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Religion Lessons Making Their Exit from Polish Schools Is an Opportunity for “Deschooling” Catechesis

Umik pouka verouka iz poljskih šol je priložnost za ,razšolano‘ katehezo

Abstract: The article presents the current situation of school religion lessons based on the results of a survey carried out at local and national level. The question of students not attending school religion lessons is outlined, and a thesis that this situation is becoming an opportunity to restore their catechetical character is put forward. For this purpose, the conception of Fr. Franciszek Blachnicki is recalled, who in the 1960s, facing a similar situation, pointed to opportunities being offered by transferring religion lessons from school to parish. At the same time, the current situation is shown as an opportunity to separate religion lessons from church so that they could become a real alternative to school ethics lessons.

Keywords: Catechesis, school religion lessons, Franciszek Blachnicki, “deschooling” catechesis, “dechurching” religion lessons

Povzetek: Prispevek predstavlja trenutno stanje pouka verouka v šolah na podlagi rezultatov ankete, izvedene na lokalni in nacionalni ravni. Izpostavljeno je vprašanje, zakaj učenci šolskih ur verouka ne obiskujejo; podana je teza, da to stanje predstavlja priložnost za obnovev katehetskosti. V ta namen se oziramo na filozofijo p. Franciszka Blachnickega, ki je v šestdesetih letih prejšnjega stoletja – soočen s podobnim položajem – opozoril na priložnosti, ki jih ponuja prenos pouka verouka iz šole v župnijo. Hkrati se sedanje razmere kažejo kot priložnost za umik pouka verouka iz cerkve, da bi tako postal prava alternativa šolskemu pouku etike.

Ključne besede: Franciszek Blachnicki, kateheza, šolski pouk verouka, ,razšolajoča katehezi‘, odprava pouka verouka iz cerkve.

1. Introduction

The topic of religious education in Polish schools evokes a lot of emotions because it has political overtones and at the same time is related to the history of our homeland, which is so deeply rooted in Christianity. Yet, aside from these contexts, one can outline another equally important perspective of this phenomenon. It is a constant search for a model of youth catechesis in itself and a place of this catechesis in the overall vision of the pastoral ministry of the Church in Poland.

2. The Situation of Religion Lessons in Polish Schools in the 1960s

Until 1961, a pre-war act on the education system had been in force, treating religion as an integral part of teaching and upbringing. This act did not contain norms directly related to the teaching of religion. However, with the main objectives and tasks of the enforced education system specified in its preamble, it stated that it was introducing systemic principles that were to provide citizens with “the highest religious, moral, mental and physical refinement as well as the best preparation for life” (Mezglewski 2000, 21–36).

Looking back at post-war Poland, one can notice the state’s relative tolerance for religion lessons present in schools since 1945 and, at the same time, actions that consistently sought to remove them from school in order to give it secular character. On 15th July 1961, the Sejm (lower house of the parliament) of the People’s Republic of Poland adopted a law on the development of the education and upbringing system in Poland, which was deeply injurious to the faithful. Article 2 states: “Schools and other educational establishments shall be secular institutions. All teaching and upbringing in these institutions shall be secular.” (Journal of Laws 1961 No. 32, item 160 (Act of 15 July 1961 on the development of the education and upbringing system))

The above article became the basis for the complete elimination of religion teaching from school and the creation of the so-called catechetical points, whose activities were to be supervised by education inspectors. Classes were held in parish halls and in parishioners’ houses, where a large room was converted into a catechetical room, and a local parochial vicar commuted to religion lessons once a week and taught classes for several hours at all educational levels. This had its colour, especially in rural parishes, but the struggle for freedom of catechization continued. Despite permission to create catechetical points, the local authority closed these points indicating unmet hygiene and sanitary standards and other conditions impossible to fulfil in communist Poland (e.g. heating, enough space for each pupil). Priests who taught despite the ban imposed by educational authorities were deprived of things necessary for carrying out their duties, such as wristwatches, means of transport or personal underwear. In many cases, catechists were imprisoned for teaching religion.

Given the outlined context, one wonders at the attitude of bishops, priests and catechists who stayed persistent and fought for the possibility of the religious education of children and the youth for 30 years. The long-standing, sacrifice-costing struggle for the freedom of catechetical activity ended with the victory of the Church in 1989 through an act on the relationship between the state and the Catholic Church (Skuzza 1993, 203–265.). In 1990, religion lessons returned to Polish schools and this state has continued until the present day, i.e. for 32 years.

For more than half of this time (20 years), the author of this article himself has been a school religion teacher and has asked himself on numerous occasions the following questions: “Is what we fought for really what we wanted? Was the simple transfer of catechesis from parish halls to school, i.e. the *de facto* liquidation of parish catechesis, the right decision?”

The process of seeking answers to these questions may be made easier drawing on thoughts and reflections offered by Franciszek Blachnicki, a Catholic priest and lecturer in catechesis at the Catholic University of Lublin, who died in unexplained circumstances in 1987 in Carlsberg (Germany). Blachnicki interpreted the year 1961 and the expulsion of religion lessons from school quite differently from the general Catholic hierarchy and clergy, which along with his revolutionary views on pastoral ministry probably caused him to be perceived by many as a “catechetical madman”. According to Blachnicki, the expulsion of religion lessons from schools in 1961 was a chance to “deschool” catechesis. It was an opportunity to transfer it from an alien and ideologically hostile environment to parish environment, i.e. to the natural environment of the Church in which catechesis was born and developed for two thousand years (Blachnicki 2005, 33). Unfortunately, in 1961, religion lessons were moved from school to catechetical points with all the package of school apparatus associated with such concepts as “religion lessons”, class day-books, grading, parent-teacher meetings, certificates. It was also related to the pedagogical supervision of the state that made such requirements. Therefore, an opportunity to “deschool” catechesis was not taken advantage of.

What did Blachnicki mean when he talked about catechesis being “deschooled”? What did he think was to be left of religion lessons after removing the school package from it, or rather what could catechesis regain in the existing situation? What was missing from school religion lessons was catechesis in its pure form, i.e. kerygma. This is the most primordial form of catechesis, i.e. the proclamation (from Greek *kerysso*) of the Good News of Jesus Christ, who died and rose from the dead. This proclamation begets the faith and community of believers, as we already read in the Acts, that is in the description of the nascent Church. The ultimate loss of the kerygmatic dimension is associated by the historians of catechesis with the enlightenment school, which, having taken over parish catechesis, endowed it on the one hand, with a modern methodological and didactic apparatus, but on the other hand deprived it of the kerygmatic dimension (Murawski 2006, 131–144). In the 1960s, Blachnicki pointed out that in western Europe, where there were no such organizational problems as those encountered by Polish catechesis (attendance, rooms, textbooks, teaching aids), reflection on the

change of the catechesis model in the kerygmatic direction was already beginning. At that time, enlightenment pedagogy and catechetical moralism still dominated in Poland (Blachnicki 2005, 30), and the struggle with organizing catechetical points seemed to prevent deeper reflection on the model of catechesis and the answer to the following question: do religion lessons conducted so far at school, and after 1961 outside it, still bear the hallmarks of true catechesis?

3. The Current Situation of Religion Lessons at School

The author of the article has been teaching religion for 9 years at Roger Sławski Secondary Civil Engineering School Complex in Poznań (the fifth largest city in Poland with over 500,000 inhabitants). In recent years, he has begun to look more closely at the phenomenon of “withdrawing” from religion lessons, which has existed from the beginning and has recently begun to intensify. At the turn of 2018/2019, he conducted a survey among students who gave up attending religion lessons. It provided interesting research material, which in the substantive realm showed that the main motive for resigning from religion lessons was usual pupils’ practice, i.e. to have more free time. The second reason was general issues, i.e. the degree of identification with the Catholic Church. Quantitative data show that at that time, out of 486 pupils in school, 255 attended religion lessons, which accounted for 52.5%. Meanwhile, the number of pupils increased as in the first year there were pupils from the last year of lower secondary school and the first year of pupils after the eighth-year primary school. Currently (data as of 2021), out of 763 students, 297 attend religion lessons, which constitutes 39%. Over the period of 3 years, there has been a decrease of 13.5%, which is 4.5% per year. Unofficial data concerning the entire city of Poznań show that in the 2019/20 school year, 48% of secondary technical school pupils attended religion lessons. It can be concluded that participation in religion lessons in the Secondary Civil Engineering School Complex is at average level for the entire city. When compared to nationwide studies, we can see a more pronounced downward trend. Data from the nationwide survey come from the report issued by the Centre for Social Opinion Analysis “Youth 2018” (Grabowska and Gwiazda 2019). Since the school year 1990/91, when religion lessons returned to school, there had been a clear increase, which reached its peak in 2010 and has been steadily decreasing since then. In 2018, it reached the level of 70% (data refer to the last year of secondary school).

An important variable is a pupil’s place of residence, which indicates a high impact of sociological conditions in the area of religious education. In the light of these data, the secondary technical school from Poznań is slightly above the national average from 2018, i.e. 44% of those attending school religion lessons.

A clear downward trend in the number of participants confirmed by nationwide research poses a question about the future of religion lessons in Polish schools and about opportunities that such a situation generates. Are we not faced with an opportunity to remove catechesis from schools and restore its kerygmatic character, just like in 1961?

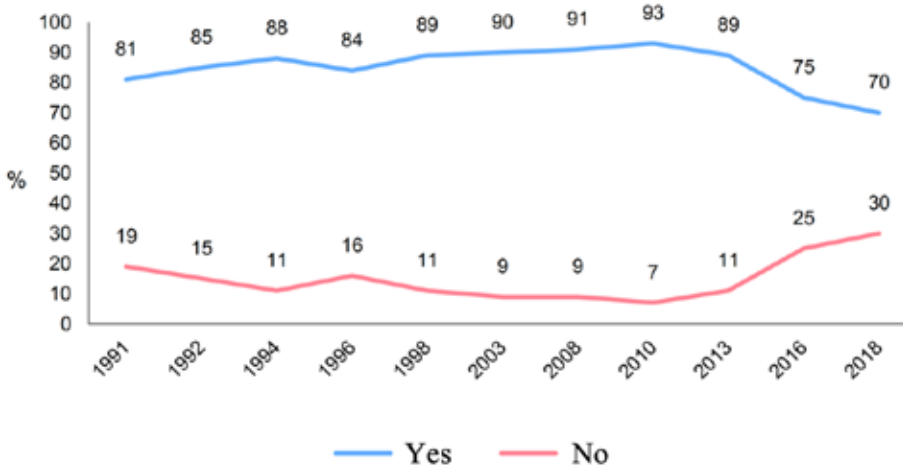


Chart 1: Answer to the question: Do you attend religion lessons at school? (source: Grabowska and Gwiazda 2019, 163)

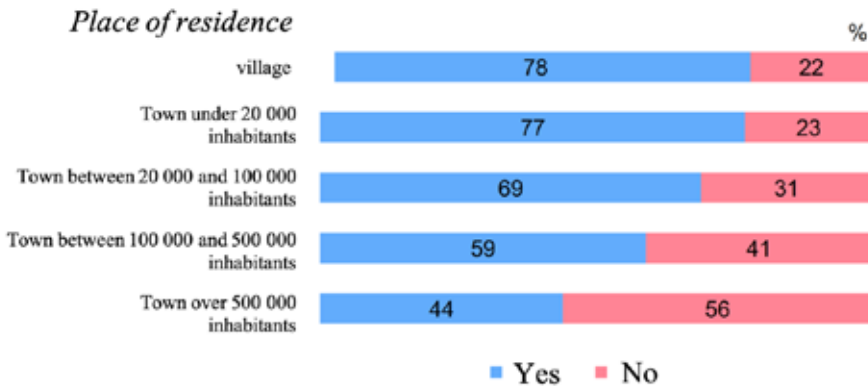


Chart 2: Answer to the question: Do you attend religion lessons at school? Place of residence (source: Grabowska and Gwiazda 2019, 164).

4. Dechurching School Religion Lessons

The situation outlined above raises other questions. When asking about the possibility of removing catechesis from schools, we can also ask about “dechurching” school religion lessons. The Magisterium of the Church clearly separates these two realities, emphasizing that teaching religion at school is complementary to catechesis (GCD 73). Therefore, we cannot recognize school religion lessons as a space in which all catechesis functions are carried out: initiation, teaching, and upbringing. By placing the main emphasis on teaching and upbringing, they fit into school tasks, which are also undertaken by other school entities and requi-

re the same systematicity and organization. The complementarity of school religion lessons in relation to catechesis is the fact that both of them need each other but cannot replace each other. The latest Directory for Catechesis warns that in the absence of a clear distinction between catechesis and school religion lessons, their identity will be threatened (DC 313). The experience of the Church in Poland shows the reality of such a threat and its consequences. When after 1990 religion lessons returned to Polish schools, it was a moment, in the general awareness of the faithful and clergy, of transferring them from parish to school and not adding to parish catechesis the complementary reality of school religion lessons. A “dechurched” model of religious education would make it possible for parish catechesis to preserve its identity (Bagrowicz 2000, 275) and at the same time it would make school religion lessons a real alternative to school ethics lessons, acceptable not only to practising believers (Kostorz 2018, 91–101). A “dechurched” model of religion lesson would fit into the culture of dialogue and create a kind of “laboratory of dialogue” between the Church and the world in the school space (Polak 2021, 711–719; Tkačova et al. 2021, 199–223). This problem is currently being faced by Polish schools, in which students who are giving up optional religion lessons due to their lack of identification with the Catholic Church are deprived of the educational component that these lessons bring. Considering the fact that ethics in practice is not conducted in schools because students are not interested in it, there is a danger of teaching without moral education, which stands in contrast to basic pedagogical principles. This should be remedied by a change in the law on education, which would make pupils face an alternative: religion lessons – ethics lessons, without any possibility of giving up both of them. In the situation of “dechurching” school religion lessons, pupils participating in religion and ethics lessons would not be divided according to the degree of their identification with the Church, but according to the choice of the basics of moral upbringing. Churches in Germany and Austria have a lot of experience in “dechurching” school religion lessons.

5. Perspectives for the Future

Franciszek Blachnicki not only bemoans a wasted opportunity to “deschool” religion lessons, but as part of an extensive study, he presents very detailed assumptions of kerygmatic catechesis. The assumptions of the kerygmatic model of catechesis, which is possible to implement as part of parish catechesis, can be condensed in three dimensions, which in the described situation require the introduction of three changes in teaching religion.

A change in catechetical environment, consisting in transferring the catechesis of an indifferent or hostile school environment to church-parish environment (Blachnicki 2005, 33). Catechesis, which is a response to God’s call addressed to man (from Greek *katecheo*), cannot be subjected to any obligation and compulsion, which are some things obvious in school. In addition, catechesis can be ca-

ried out in a faith-based environment, which testifies to and conveys faith. The problem outlined in this way corresponds to pedagogical approaches that emphasize the role of the upbringing environment (Blachnicki 2005, 260). Such an environment in upbringing to faith is the community of believers and in a formal sense, a parish and liturgy to which catechesis should lead. Blachnicki emphasizes an ancient and important relationship between catechesis and liturgy (41–43). The Catechumenate in the Early Church and its subsequent editions until parish catechesis in the post-Trent period did not know catechesis outside liturgy. Catechesis was to lead to liturgy and initiate it, and liturgy became catechesis. This symbiosis was interrupted in the enlightenment, when parish catechesis was inserted into the framework of a rational and humanistic school and completely detached from life in the parish community, and thus also from liturgy. Liturgy has since become only one of the issues presented during religion lessons. The change of the catechetical environment into the parish corresponds to the latest approaches to the renewal of parish life (Przygoda 2021, 445–457).

A change in the content of catechesis, consisting in expanding knowledge about Christian morality and theological and dogmatic content appearing within school religion lessons with a kerygma, which is the proclamation of a salvific event by Jesus Christ and an invitation to the decision of faith and entry into the Church (Blachnicki 2005, 178–190). Kerygma, or the word of proclamation, is referred to in the theological tradition as an audible sacrament (from Latin *sacramentum audibile*) (114), and thus, using the classical definition of the sacrament which does what it means, kerygma is a direct impulse to faith. Kerygma must be proclaimed and accepted not as information, not in a way as school knowledge is conveyed. Blachnicki emphasizes that in terms of material issues, the 19th century in catechetics is school and scientific theology, which referred primarily to pupils' intellect. Such a model could form a basis for "dechurched" religious education at school. Kerygma, which refers to the decision of faith, fulfills its role when it is listened to with the openness of a listener to the word of God. In addition to the intellectual dimension, this openness also assumes will and feelings.

A change in the form of teaching, consisting in supplementing activating methods derived from general didactics with a strictly catechetical methodology that allows for initiation into the proclaimed truths of faith. Blachnicki points to a historical process that was initiated in 1803 with the introduction of religion teaching to schools (271). These school religion lessons in the methodical layer went through the exegetical method consisting in the analysis and explanation of catechism texts, through the method of formal degrees referring to the psychological structure of the cognitive process, all the way to the so-called school of work, i.e. emphasizing a pupil's activity in the didactic process. Without rejecting what catechesis gained through contact with secular didactics, above all an appreciation of the needs and possibilities of a recipient of the message, the ultimate catechetical method will be one that will lead to an encounter between man and God. The relationship between *fides quae* and *fides qua*, between the content of faith and the act of faith, can only be maintained when methods of conveying content are not limited to stimu-

lating the intellect of a recipient of catechesis, but will be the service of a meeting. The personalistic method of catechesis is based on the double principle of faithfulness to God and man (CT 55). On the one hand, it takes into account the participation of God's element, i.e. the proclamation of kerygma, and on the other hand, a human element, i.e. what a preacher knows about the structure of a person receiving kerygma and about the life rights of its development and action.

The current difficult situation of religion lessons in Polish schools, which is raising concerns of ecclesiastical circles and becoming the subject of political disputes with lay-liberal environment, may become an opportunity to regain the kerygmatic dimension of catechesis lost during the enlightenment. It is not the first time that history is a teacher of life or wants to be one. The prophetic analysis of the analogous situation from 60 years ago by Franciszek Blachnicki presented in the article can be an inspiration and a hint for those on whom the shape of the catechesis of the young generation of Poles depends, which ultimately is the shape of the Church in Poland today and tomorrow. It should be added that this is not only a theory, but an idea implemented by Blachnicki as part of the "Light-Life" Movement - a catechumenal community that has existed in the Church for over 60 years. Some Polish dioceses have adopted the so-called "Oasis" as a valid model of parish youth ministry. In other dioceses, the movement exists as one of many formation proposals of the young generation. It was particularly popular in the times of communism, because, like the whole Church, it gave the young generation an area of freedom and a peaceful expression of rebellion against the totalitarian system. After 1989, interest in the "Oasis" decreased and the movement from its mass-character became more elite. For more than half a century the catechesis model used there has been characterized by high effectiveness in initiating the young generation into the Church, awakening vocations to priesthood and consecrated life, and forming mature and committed Christians. The catechumenal model of catechesis turns out to be an effective remedy for the crisis of the Church in Europe today (Przygoda 2021, 445–457).

Abbreviations

CT – John Paul II 1979 [Catechesi Tradendae].

DC – Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelization 2020 [Direttorio per la Catechesi].

GDC – Congregation for the Clergy 1997 [General Directory for Catechesis].

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