is based and without which it would fail to represent its true nature.<sup>29</sup> Authentic Christian mercy also leads to a more perfect equality between people, i.e. it is a more perfect incarnation of justice. The Pope recalls that “the person who gives becomes more generous when he feels at the same time benefitted by the person accepting his gift; and vice versa, the person who accepts the gift with the awareness that, in accepting it, he too is doing good is in his own way serving the great cause of the dignity of the person; and this contributes to uniting people in a more profound manner.”<sup>30</sup> This equality does not so much concern the sphere of material goods, but rather the sphere of good in the form of the man himself with the dignity unique to him. Such equality does not constitute the blurring of differences, but results from finding the true foundation of person’s dignity.<sup>31</sup> The conviction that the party practising mercy is also endowed constitutes indirect recognition of the dignity of people who experience mercy. Therefore, mercy cannot be unilaterally understood or practised. The work of mercy is a deeply personal meeting, a bilateral relation. If this is lacking, then even acts that seemingly have a merciful character cannot truly be considered as works of mercy.

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., s. 94.

<sup>29</sup> Karolina M. KASPERKIEWICZ, “Pojęcie miłosierdzia w *Dives in misericordia*”, in *Dives in misericordia. Tekst i komentarz* [*Dives in misericordia. The text and commentary*], 71.

<sup>30</sup> JAN PAWEŁ II, Encyklika o Bożym miłosierdziu *Dives in misericordia*, no. 6, in *Encykliki Ojca Świętego Jana Pawła II*, 130.

<sup>31</sup> J. NAGÓRNY, *Posłannictwo chrześcijan w świecie* [Mission of Christians in the world], 270.

### 3. PRACTICE OF MERCY IN SOCIAL LIFE

Mercy understood as a social principle becomes the basis for the construction of a proper social order as well as the criterion for its evaluation. Practice of merciful love may and should take place at all levels of social life, in small and large social groups as well as in all spheres of social life: political, economic and cultural ones. The post-conciliar social teaching of the Church departs from the recognition of mercy as a virtue in favour of an attitude or style of life being an important feature of the Christian vocation. If man is affected by God's mercy, then he should also practise it towards the ones in need. Such an attitude requires adequate convictions, will, aspirations and commitment of an affective side.<sup>32</sup> The life of a Christian should be led according to the moral norm of the love of God and neighbour whose special form is merciful love, i.e. mercy.<sup>33</sup> Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church recalls that no systems of legal rules may guarantee the life of people and nations in brotherhood, unity and peace. Only love as a 'form of virtues' may animate and shape social actions towards peace. In order to do that, however, one needs to take care of portraying love not only as an inspiration for individual actions but also as a force able to inspire new ways for the confrontation with the problems of the modern world and for the profound internal renewal of structures, social organisations and legal systems. In this perspective, love becomes social and political love: social love enables us to love the common good and contributes to the real search for the good of all persons, considering them not only individually, but also together in the social dimension.<sup>34</sup>

The call to practise mercy in social life is dictated by the state of today's *conditio humana*. St John Paul II emphasised that the Church who since its beginning taught about God's mercy as the source of salvation is today particularly called to proclaim this message. "Before humanity"—the Pope said in Cracow—"there appear new perspectives of development as well as new threats. Man frequently lives as if God did not exist. He usurps the Creator's

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<sup>32</sup> Jerzy MISIUREK, "Miłosierdzie w teologii", in *Encyklopedia Katolicka* [Mercy in theology, in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*], t. XII (Lublin: Towarzystwo Naukowe KUL, 2008), 1091.

<sup>33</sup> Józef ZABIELSKI, *Wydobywanie dobra. Teologia chrześcijańskiego miłosierdzia* [Extraction of good. Theology of Christian mercy] (Białystok: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu w Białymstoku, 2006), 177.

<sup>34</sup> KNSK, 138.

right to interfere in the mysteries of human life. He attempts to determine its occurrence, set its shape through genetic manipulation and to define the boundaries of death... there are many attempts to silence God's voice in people's hearts, and to make Him the Great Absentee in social culture and consciousness of nations. The mystery of iniquity is still a part of the reality of the world in which we live."<sup>35</sup> The Holy Father clearly states that the rejection of God in the life of an individual leads to the violation of the order in the world, especially of relationships between people, social groups and nations. A category of sins called 'social sins' appears. Exhortation *Reconciliatio et paenitentia* lists their three meanings. Firstly, an individual sin always affects other people. Thus, every sin has a social character. Secondly, taking into consideration the subject, one may classify in this category sins against love of neighbour, against justice, rights of a human person, the common good and its requirements, finally sins committed through deed or negligence by political, economic or trade union leaders. Thirdly, there are sins of an individual referring to relations between human communities. If these relations are not in accordance with morality, they violate justice, freedom and peace among human individuals and social groups.<sup>36</sup> Social sins lead to the formulation and buildup of various structures of sin. They exist and function as objective social creatures, taking the form of institutions or organisations. The structures of sin may exist in a pure form, i.e. by its nature and purpose as well as they may be 'marked by sin'.<sup>37</sup>

In view of these threats to social order the reform at the structural and institutional level is necessary. Also in this field it is important to practise works of mercy, which is confirmed by the latest social teaching of the Church, expressed in the Compendium: "It is undoubtedly an act of love, the work of mercy by which one responds here and now to a real and impelling need of one's neighbour, but it is an equally indispensable act of love to strive to organize and structure society so that one's neighbour will not find himself in poverty, above all when this becomes a situation within which an

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<sup>35</sup> "Homilia w czasie Mszy świętej beatyfikacyjnej. Kraków 18.08.2002", in JAN PAWEŁ II, *Pielgrzymki do ojczyzny. Przemówienia i homilie* [The homily during the Beatification Mass. Cracow 18 Aug 2002, in JOHN PAUL II. *Pilgrimages to the Fatherland. Speeches and homilies*] (Kraków, 2005), 1212–1213.

<sup>36</sup> Jan Paweł II, *Adhortacja apostolska Reconciliatio et paenitentia* (Watykan, 1984), 16.

<sup>37</sup> Władysław PIWOWARSKI, "Grzechy społeczne i struktury grzechu w nauczaniu Jana Pawła II" [Social sins and the structures of sin in the teaching of John Paul II], *Studia Warmińskie* 37(2000), 465–467.

immense number of people and entire populations must struggle, and when it takes on the proportions of a true worldwide social issue.”<sup>38</sup> The document also notes that the neighbour whom we love is often in front of us ‘in the community’, thus remedying his needs may also mean something else than the good that we want for him at the level of individual relations. Love of neighbour at the social level requires the use of social mediation in order to help the ones in need.<sup>39</sup>

Activities of Christians promoting mercy, in addition to a personal dimension, more often adopt social and institutional forms. It is often non-profit and voluntary work and commitment. Non-profit associations, i.e. voluntary, stable and self-governing ones are worth mentioning. If such an activity is undertaken for religious reasons, it is a kind of an apostolate. In history we find many institutional forms of practising mercy by the Church whose examples we may observe in the charitable activities of religious orders, confraternities, hospitals and activities of Caritas. The social character of merciful love is revealed in the charitable service. No-one is entitled to this help out of justice, but this help is a manifestation of social love of the community of the Church towards its members and other people in the world. The charitable service is not an individual or private activity of Christians but the mission and function of the whole People of God. By its very nature, it is a social activity, developed in families, parishes, local communities, countries and in the international community.<sup>40</sup>

It should be noted that mercy as a social virtue has been slightly overshadowed by the emergence and development of social security on the part of the welfare state. Mercy has come to be associated with false pity or a veil for negligence in structural reforms. Deprived of social reference, purely individualistic or solely spiritual interpretation of mercy and convictions held in rich countries that works of mercy have become less important, perhaps except helping poor countries, are the most important misconceptions distorting the attitudes of mercy.<sup>41</sup> Meanwhile, history shows that there is still a lot of space and the need for the provision of mercy. It is also necessary in the conditions of modern economic and social order of developed countries, which social ethicist B. Sutor observes in the statement that the Good

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<sup>38</sup> KNSK, 139.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> W. PRZYGODA, *Posługa charytatywna* [Charitable service], 121–123.

<sup>41</sup> W. ZYZAK, “Miłosierdzie jako termin teologiczny” [Mercy as a theological term], 145.

Samaritan will still have a sufficient number of duties in any order. However, beside its goals, there is also a need to create a social order that takes into account those socially vulnerable ones.<sup>42</sup>

In the practice of Christian mercy at a social level, especially in its structural forms, there arises a danger of its identification with the naturalistic philanthropy to the extent that one may speak about a kind of secularisation of the works of mercy in the organisation of Caritas. Thinking of the satisfaction of purely material needs of man is its manifestation while ecclesial charity may not be reduced to the horizontal dimension only. Through the service of love, one must sometimes address a poor man's unconscious thirst for truth, life in fullness and salvation brought by Jesus Christ.<sup>43</sup>

Christian mercy is an important way to the renewal of social life. Here one can ask again whether it is necessary to change individual people's disposition or the reform concerning the structures of society. It is certain that good order among people may not be 'structurally' built, because even the best structures and laws may be threatened by bad individual disposition. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to believe that it only comes down to the reform of human dispositions and that nothing depends on laws and structures. Therefore, the reform of disposition and structures should go hand in hand.<sup>44</sup> Referring to mercy, it must be said that putting this virtue into practice in the social dimension is undoubtedly connected with its practice in the individual dimension. This was pointed out by Pope Francis, who, while opening the holy doors of the Lateran Basilica on the first Sunday of the Year of Mercy (13 Dec 2015), said in his homily: "it is required from us that we be the instruments of mercy, aware that we will be judged on this basis. Whoever was baptised knows that his obligations are greater. Faith in Christ sends us on a way that lasts a lifetime and that consists in being as merciful as the Father is. The joy of crossing the doors of mercy is accompanied by the commitment to accept and be a witness of the love that goes beyond justice and has no boundaries."<sup>45</sup> In this way he referred to Jesus'

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<sup>42</sup> B. SUTOR, *Etyka polityczna. Ujęcie całościowe na gruncie chrześcijańskiej nauki społecznej* [Political ethics. An overall view based on Christian social teaching], trans. A. Marcol (Warszawa: "Kontrast" Wydawnictwo Fundacji ATK, 1994), 285.

<sup>43</sup> Wiesław PRZYGODA, *Apostolski wymiar wolontariatu charytatywnego w Polsce* [An apostolic dimension of charitable voluntary service in Poland] (Lublin: Towarzystwo Naukowe KUL, 2012), 73.

<sup>44</sup> B. SUTOR, *Etyka polityczna* [Political ethics], 150–151.

<sup>45</sup> Papeż otworzył drzwi święte na Lateranie. [http://l.radiovaticana.va/news/2015/12/13/papiez\\_otworzyl\\_drzwi\\_swiete\\_na\\_lateranie\\_od\\_chrześcijan\\_wy/1194103](http://l.radiovaticana.va/news/2015/12/13/papiez_otworzyl_drzwi_swiete_na_lateranie_od_chrześcijan_wy/1194103) [18.12.2015].

command to follow God in his mercy (“be merciful just as your Father is merciful”—Luke 6:36).

The call to practise mercy constitutes a consequence of the merciful action of God. Being His follower should consist in the kindness, gentleness and practice of love towards all people, especially those in need, and on the condonation of wrongs and all resentment,<sup>46</sup> of which we are reminded by the catalogue of the corporal and spiritual works of mercy. Pope Francis drew attention to their topicality in his bull *Misericordiae vultus*.<sup>47</sup> The understanding of the nature of these works is broadening nowadays and, consequently, they need to be perceived also at the level of national and universal community. There is, therefore, a need to shape appropriate attitudes and, in the social dimension, structures which would ensure the provision of mercy to people and social groups.<sup>48</sup> Forgiveness, which John Paul II considered as a requirement for a *more human* world, is an important element in the above process. Pope Francis sees forgiveness as the most evident expression of merciful love as well as an imperative that we cannot ignore. Alongside forgiveness, a new compassionate mercy, being a neighbour to the needy, the removal of the layers of evil, entrusting to God’s mercy and its proclamation to the world constitute the embodiment of merciful service and are other forms of the works of mercy known in the tradition of the Church.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Andrzej PIWOWAR, “Miłosierdzie w Nowym Testamencie” [Mercy in the New Testament], in *Encyklopedia Katolicka* [The Catholic Encyclopedia], vol. XII, 1089–1090 (Lublin: Towarzystwo Naukowe KUL, 2008).

<sup>47</sup> “It is my burning desire that, during this Jubilee, the Christian people may reflect on the corporal and spiritual works of mercy. It will be a way to reawaken our conscience, too often grown dull in the face of poverty. And let us enter more deeply into the heart of the Gospel where the poor have a special experience of God’s mercy. Jesus introduces us to these works of mercy in his preaching so that we can know whether or not we are living as his disciples. Let us rediscover these [...]works of mercy” (nr 15) [see: [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/bulls/documents/papa-francesco\\_bolla\\_20150411\\_misericordiae-vultus.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/bulls/documents/papa-francesco_bolla_20150411_misericordiae-vultus.html) (4.01.2016)]. Wydanie polskie: *Bulla Misericordiae vultus Ojca świętego Franciszka o nadzwyczajnym jubileuszu miłosierdzia*. Wrocław: TUM Wydawnictwo Archidiecezji Wrocławskiej, 2015, 25.

<sup>48</sup> J. MISIUREK, “Miłosierdzie w teologii” [Mercy in theology], 1091.

<sup>49</sup> W. ZYZAK, “Miłosierdzie jako termin teologiczny” [Mercy as a theological term], 145.

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## SPÓŁECZNY WYMIAR CHRZEŚCIJAŃSKIEGO MIŁOSIĘRDZIA

### S t r e s z c z e n i e

W artykule pokazano, że miłosierdzie we współczesnym nauczaniu społecznym Kościoła podniesione zostało do rangi zasady etyczno-społecznej. Podobnie jak inne społeczne principia jest ono osadzone na gruncie chrześcijańskiej antropologii. Chodzi tutaj o horyzontalny wymiar miłosierdzia, które w relacjach międzyludzkich przyjmuje różne formy, wynikające z dobrze rozeznaczonych uwarunkowań miejsca i czasu. Tutaj pomocna jest metoda katolickiej nauki społecznej: widzieć—ocenić—działać. Nie wolno jednak zapominać, że miłosierdzie ma także wymiar wertykalny. Jezus Chrystus, który objawia tajemnicę Boga będącego Ojcem miłosierdzia, sam staje się wcieleniem nieskończonego Bożego miłosierdzia. W swoim nauczaniu i postępowaniu ukazuje darmowe Boże miłosierdzie, które zbawia i rodzi nowe życie. Jako jego uczniowie jesteśmy wezwani do tego, by żyć tak jak On, dzięki darowi Ducha Świętego Pocieszyciela, który zakorzenia w naszych sercach styl życia samego Chrystusa<sup>50</sup>. Tylko w perspektywie Bożej miłości i miłosierdzia ludzkie wysiłki w dziedzinie społecznej, kulturowej, politycznej i gospodarczej mogą przyczynić się do budowania prawdziwej cywilizacji miłości.

**Słowa kluczowe:** miłosierdzie; sprawiedliwość społeczna; miłość społeczna.

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<sup>50</sup> KNSK, 20–21.