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THE MISSION OF A TEACHER OF RELIGION IN THE CONTEMPORARY POLISH SCHOOL

A b s t r a c t. Work in a contemporary Polish school puts before teachers of religion new challenges in the areas of teaching, care, education and prophylaxis. They arise not only from structural, but also from syllabus-related changes. A new approach to education and prophylaxis, especially placing the proper value on holistic education in the Polish school, based on universal values, helps to fulfil the mission and vocation of a teacher of religion. Because, along with transmission of religious knowledge and evangelisation, other important issues include supporting students in discovering general human values and their internalisation and in developing social attitudes, as well as in pro-health, ecological and patriotic education. These actions have an educational and prophylactic dimension. The way in which a teacher of religion performs educational and prophylactic tasks largely affects the quality of religious instruction in Polish schools.

This study is based on the current Law on Education and catechetical documents. The importance of a teacher of religion's activity is emphasised as well as his personal traits and testimony of faith.

Key words: teacher of religion; Polish school; education; religious instruction; pedagogy.

Teaching religion in the Polish school plays a special role. It involves not only teaching activities, but also educational and prophylactic activities. It becomes the place of correlation with the general school education and

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favours interdisciplinary dialogue. A teacher of religion is obliged to supplement the content of general education and its integration with religious education, and sometimes to engage in polemics.¹ It is his job to perform various educational and prophylactic tasks, specified, *inter alia*, in the Law on Education and in documents of the Church. His mission in the Polish school is not limited to transmitting religious knowledge and to supporting students in developing their faith, or to evangelisation. On the contrary, it includes distinctly educational and prophylactic activities. The way in which a teacher of religion performs educational and prophylactic tasks largely affects the quality of religion teaching in Polish schools.

The aim of the analyses performed for this study is to show various aspects of the didactic, educational and prophylactic activities of a teacher of religion in the contemporary school in Poland. Therefore, one has to refer to the valid Law on Education and catechetical documents. The following issues form the structure of the analyses: basic term categories, didactic, tutelary, educational and prophylactic activity. The final comments will point to the importance of the religion teacher's personality and testimony of faith.

1. BASIC CATEGORIES OF CONCEPTS

The key terms in this study include "mission of a teacher of religion" and "contemporary school in Poland". They can be considered in various contexts. However, understanding their meaning properly requires their linking with the role that a teacher of religion plays at a school. The main point is that his role is not only didactic or tutelary, but he is also an educator and a witness of faith.

For this text and with the specificity of religion teaching in the contemporary Polish school, it has been accepted that the term "mission of a teacher of religion" is identical to the role played by such a teacher, with important, responsible tasks to perform, initiated in order to support students in their holistic development and to accompany them in their discovering of Christian values and using them as guidelines in everyday lives. Understood in this manner, the mission of the religion teacher is a continuous process. It includes a range of pedagogical activities of importance from the didactic, tutelary, educational and prophylactic standpoint, which include: transmitting

¹ See e.g. THE POLISH BISHOP'S CONFERENCE, *The Catechetical Directory of the Catholic Church in Poland* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo WAM, 2001), no. 83.

religious knowledge, developing proper social attitudes and behaviours, motivating to take actions aimed at meeting Jesus Christ, establishing close ties with Him and discovering the values of faith as well as developing a sense of responsibility for oneself, for others and for the community of the Church.² In its essence, the thus-understood mission of a teacher of religion does not focus only on didactic functions, associated with transmission of religious knowledge, but it also takes into account tutelary, educational and prophylactic functions. Pointing to a broad spectrum of the educational mission of a teacher of religion, one has to bear in mind that this definition takes into account the interests of each student. The student is the subject of educational and catechetical interactions.

Considering the nature of religion teaching at the Polish school, it seems important to make the term “contemporary Polish school” more specific. The term denotes schools during the process of reform implemented since 1 September 2017,³ whose tasks include educating children and adolescents. The contemporary Polish school undergoes changes not only in terms of its structure,⁴ but also the teaching syllabus.⁵ Emphasis is placed on a strong link between education and prophylaxis at the school⁶ and efforts are made to create the modern school, which is at the same time deeply rooted in the Polish tradition.⁷

² Ibidem.

³ See e.g. Ustawa z dnia 14 grudnia 2016 r. – Prawo oświatowe, *Dziennik Ustaw RP* z 2017, poz. 59; Ustawa z dnia 14 grudnia 2016 r. – Przepisy wprowadzające ustawę – Prawo oświatowe, *Dziennik Ustaw RP* z 2017, poz. 60.

⁴ These changes concern the replacement of the six-year primary school with the eight-year primary school, the three-year general secondary school with the four-year secondary schools and four-year technical colleges with five-year colleges. Vocational schools will be replaced with industry schools. To learn more, see for example: DEPARTAMENT INFORMACJI I PROMOCJI MINISTERSTWO EDUKACJI NARODOWEJ. *Rok rządu Beaty Szydło – dobra zmiana w edukacji* [DEPARTMENT FOR INFORMATION AND PROMOTION, MINISTRY OF EDUCATION. The year of Beata Szydło’s government – good change in education], <https://men.gov.pl/ministerstwo/informacje/rok-rzadu-beaty-szydlo-dobra-zmiana-dla-edukacji.html>, 10 November 2017, 1-2.

⁵ To learn more, see for example: MINISTERSTWO EDUKACJI NARODOWEJ, *Dobra szkoła* [MINISTRY OF EDUCATION, Good school]; *Reforma edukacji. Najważniejsze zmiany. Pytania i odpowiedzi* [Good school. Education reform. Major changes. Questions and answers], [men.gov.pl/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/broszura-dobra-szkola-plik-internetowy](http://men.gov.pl/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/broszura-dobra-szkola-plik-internetowy.pdf), 10 November 2017, 1-40.

⁶ *Dobra Szkoła – Reforma Systemu Edukacji* [Good school – Education system reform], <http://reformaedukacji.men.gov.pl/>, 10 November, 2017, 1-2.

⁷ Ibidem.

Considering the reform of the system of education being implemented since 1 September 2017, the mission of the religion teacher in the contemporary Polish school focuses not so much on the structural, but rather on syllabus-related and organisational changes, which have been planned for the next years in order to ensure that “every student, regardless of their origin and material status of their parents, will have access to good school and good education.”⁸ These changes include restoring the proper importance of educational and prophylactic activity at school.⁹ The list of teachers’ tasks has been „expanded to include actions which emphasise the educational function of the school.”¹⁰

2. DIDACTIC ACTIVITY

The mission of a teacher of religion in the Polish school is linked with teaching the contents of faith.¹¹ Teachers of religion have been sent to the school by Christ to teach on His behalf¹² and though the professional activities of a teacher of religion in the Polish school cannot be reduced to discussing systematically the contents of faith, these tasks play an important role in the mission of a teacher of religion in the contemporary Polish school.¹³ A teacher of religion has been appointed by Christ to preach the Gospels in communion with the whole missionary activities of the Church. In response to this gift, a teacher of religion does not teach on his own behalf, but on behalf of the ecclesial community which sends him to the school.¹⁴ He preaches the Gospels.¹⁵

⁸ Ibidem.

⁹ Ibidem.

¹⁰ Ibidem.

¹¹ To learn more about it, see: Anna ZELLMAN, *Profesjonalny rozwój nauczyciela* (Olsztyn: Wydział Teologii UWM, 2013), 83-90; Elżbieta OKOŃSKA, *Nauczyciel religii w szkole. Tezy. Poszukiwania. Propozycje* (Bydgoszcz: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Kazimierza Wielkiego, 2006), 20-22, 30-36.

¹² More about it in Jerzy BAGROWICZ, *Towarzyszyć wzrastaniu. Z dyskusji o metodach i środkach edukacji religijnej młodzieży* (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika, 2006), 140-145.

¹³ Ibidem.

¹⁴ To learn more, see for example: Robert STRUS, Sylwester ZWOLAK, *Nauczanie religii w przedszkolu i szkole. Wybrane zagadnienia dydaktyczne i prawne* (Zamość: Lubelskie Samorządowe Centrum Doskonalenia Nauczycieli Oddział w Zamościu Wydział Nauki i Wychowania Katolickiego Kurii Diecezjalnej w Zamościu, 2013).

¹⁵ See THE POLISH BISHOP’S CONFERENCE, *The Catechetical Directory of the Catholic*

Fulfilling the mission of religion teaching at the school requires that a teacher should know the essence of Christianity and doctrine of the Catholic Church¹⁶ well, and the basics of the catechesis syllabus, teaching curriculum and handbooks for the teaching of religion.¹⁷ Becoming properly acquainted with Christian teachings, considering texts of the Holy Scripture and maintaining one's personal bond with the Church community lies at the basis of the didactic activity of a teacher of religion. What is more, these elements are crucial for preaching the word of God responsibly and transmitting the contents of faith in association with socio-cultural issues. Thanks to such actions, students receive proper help and support in the process of becoming acquainted with the contents of faith.¹⁸

It is noteworthy that changes in the syllabus in the Polish school,¹⁹ require of a teacher of religion „a greater emphasis on transmitting specific religious knowledge.”²⁰ It is necessary to take up various forms of didactic activities, which will show the students what the Church believes in and what are its main concerns. “The point is that one should live according to the Gospels, and in order to live according to the Gospels, an educated and intelligent person must possess considerable religious knowledge.”²¹ A teacher of religion must preach the Gospel in the context of contemporary culture and try to “link it with other areas of teaching and education to get the evangelical message across to the students’ minds in the area of their education so that their whole culture is harmonised in the light of faith.”²² This is linked with the care about faithful transmission of the integral evangelical

Church in Poland, no. 84-85, 91.

¹⁶ See THE CONGREGATION FOR CLERGY, *General Directory for Catechesis* (Poznań: Pallottinum, 1998), no. 234-235; THE POLISH BISHOP'S CONFERENCE, *The Catechetical Directory of the Catholic Church in Poland*, no. 149-150.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, no. 151.

¹⁸ To learn more, see for example: Zbigniew MAREK, “Katecheza inspirowana adhortacją «Verbum Domini»”, *Katecheta* 55(2011), 2: 3-8.

¹⁹ Currently, work is under way on the new “Core curriculum of catechesis of the Catholic Church in Poland,” which is to become effective as of 1 September 2019. See KAI/BP KEP, *Komisja Wychowania Katolickiego rozpoczęła prace nad nowym programem katechezy* [The Committee for Catholic Education started work on the new catechesis curriculum], <http://episkopat.pl/komisja-wychowania-katolickiego-rozpozczela-prace-nad-nowym-programem-katechezy/>, 12 November 2017, 1-2.

²⁰ *Ibidem*.

²¹ *Ibidem*.

²² THE CONGREGATION FOR CLERGY, *General Directory for Catechesis*, no. 73.

message pertaining to the life and faith of students who participate in lessons of religion.²³ Because a teacher in a contemporary school has less and less contact with believers who need support in better understanding of the teaching of Christ and using it to explore the major moral issues and more with people who seek the light or who have religious doubts or even who do not believe at all. This situation breeds the need for supporting participants of lessons of religion in properly understanding the contents of faith²⁴ and in taking up the dialogue on the Gospels and the teaching of the Church.²⁵ Thus, the didactic activity of a teacher of religion in the contemporary school in Poland requires both good knowledge of catechetical content as well as the mindset of his students and their attitudes to God and the Gospels as well as the community and the Church's teachings. It is equally important to know various didactic solutions which can be used as tools by a teacher of religion. Supporting students in discovering the existential importance of religious knowledge and moral standards requires the ability to conduct dialogue with students and to stimulate those catechised to seek the authentic values, to discover the meaning of life, to develop the Christian identity.²⁶ Hence, an important role in the didactic activity of a teacher of religion is played by the knowledge of the basic issues of didactics, psychology and pedagogy.²⁷ Knowledge of current issues of social science helps in planning religion lessons. A teacher of religion makes use of it both when he chooses the appropriate strategies in transmitting the message of salvation and when he seeks the effective forms and methods of getting students to establish their personal ties with Christ and to participate in the life of the Church community. When properly absorbed, religious knowledge is extremely useful in professing one's faith.

²³ Ibidem, no. 114-116.

²⁴ Ibidem, no. 75.

²⁵ Ibidem.

²⁶ To learn more, see for example: Anna ZELLMMA, *Wielostronne aktywizowanie młodzieży w nauczaniu religii. Studium w świetle „Programu nauczania religii katolickiej” z 2001 roku* (Olsztyn: Wydawnictwo UWM w Olsztynie, 2006), 145-185.

²⁷ THE CONGREGATION FOR CLERGY, *General Directory for Catechesis*, no. 148-160, 242-245.

3. TUTELARY, EDUCATIONAL AND PROPHYLACTIC ACTIVITY

A teacher of religion in the Polish school is obliged – under the valid regulation of the educational and canon law – to fulfil tutelary, educational and prophylactic duties. They were set out both by the Church,²⁸ and by the Ministry of Education.²⁹ They have the nature of educational obligations. Apart from evangelisation and transmitting the contents of faith, a teacher of religion is obliged to 1) provide students with proper care during his curricular and extracurricular activities (including during the school Lent retreat); 2) participate actively in performing the duties and specific tasks in the area of education and prophylaxis that are specified in the school education-prophylaxis programme. Hence, it is assumed that education is among the priorities in professional activities of a teacher of religion in the Polish school. It cannot be regarded as an addition to the didactic and tutelary activities. Because if limited to transmission of religious knowledge and/or only to care and teaching of skills, the activity of a teacher of religion at a school would be incomplete. It is important to harmonise and to find the balance between those two and to link them with the educational and prophylactic objectives laid down in the educational and prophylactic programme at the school.

The contemporary Polish school sees it as a priority for a teacher of religion to participate actively in diagnosing the needs and issues present in a given school community.³⁰ This type of diagnosis plays an important role in developing educational and prophylactic objectives, contents and tasks oriented towards students and prophylactic contents and activities oriented towards teachers and parents.³¹

Like other teachers who work at a Polish school, a teacher of religion is to support each student “in developing towards full physical, emotional, intellectual, spiritual and social maturity, which should be reinforced and supplemented by activities regarding prophylaxis of problems faced by children and adolescents.”³² To fulfil these tasks, a teacher of religion participates in the voluntary service organised by the school. In practical terms, the

²⁸ See THE POLISH BISHOP'S CONFERENCE, *The Catechetical Directory of the Catholic Church in Poland*, no 83-91.

²⁹ See Ustawa z dnia 26 stycznia 1982 r. – „Karta Nauczyciela”, tekst jednolity, *Dziennik Ustaw RP* z 2006, nr 97, poz. 674, z późn. zm.

³⁰ *Ibidem*.

³¹ *Ibidem*.

³² *Ibidem*.

method of organisation and execution of a teacher of religion's tasks related to the voluntary services is specified in the school statute and it may have various forms.³³ Other pedagogic initiatives are also important.³⁴ Examples may include: actions taken by the school "Caritas" group, educational projects, sociocultural events, collaboration with police officers in social prophylaxis, participation in nationwide programmes promoting health and safe behaviour, organising and co-organising patriotic events.³⁵

Linked integrally with these educational and prophylactic actions are organisational and methodological innovations as well as pedagogic experiments carried out at the school.³⁶ It is noteworthy to take up these actions in connection with developing social attitudes, creativity and responsibility for oneself, others and the Church community.³⁷ Under his canonical mission and the contract of labour, a teacher of religion is obliged to take up educational and prophylactic tasks, which help to develop students' social skills and to mould the personality of a mature Christian.³⁸

The scope of pedagogical activities of a teacher of religion which arise from the educational and prophylactic programme of the school also includes involvement in patriotic, ecological, pro-health, regional, cultural and European education. It requires taking up relevant actions which favour adopting pro-social, patriotic, ecological and pro-health attitudes. Undoubtedly, a teacher of religion is supposed to support students in learning on the world and

³³ Ibidem.

³⁴ See MINISTERSTWO EDUKACJI NARODOWEJ, Dobra Szkoła [MINISTRY OF EDUCATION, Good school], *Wolontariat w szkołach i placówkach* [Voluntary service at schools and educational facilities], <http://reformaedukacji.men.gov.pl/o-reformie/uczen-i-rodzic/wolontariat-w-szkolach-i-placowkach.html>, 14 November 2017, 1-2.

³⁵ Ibidem.

³⁶ See MINISTERSTWO EDUKACJI NARODOWEJ, Dobra Szkoła [MINISTRY OF EDUCATION, Good school], *Eksperyment pedagogiczny* [Pedagogical experiment], <http://reformaedukacji.men.gov.pl/o-reformie/nauczyciel-i-dyrektor/eksperyment-pedagogiczny.htm>, 15 November 2017, 1-4; MINISTERSTWO EDUKACJI NARODOWEJ, Dobra Szkoła [MINISTRY OF EDUCATION, GOOD SCHOOL], *Innowacje i eksperymenty w szkołach* [Innovations and experiments at schools], <https://reformaedukacji.men.gov.pl/o-reformie/uczen-i-rodzic/innowacje-i-eksperymenty-w-szkolach.html>, 16 November 2017, 1-2.

³⁷ Ibidem.

³⁸ See e.g. Rozporządzenie Ministra Edukacji Narodowej z dnia 25 sierpnia 1993 r. zmieniające rozporządzenie w sprawie warunków i sposobu organizowania nauki religii w szkołach publicznych, *Dziennik Ustaw* z 1993 r., nr 83, poz. 390; Rozporządzenie Ministra Edukacji Narodowej z dnia 30 czerwca 1999 r. zmieniające rozporządzenie w sprawie warunków i sposobu organizowania nauki religii w szkołach publicznych, *Dziennik Ustaw* z 1999, nr 67, poz. 753-754; Ustawa z dnia 26 stycznia 1982 r. – „Karta Nauczyciela”, tekst jednolity, poz. 674.

life in its many aspects and in developing social self-reliance, responsibility and creative activity.³⁹ A teacher of religion is also obliged to show acceptance to the student, to create an atmosphere of trust, mutual understanding and educational dialogue in the class and to develop various forms of cooperation with other teachers, with parents and with social institutions. This, in turn, breeds the need for getting to know students and their family environment constantly.⁴⁰ Knowing each student well, his needs, talents, interests and family situation allows a teacher of religion to understand the student's behaviour and to plan appropriate educational measures (e.g. during a lesson, at meetings outside lessons and outside school).

As has been mentioned before, the educational activity of a teacher of religion in the contemporary Polish school is linked integrally with the primary and secondary prophylaxis.⁴¹ Within these outlined prophylactic activities, a teacher of religion is obliged to transmit information on healthy lifestyle and health associated with smoking, drinking alcohol, using psychoactive drugs, committing violence, behaving aggressively and early sexual activities. He is also obliged to cooperate with the school pedagogue, psychologist and police in supporting students in developing the skills necessary to care for the health of oneself and others. Usually, such a programme is implemented with the use of procedures laid down in the educational and prophylactic programme of the school.

4. FINAL NOTES

The mission of a teacher of religion in a contemporary Polish school is associated directly with his vocation and the role played at the school. It requires involvement in putting back educational work to its right place in the contemporary Polish school. This is linked to a teacher of religion's obligation to actively participate in educating students for values.

³⁹ See THE POLISH BISHOP'S CONFERENCE, *The Catechetical Directory of the Catholic Church in Poland*, no. 83-91, 134.

⁴⁰ To learn more about this subject, see: Stanisław ŁABENDOWICZ, „Poznawanie uczniów na katechezie przez katechetów”, *Zeszyty Formacji Katechetów* 7(2007), 2: 55-62.

⁴¹ To learn more on prophylaxis at the school, see: Zbigniew B. GAŚ (ed.), *Profesjonalna profilaktyka w szkole: nowe wyzwania* (Lublin: Wydawnictwo: Wyższa Szkoła Ekonomii i Innowacji w Lublinie, 2011).

In order to meet the contemporary challenges faced at the school, a teacher of religion should cooperate with other entities responsible for teaching, care, educating and prophylaxis. This, in turn, breeds the need for a dialogue with the school management, the teaching staff, parents and students and for joint actions for the benefit of every student. To this end, a teacher of religion is obliged to initiate various kinds of educational and prophylactic actions and to get involved in pedagogic initiatives at the school.

Obviously, it is difficult to talk about the educational mission of a teacher of religion in a contemporary Polish school without reference to his personality and the testimony of faith. The personal traits of a teacher of religion which testify to his personal and Christian maturity play a very important role in didactic, tutelary, educational and prophylactic work. Only responsible, wise, credible, authentic teachers, conscious of their vocation and mission, who are not afraid of new challenges, can respond to the *signum temporis* and perform creatively their didactic, tutelary, educational and prophylactic tasks. Their testimony of faith reinforces various areas of pedagogical involvement in the Polish school.

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MISJA NAUCZYCIELA RELIGII WE WSPÓŁCZESNEJ POLSKIEJ SZKOLE

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

Praca we współczesnej polskiej szkole stawia nauczycielom religii nowe wyzwania w obszarze kształcenia, opieki, wychowania i profilaktyki. Wynikają one nie tylko ze zmian strukturalnych, ale także programowych. Nowe podejście do wychowania i profilaktyki, a zwłaszcza dowartościowanie w polskiej szkole wychowania holistycznego, opartego na uniwersalnych wartościach, sprzyja realizacji powołania i posłannictwa nauczyciela religii. Obok

przekazu wiedzy religijnej i ewangelizacji za istotne uznaje się bowiem wspieranie uczniów w odkrywaniu wartości ogólnoludzkich i ich internalizacji oraz w kształtowaniu postaw społecznych, w tym także w wychowaniu zdrowotnym, ekologicznym, patriotycznym. Wymienione działania mają wymiar wychowawczy i profilaktyczny. Sposób, w jaki nauczyciel religii wypełnia zadania z obszaru wychowania i profilaktyki, w znacznym stopniu warunkuje jakość nauczania religii w polskiej szkole.

Podjmując wyżej zasygnalizowaną problematykę, w niniejszym opracowaniu odwołano się do obowiązującego prawa oświatowego i dokumentów katechetycznych. Zwrócono przy tym uwagę na znaczenie aktywności własnej nauczyciela religii oraz na jego cechy osobowe i na świadectwo wiary.

Słowa kluczowe: nauczyciel religii; polska szkoła; edukacja; nauczanie religii; pedagogika.