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SPIRITUALITY OF CHRISTIAN MERCY
IN CONTEXT OF A CULTURE OF EXCLUSION — THE POOR

A b s t r a c t. The article raises a problem of the spirituality of Christian charity with a particular emphasis on poverty. Firstly, it focuses on the culture of exclusion and its many dimensions, drawing on the recent Polish studies. Following that it emphasises the foundations of Christian charity. Further, it goes on to presenting the ecclesial (Church and community based) dimension of the ministry of mercy and a number of both internal and external difficulties in the practical implementation of this idea in the specific conditions of daily life. The article concludes that exclusion is a particular area in life that calls for the ministry of charity towards the ones in need.

Key words: charity; poverty; Christian spirituality.

After the Jubilee Year of Mercy, Pope Francis appealed to the Church, but also to all people of good will ("to all who read this Apostolic Letter — mercy and peace") for the continuation of works of mercy in the world:

> Many concrete signs of mercy have been performed during this Holy Year. Communities, families and individuals have rediscovered the joy of sharing and the beauty of solidarity. But this is not enough. Our world continues to promote new forms of spiritual and material poverty that assault human dignity. For this reason, the Church must always be vigilant and ready to identify new works of mercy and to practise them with generosity and enthusiasm.
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> Let us make every effort, then, to devise specific and insightful ways of practising charity and the works of mercy. Mercy is inclusive and tends to spread like wildfire in a way that knows no limits. Hence we are called to give new expression to the traditional works of mercy. For mercy overflows, keeps moving forward, bears rich fruit. It is like the leaven that makes the dough rise (cf. Mt 13:33), or the mustard seed that grows into a tree (cf. Lk 13:19).[1]

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[1] Apostolic Letter *Misericordia et Misera* of the Holy Father Francis at the Conclusion of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy, No. 19.

Therefore, the announcement and the whole course of the jubilee Year of Mercy can be interpreted as a beginning, an impulse for the Church and the world, an impulse which should push people towards mercy and never expire. This article was inspired by a fragment of the apostolic exhortation of Pope Francis *Evangelii Gaudium* (No. 197–201), in which he addresses the issues of the poor in the context of Christian spirituality. In the face of the issue of poverty, this theological reflection (necessarily extended by the results of research of other humanities) will focus on the special form of poverty, which is exclusion. Although the very concept of "exclusion" as well as the phenomenon described is something new in the theological reflection, it seems that it must be deepened and expanded to help not only to understand the phenomenon, but also to pave the way for certain specific actions that are, after all, a practical realization of the Gospel message.

1. "EXCLUSION" AS A MULTI-DIMENSIONAL PHENOMENON

The phenomenon of social exclusion is difficult to define. There are several overlapping dimensions of marginalization. However, in general, social exclusion, which consists in not taking the usual and socially accepted way of life or losing it, concerns people, families or groups of people who:

a) live in unfavorable economic conditions (material poverty);

b) are affected by unfavorable social processes resulting from mass and dynamic developmental changes, for example, deindustrialisation, crises, rapid collapse of industries or regions;

c) have not been provided with life capital that allows them to gain a normal social position, an appropriate level of qualifications, entering the labor market or starting a family, which further hinders adjustment to changing social and economic conditions;

d) do not have access to adequate institutions allowing them to be provided with life capital, its development and multiplication, which results from the underdevelopment of these institutions due to lack of priorities, lack of public funds, low efficiency of functioning;

e) experience discrimination as a result of underdevelopment of relevant legislation or cultural prejudices and stereotypes,

f) have characteristics that make it difficult for them to use public social resources due to disability, addiction, long-term illness or other individual characteristics;

g) are subject to the destructive actions of other people, for example violence, blackmail, indoctrination.[2]

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[2] MINISTRY OF LABOR AND SOCIAL POLICY, *National Strategy for Social Integration for Poland*, Warsaw, 2003, p. 21. The National Strategy for Social Integration (NSIS) is a document prepared by

In the subject literature and in numerous national and international documents, the definitions of social exclusion focus either on specific dimensions of the phenomenon, for example, institutional and legal constraints or on the dominant risk (threat of exclusion), for example, poverty or lack of qualifications, or on groups of people already affected by social exclusion (for example, homeless, addicts), or on showing areas where access has been restricted (for example, to consumption, information, culture). The more we should reflect on this phenomenon from the perspective of spiritual theology, which — as one of theological sciences — tries to describe the reality from the point of view of Revelation contained in Scripture. Spiritual theology, which is theology "of life in the Spirit," that is, life of God's love in man, must necessarily deal with the new realities so vividly and painfully affecting specific people. One of these phenomena is poverty expressed, among others, by exclusion. As seen above, the dynamically changing world is providing more and more new phenomena and forms of exclusion. Theology, including spiritual theology, must see is as a "sign of the times" and try to perceive this sign in the light of Revelation.

Speaking of the nature of exclusion, there are definitions describing the process of social exclusion by presenting its main causes: legal restrictions on human rights, health condition of individuals, skills, qualifications, family and environmental relations, impact of social environment, influence of family dysfunctions, impact of peer groups (getting into a "bad company"), gangs, the world of crime, groups at risk of exclusion, groups vulnerable to exclusion, groups prone to discrimination, culture, helplessness, weakening of family ties, family breakdown, stigmatization, loss of identity, etc. Poor people do not have to be excluded and vice versa — excluded people are not necessarily poor. There is a broad conglomerate of both the causes and the effects of poverty that result in exclusion. It is worth adding — according to Rafał P. Bartczuk's latest research regarding Poland — another category of people: not excluded, but "at risk of exclusion." In Poland, these are:

1. Members of large families,
2. Young people from families with alcohol problems,
3. Social orphans,
4. Euro-orphans;
5. Minor mothers;
6. Young people violating criminal law norms

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the Task Force for Social Reintegration chaired by the Minister of Economy, Labor and Social Policy, which was established on April 14, 2003 by the Prime Minister. See www.mpips.gov.pl Accessed 6 December 2016.

7. Young people at risk of alcoholism from rural areas;

8. Young people at risk of addiction from urban areas;

9. Offenders serving insolvency sentences,

10. People released from prison;

11. The homeless,

12. People engaged in prostitution.[3]

It is easy to notice that the above-mentioned categories of marginalization mainly refer to the sphere of the external life of a man, although of course they can influence — and most often they do — the mental condition and spiritual life. Speaking of exclusion in the context of the internal life of man and Christian spirituality, it is necessary to add to the above points some phenomena that pertain to "spiritual marginalization." These are:

1. "Man alienated from himself," that is, from his own identity. Rose Businge, working with AIDS sufferers in the slums in Uganda, says that people because of war and disease are "devoid of" the sense of identity. They do not know who they are. She quotes the words of one of the sick: "I am no longer anybody. It is as if I were no longer myself: I eat, I sleep, but I cannot find any meaning in all this. I want to scream, "what meaning is there if I continue to live?"[4] This is just one of many examples of "exclusion" that concerns man's inner life.

2. "Nuclear man."[5] It is a state in which a man sees that his abilities and works have the power of self-destruction, he feels lost in the face of a multitude of ideologies, religions and worldviews, which leads to alienation and exaltation. He no longer believes in anything that would be universally true and important. Seemingly open and tolerant of everything, he "might listen with great attention to a rabbi, a minister, a priest," but he is no longer capable of considering something that would be a spiritual path. So he remains lonely, spiritually marginalized, does not belong to any community, does not follow any path, because he no longer believes that he can get anywhere. According to Robert J. Lifton, "nuclear man" can be characterized by: a) a historical dislocation, b) a fragmented ideology, and

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[3] Rafał P. BARTCZUK, "Metodologia badań nad zasobami adaptacyjnymi," in *Skazani na wykluczenie. Zasoby adaptacyjne osób zagrożonych marginalizacją społeczną* [Condemned to exclusion. Adaptation resources of people at risk of social marginalization], ed. Mirosław Kalinowski and Iwona Niewiadomska (Lublin: Wydawnictwo KUL, 2010), 45.

[4] Rose BUSINGYE, "The 'Meeting Point' in the Slums: A Presence Among Sick People and Outcast Youth," in Walter L. MAFFENINI, *Partnership Experiences Against Urban Poverty* (Milano: Franco Angeli, 2003), 35.

[5] See H. NOUWEN, *The Wounded Healer — Ministry in Contemporary Society* (New York: Crown Publishing Group, 2013), 5 ff. The author uses the word "nuclear" in the context of nuclear danger, but it seems to have a certain spiritual aspect: it can be interpreted as "atomic," "atomization." This means breaking down into indivisible particles, which suggests their loneliness, isolation.

c) a search for immortality.[6] H. Nouwen analyzes and deepens these three qualities, emphasizing that the contemporary man who is spiritually lost, condemns himself to complete marginalization.

3. "Postmodern" man[7]—permeated with a mentality indicating that his life is an accident in which there are no constant references and truths, which, on the one hand, exempts him from moral requirements, and, on the other hand, causes his spiritual void.

As one can see from the above, a wide array of exclusion phenomena emerges, both from the point of view of the causes and forms of its occurrence. Seemingly, this is an intimidating vision, but from the point of view of the multidimensionality of the spirituality of mercy, it opens up a wide range of forms of doing good, in which each of those who truly follow Jesus Christ can find the closest and most suitable form of helping their neighbors. It is worth noting that in recent years, on the initiative of Caritas Poland and the John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, thorough scientific research on adaptation resources of people at risk of poverty and marginalization has been carried out in Poland. As a result of this initiative, a great work was written describing in a competent and reliable manner the difficult situation of numerous environments and individuals. The value of the undertaken initiative is not only a detailed description of the "state of poverty and exclusion" in Poland, but also indicating areas requiring specific changes by presenting the existing capital and adaptive resources of groups and individuals.[8] It ensures that any actions taken by Caritas Polska or other charitable institution are not run blindly, that is, without meeting the real needs of people in a difficult situation.

As shown by the sociological studies presented above, people suffer from loneliness and isolation, and even from the very threat of isolation. Sometimes they isolate themselves, sometimes they are marginalized by others. In reflecting on the spirituality of mercy (and also on the concrete ministry of mercy) we should notice not only one's material and emotional needs, but also the fact that he can suffer even more from being isolated by others, or marginalized. However, in the human nature there is a need to be with others, not only to keep in touch with them by phone or e-mail, but also to meet and talk to them. There is a law of connected vessels between people. It is the social nature of man, his special dependence on others, that fits in with the ethos of mercy and the spirituality of mercy.

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[6] Ibid., 12.

[7] A comprehensive study on the relation of postmodernism to the sense of alienation and exclusion see Zygmunt BAUMAN, *Postmodernity and Its Discontents* (New York: New York University Press, 1997).

[8] Here the author refers to the book *Skazani na wykluczenie* (see footnote 3).

2. SOURCES OF SPIRITUALITY OF MERCY AND EXCLUSION

The ethos of antiquity ordered the issues of the human community using the category of justice. Although antiquity knew the attitude and act of mercy (*eleos*), it was understood as a resonance of inner movement, a feeling of pity, not as a commitment to being a mature citizen or as a call for pragmatic action for the needy, which is why the stoics considered compassion and pity for the "disease of the soul" to be fought. In antiquity, we do not find any signs of special care of the gods for the poor, or, for example, state care for the disabled. If one speaks of doing something good regarding this ethos, it is more to serve to the community, because it is a public act, that is, securing a certain public order.[9] As stated by Cardinal J. P. Cordes, "various aspects of the commandment to love one's neighbor are revealed, useful for guarding against the reduction, both individually and communally, of the biblical command to love God and neighbor."[10]

It is clear from Revelation that God himself gives the example of a merciful "exodus toward man," and "seeking him." God reveals Himself as a community, the communion of the Three Persons, who opens up and meets man, seeks him, gives him grace before he asks for it. God's act precedes a human response. In this regard, God is tireless. That is why Pope Francis bases his appeal to the Church to engage in works of mercy on the theocentric foundation (*Evangelium Gaudii*, No. 197):

> God's heart has a special place for the poor, so much so that he himself "became poor" (2 Cor 8:9). The entire history of our redemption is marked by the presence of the poor. Salvation came to us from the "yes" uttered by a lowly maiden from a small town on the fringes of a great empire.

This identification of God with the poor and the excluded was expressed most fully in Christ, who, on the one hand, was the "fullness of the Deity," and, on the other hand, experienced the fate of the poor:

> The Saviour was born in a manger, in the midst of animals, like children of poor families; he was presented at the Temple along with two turtledoves, the offering made by those who could not afford a lamb (cf. Lk 2:24; Lev 5:7); he was raised in a home of ordinary workers and worked with his own hands to earn his bread. When he began to preach the Kingdom, crowds of the dispossessed followed him, illustrating his words: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor" (Lk 4:18). He assured those burdened by sorrow and crushed by poverty that God has a special place for them in his heart:

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[9] Paul Josef CORDES, *Where are the Helpers?: Charity and Spirituality* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), 76

[10] Ibid., p. 77.

"Blessed are you poor, yours is the kingdom of God" (Lk 6:20); he made himself one of them: "I was hungry and you gave me food to eat", and he taught them that mercy towards all of these is the key to heaven (cf. Mt 25:5ff.).

The Holy Scriptures in many other places show God seeking a man when he is unworthy, walks away from God, goes the wrong way and destroys himself, his dignity, and his relationship with God and with people. In the book of Genesis, God looks for Adam and asks him: "Where are you?." Man can get lost, or "marginalized." He can be "marginalized" by others, but the saving action of God is not just about directing man to salvation that will happen "sometime": God seeks man in his "now" and even precedes him with His love. Therefore, one can say that God Himself gives the example of "mercy towards the marginalized." The spirituality of mercy could be summarized in the words: "we must seek and find those in need, as God sought and found us."[11] John Paul II used the term "creativity in charity" in this context. Creativity is an internal power that allows us to present something that we do not see, something that has not happened yet. Creativity as an internal power is the basis of all human creation, including art. Therefore, it seems that it is necessary in this context: marginalized people often hide from the world, they do not ask for help, that is, they "marginalize: themselves or "are marginalized" by others, but it does not mean that they are not there. One must first create them, and then find them, in real contact. This exceptionally apt term "a new creativity in charity" comes from the apostolic letter of John Paul II: *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, which appeared at the end of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000. To his address, John Paul II returned in a homily delivered in Błonia on August 18, 2002. Then four Polish blesseds were beatified, who became famous for their attitude of mercy towards their fellow men. John Paul II said:

> "Faced with the modern forms of poverty that, as we all know, are not lacking in our country, what is needed today is — as I called it in my Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte* — "a new 'creativity' in charity" (No. 50), in a spirit of solidarity towards our neighbour, so that the help we lend will be a witness of "sharing between brothers and sisters" (*ibid.*). May this "creativity" never be lacking in the residents of Kraków and in all the people of our homeland. It represents the pastoral plan of the Church in Poland. May the message of God's mercy be reflected always in works of human mercy! We must take a loving look around ourselves if we are to be aware of the neighbour by our side, who — because of the loss of work, home, the possibility to maintain his family in a decent manner and to educate his children — feels a sense of abandonment, of being lost, of distrust.

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[11] See Adam RYBICKI, *Słudzy miłosierdzia. Duchowa formacja do posługi Caritas* [The servants of mercy: A spiritual formation for the Caritas ministry] (Lublin: Wydawnictwo GAUDIUM, 2010), 26–8.

This "creativity in charity" is needed to provide material and spiritual assistance to neglected children; to refrain from turning one's back on the boy or girl who have gotten lost in the world of addiction or crime; to give advice, consolation, spiritual support to those engaged in an internal struggle with evil. May this "creativity" never be lacking when a needy person pleads: "Give us this day our daily bread!". Thanks to brotherly love, this bread will not be lacking. "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy" (Mt 5:7).

Using the phrase "creativity in charity," John Paul II touched theologians, as well as those involved in the Caritas ministry on a daily basis, who began to reflect on this concept. To be "creative in charity" means to be able to imagine that someone can need us and our help. The phenomenon of "isolation" (or rather self-isolation) was presented in the story of Cain and Abel. Cain killed Abel. When God asked Cain: "Where is your brother Abel?" he answered "Am I my brother's keeper?" (see Genesis 4:9). Cain said in this way that he did not feel responsible for his brother, he did not need or did not want to know where Abel was. Moreover, he spoke these words after killing his brother: lack of interest in his brother was a kind of "turning a blind eye" to that. However, the needy brother existed, lived, and often silently called for help. Having killed Abel, Cain could only react with getting rid of his responsibility: "Am I my brother's keeper?" but in the context of the whole biblical message one might add: God could answer: "Yes, you are! From the very beginning you are your brother's keeper! From the very beginning, you are responsible for where your brother is, and how he feels. Yes, you are your brother's keeper!" We see here the other side of marginalization: those who can help are also isolated, but prefer to distance themselves in order not to see the needy. Cain's question is rather an excuse for lack of interest in his brother.

If "exclusion" is a kind of darkness in which a man withdraws, then finding him, entering God (and a kind man) into his world is always a kind of light. Therefore, Christian spirituality is a light that darkness does not embrace. In the context of the marginalization of spirituality, Cardinal W. Kasper wrote:

Those who do not share the Christian faith need even more human sympathy, human intimacy, and caring assistance in such situations. We must practice mercy. That is the only persuasive answer we can give. Such practical evidence of mercy is representative hope for others. By means of our merciful action, a ray of light and warmth from God's mercy can fall in the midst of a gloomy situation. Only in this way can we make talk about God's mercy credible and persuasive; only in this way can we make it a message of hope.[12]

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[12] Walter KASPER, *Mercy: The Essence of the Gospel and the Key to Christian Life*, trans. William Madges (New York: Paulist Press, 2014), 33.

The light-dark symbolism triggers a lot of thoughts in the context of Christian spirituality and the life of a poor, excluded man. The role of exegetes, pastoralists and theologians of spirituality will always be to find an answer to the question: what is (or could be) the light that needs to be brought to people living in the "darkness of exclusion"? Are material values the light? Is it a human presence? Or the Word of God? Or maybe all together becomes the light when it springs from love of God and neighbor?

3. THE ECCLESIASTICAL ASPECT OF SPIRITUALITY OF MERCY

The call to follow God in His merciful "exodus towards a human in need" is not directed only to the individual Christian, as the Christian spiritual journey is not made individually. The whole Church as a community is to define itself in such a way as to be a sign of the mercy of God to the world. In this way, spirituality of mercy gains an ecclesiastical dimension: the Church of Christ must be "the Church of Mercy." Otherwise it would distort or even lose its identity. It is in relation to the Church that we have been talking about the so-called option for the poor. This idea is also mentioned by Pope Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium*:

> For the Church, the option for the poor is primarily a theological category rather than a cultural, sociological, political or philosophical one. God shows the poor 'his first mercy'. This divine preference has consequences for the faith life of all Christians, since we are called to have 'this mind… which was in Jesus Christ' (Phil 2:5). Inspired by this, the Church has made an option for the poor which is understood as a 'special form of primacy in the exercise of Christian charity, to which the whole tradition of the Church bears witness'. This option — as Benedict XVI has taught — 'is implicit in our Christian faith in a God who became poor for us, so as to enrich us with his poverty'"

In this ecclesial vision of the "option for the poor," it is not only about the one-way movement of good (goods), that is, from the Church towards the poor, but in the reflection of Francis we also find a deep thought (of course it is present in all spirituality of mercy) that thanks to the mercy "granted" to man (and the whole Church), he is endowed with many favors and gifts, both on a purely human and personal, and supernatural level, reaching eternity. Speaking about the poor, Francis stated that "they have much to teach us" (*Evangelii Gaudium*, No. 198) because "not only do they share in the *sensus fidei*, but in their difficulties they know the suffering Christ" (ibid.). Francis even claims that the existence of the poor has "t h e s a v i n g p o w e r" (underlining added) and "the mysterious wisdom" (ibid.), which God wants to pass on to people. It is also worth noting

that while the Church once showed initiative to evangelize the poor, today Francis calls it to let itself "be evangelized by them" (ibid.)

When addressing spirituality of Christian mercy towards the poor and the excluded, one cannot give in to the romantic illusion that it is a wise, evangelical idea that can be carried out without obstacles; that it is enough to set it in motion and it brings numerous and beautiful fruits. Nevertheless, it should also be noted that it encounters many difficulties and external and internal obstacles, which sometimes makes it dead for some people or communities, that is, it is put only in the sphere of postulates and considerations. After presenting his reflections and encouragements to show mercy to the poor, Francis said (*Evangelii Gaudium*, No. 201):

> I fear that these words too may give rise to commentary or discussion with no real practical effect.

We could ask: where did his concern come from? Where obstacles can arise, so that Christian mercy, as the word, may become flesh. Why is it so difficult? Are these obstacles more external (resulting, for example, from lack of resources, systemic solutions, organizational ineptitude) or more embedded in human nature and spirituality?

It seems that the external obstacles mentioned are not the main reason for Francis's concern, because many saints who performed "a work of mercy" also experienced difficulties, but they managed to overcome them. What is a barrier between Christian mercy as a purely beautiful "idea" (or "emotion") and mercy as a daily concrete practice lies in the nature of man. As the history of Christian spirituality shows, this barrier cannot be overcome by decision alone, by force of will or by some internal techniques. It is possible to put forward a working hypothesis that the most primary barrier between the acceptance of the idea of mercy, as the right, beautiful, worth undertaking, and the lack of concrete actions is a n x i e t y. One of the greatest theologians of our time, Hans Urs von Balthasar, in one of his works deals with the problem of anxiety in the life of a Christian.[13] He shows the multidimensionality and meaning of anxiety in Christian spiritual life, but for this reflection on the charity of the Church towards the poor and the excluded, his final remark is very valuable, in which he introduces the theme "the Church and anxiety," encouraging the reader to explore this issue. What is the most valuable in Balthasar's reflection on the problem of anxiety in the context of mercy? It is the demonstration that the "anxiety of the Church" should be presented in two ways: on the one hand, the Church (or rather the Church's people) sometimes has fear of the world (including the poor and the excluded), which is

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[13] Hans Urs von BALTHASAR, *The Christian and Anxiety*, trans. Dennis D. Martin and Michael J. Miller (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000).

unjustified and is rather an expression of stereotypes and prejudices, but on the other hand, the Church itself is fearful among the poor. This fear also arises as a result of stereotypes and prejudices, and sometimes, as Hans Urs von Balthasar says, "claims and threats." In his newest publication on mercy, Cardinal Walter Kasper notes that the Church is considered "merciless and ruthless."[14] However, the most important element that "draws out" the fear of the Church in some people, as von Balthasar says, is that the Church invites people to "leap to the Church," to take the existential risk that everyone takes on the true path of faith. In this context, he emphasizes the role of "courage", "Christian fortitude," which will allow the people of the Church to live in that leap of faith and show others the value of this path.[15] In the context of mercy, that "leap of faith" is even more important — it makes Christian mercy go far beyond human philanthropy. Moreover, it makes aware those who have any "fear of the Church" of what they are really afraid of.

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Discussing the topic of the poor and the excluded, Pope Francis has opened a wide range of issues for the reflection of theologians. Spiritual theologians and pastoralists receive a special field of reflection: how to carry and nurture the Word that is made flesh to the poor and the excluded; How to look after the spiritual life of people we consider "excluded"? According to Francis, this is a particularly sensitive issue, and he calls it "the worst discrimination" against the poor (*Evangelii Gaudium*, No. 200):

> Since this Exhortation is addressed to members of the Catholic Church, I want to say, with regret, that the worst discrimination which the poor suffer is the lack of spiritual care. The great majority of the poor have a special openness to the faith; they need God and we must not fail to offer them his friendship, his blessing, his word, the celebration of the sacraments and a journey of growth and maturity in the faith. Our preferential option for the poor must mainly translate into a privileged and preferential religious care.

Spiritual care for the excluded is one of the most important areas for theological research and practice of the Church. Showing the nature of exclusion and the basics of spirituality of mercy, including the issue of spiritual care for the poor, this article is only an outline of the most important areas of theological reflection on this subject. In accordance with the idea and wish of Francis that the Jubilee Year of Mercy should be continued, probably all the areas mentioned will find their deepening and development in the future.

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[14] W. KASPER, *Mercy: The Essence of the Gospel and the Key to Christian Life*, 11.
[15] H.U. von BALTHASAR, *The Christian and Anxiety*, 75 ff.

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