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## Child's welfare as a pedagogical challenge for family and society – based on John Paul II teaching

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## Child's welfare as a pedagogical challenge for family and society – based on John Paul II teaching

Dobro dziecka jako pedagogiczne wyzwanie dla rodziny i społeczeństwa w nauczaniu Jana Pawła II

### Introduction

There are many different kinds of welfare in the world and among them child's welfare is the most important. This statement does not need further explanation. It simply states that children are the future of the world and all adults who think are responsible for this future should keep that in mind. With this approach they gain a guarantee that their old age will be in the hands of well-bred new generation. Taking care or disregarding child's welfare means drifting between bliss and damnation. So it is worth taking into consideration the teaching of John Paul II focused on child's welfare as a path to the Church and to sublime future. John Paul II the Great brought to life the testament of cardinal Stefan Wyszyński – the Primate of the Millennium – he accompanied God's Church through the threshold of the third millennium<sup>1</sup>. The most notable fact is undoubtedly the act of committing the world to God's mercy on the 17<sup>th</sup> of August 2002 and the consecration of the basilica in the Sanctuary of God's Mercy in Kraków-Łagiewniki. In this mercy, a child plays an important role as hope and future of society. Therefore, child's welfare is a pedagogical challenge for family and society. John Paul II used to inform us about this challenge in all his teaching.

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<sup>1</sup> See: John Paul II, *Novo millennio ineunte* – John Paul II apostle letter to bishops, priests and believers for the end of Great Jubilee 2000, "L'Osservatore Romano" 2001, No. 2, pp. 4–23.

## A child as hope for family and future for society in times of numerous dangers

During the world's congress devoted to fight with sexual abuse of children for commercial reasons, which took place 17–21 December 2001 in Yokohama (Japan), the chairwoman of the delegation from the Apostle Capital, Janne Haaland Matlary, stated in her speech that:

Children are entitled to innocent childhood. In a natural way they evoke love, they are innocent and trustful towards adults; nowadays, however, they are often robbed of their childhood. They fall victim to the media, the forces of free market, and to people who sexually abuse them. Children are the hope and future of society, therefore they should be protected and provided with all possible help<sup>2</sup>.

This statement points to the weakening importance of contemporary family. In its essence, family should be like a castle for children's safety. Sexuality has no right to leak into this castle. However, as Matlary noted,

Sexualization of childhood, promoted by the forces of free market, conduces to robbing children of natural innocence. Portraying sex as normal behavior among children also leads to 'sexualization' of childhood, which is like fuel for pedophiles to "normalization" and legalization of their crimes<sup>3</sup>.

In the light of this tendency family's strength weakens. On the other hand, the evident lack of support from the outside conduces to the society's anomaly – using Durkheim's or Merton's terminology – in the most important sphere of social life, that is in its source. The source of healthy society was, and always will be, morally healthy family. Disregarding this fact most often leads to various dramatic experiences. Among the reasons for brutalizing children, the chairwoman Matlary pointed out financial poverty connected to weakened family ties, lack of punishment for those who brutalize children, serious moral crisis and crisis of values.

The break-up of family and weakening of family ties happens when society becomes more and more acquisitive as far as sex is concerned. As research shows children are abused not only by pedophiles but also by teenagers and adults with twisted sexual mentality. The combination of sex and violence, as is seen in the media and entertainment industry, and perceiving sexual experiments as something normal easily leads to perversion to which women and children fall victim<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> J. H. Matlary, *Children as hope and future of society – Presentation of the Apostle Capital Chairwoman at the congress in Yokohama*, "L'Osservatore Romano" 2002, No 3, p. 42.

<sup>3</sup> There, p. 43.

<sup>4</sup> There.

The author also drew attention to possibilities of fighting this problem. According to her, strengthening family ties plays a very important role in this fight with sexual exploitation of children because “it is in the family that a child can find protection from aggressive society, for which the welfare of the youngest citizens is not of primary importance”<sup>5</sup>. Disregarding this fact often comes as a result of not knowing the institution of family. A contemporary man seems to be not educated family wise. On the one hand, he cannot see that family is a notion which is verified by wise lifestyle, and on the other hand, he cannot, or he does not want to understand that family is a task requiring serious effort. We can overcome this problem by constant teaching and informing what role a family plays for individuals and society. This education should be rooted in the subject matter that John Paul II drew attention to and which refers to marriage as an inseparable unit being good for spouses, children, church and the whole of mankind. Drawing attention to God's plan in this subject the Pope said

According to Christ's teaching it was God himself who connected man and woman by marital bond. It is obvious that such a bond is formed thanks to both of them giving consent but this human consent concerns the plan and this plan is God's plan. In other words, it is the natural aspect of the bond, and to be precise, human nature formed by God himself provides the necessary key to make it possible to see the essential good sides of marriage. Its final strengthening in Christian marriage is based on natural law foundation, without which the saving work would not be understood<sup>6</sup>.

The analysis of child's welfare as a pedagogical challenge for family and society should be carried out with this statement in mind. The subject matter described above which show tendencies towards depraving children of dignity by abusing them will be manifested in the quality of marital bond. One year before his death John Paul II, during the Sunday prayer on the 28<sup>th</sup> of March 2004, addressed the people and asked them to be more interested in children. He said that “many of them fall victim to serious diseases, including tuberculosis and AIDS, malnutrition and improper sanitary conditions cause death of many children who do not have even the minimum of means necessary to survive. In some regions of the world, especially in very poor countries, children fall victim to a cruel form of violence; they are recruited to fight in so called “forgotten wars”.

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<sup>5</sup> There.

<sup>6</sup> John Paul II, *Permanence of marriage as everybody's goodness*, „L'Osservatore Romano” 2002, No 4, pp. 33–34.

They are hurt in two ways: they are victims and they are used as war tools, war waged by adults' hatred. They are deprived of everything and the future is like an unavoidable nightmare. Those smallest brothers of ours who suffer from hunger, war, diseases give a message to adults' world. Let this silent scream be heard<sup>7</sup>.

Those words addressed by the Pope to adults reveal a grim picture of childhood devoid of love. In answer to that it is worth paying attention to the ill-fortune that our neighbours suffer from. Every repair work should be started from yourself. First and foremost we should pay attention to our neighbourhood, our family. This approach can be supported by the knowledge of hope pedagogy. Chrobak said that a contemporary man needs bigger or smaller hope. This hope helps people but it has to be a big hope. "Another definition of a human being emerges: a human is a being with hope or a being which lives thanks to hope"<sup>8</sup>. The author, seeking the reasons for the contemporary ill-fortune, pointed that

The crisis of mankind is caused by the crisis of hope of the contemporary man. Experiencing disappointments, despair, lack of sense in everything easily lead to questioning the purpose of life. It also leads to people questioning the hierarchy of values. Present-day social, economic, and political processes question an individual's sense of living. If hope is just narrowed to one of those life hopes then it must lead to human failure and it is not important whether this hope is fulfilled or not<sup>9</sup>.

It is not difficult to note that present-day children's drama is started in adults' drama. If we pay attention to Pope's authority we can become aware of certain neglect in the care of children; we can also start constructive repair of our personal hierarchy of values, a hierarchy in which a child is of utmost importance.

### Family's welfare as basis for child's welfare

Pointing to the welfare of family on 28<sup>th</sup> December 2003 John Paul II said that:

In our times misunderstanding human laws sometimes undermines the nature of family and marital bond. It is important that on every level those who believe in

<sup>7</sup> John Paul II, *Let's be sensitive to children's suffering*, „L'Osservatore Romano” 2004, No 6, p. 36.

<sup>8</sup> S. Chrobak, *The basis of hope pedagogy. Present day contexts in Christian and personifying inspiration*, Warszawa 2009, p. 525.

<sup>9</sup> There, p. 528.

the value of family based on marriage should unite their efforts. This is human and God's reality which should be protected and strengthened as the basic good of society. Christians, as the Vatican Council II reminds, sensitive to times, must "avidly support the good of marriage and family, both with their lives and cooperation with people of good will (*Gaudium et spes*, 52). It is important that the family gospel is voiced with courage and happiness<sup>10</sup>.

In the proclamation for the Great Lent 2004 Pope draws people's attention to a child, who is like a pupil called to follow Master God.

Becoming little and accepting the little: those are two aspects of the same teaching which is also directed to his pupils by Lord in present times. Only those who make themselves little can lovingly accept the littlest of brothers. Many believers try to follow this way of Lord's teaching. I would like to mention those parents who, without hesitation, take responsibility for a multi-children family; about mothers and fathers who do not think about their professional career and success but care about providing children with those human and religious values that are truly important in human life. It is with admiration and gratitude that I think about those raising children with difficulties and trying to help them and their relatives with their suffering caused by war and violence, by lack of food and water, by forced emigration and many other forms of injustice in the world<sup>11</sup>.

Many factors influence the welfare of family – both inside and outside the family. The latter is rooted in society's care about family as its base. Among the former factors, family's welfare is formed by responsible parenthood. This is manifested by people's approach to a child – the biggest social gift. A child is a gift and although this gift is sometimes very troublesome, it cannot be treated otherwise. This attitude directs attention to a gift as goodness. John Paul II said those truths during the pilgrimage to Kielce when he discussed the IV God's commandment – Respect your father and mother<sup>12</sup>. It is worth paying attention to Pope's message directed to the participants of international symposium on the subject: "Natural methods of birth control and the culture of life", which

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<sup>10</sup> John Paul II Family's good, *Thoughts before prayer "Master's Angel"*, "L'Osservatore Romano" 2004, No. 2, p. 29.

<sup>11</sup> John Paul II, *And who would accept one such child on my behalf, I am accepted. John Paul II speech for Great Lent 2004*, "L'Osservatore Romano" 2004, No. 2, p. 10.

<sup>12</sup> Com.: John Paul II, *Can we put Polish families in danger of further destruction? Homily announced during Holy Mass at the airport in Masłów (Kielce)*, "L'Osservatore Romano" 1991, June Special Number 1–9, pp. 36–38.

was held at the University Sacro Cuore in Rome on 30<sup>th</sup>–31<sup>st</sup> January 2004. John Paul II directed this message on 28<sup>th</sup> January 2004, i.e. 14 months before he died. This message can be treated as a kind of will for families, for adults becoming sexually active and for everyone who is aware that there are children around and that they are of utmost importance to society and that society must be constantly reminded about it. Pope wrote these words:

In our times this mentality is more and more widespread – mentality which fears of responsibility for procreation and the will to manipulate life. It is important to form culture which will help to overcome stereotypes which are often spread by a kind of propaganda. At the same time it is important to conduct bringing-up and formative activities for spouses, people who are engaged, and all young people as well as social workers and priests. Those activities would show all aspects of responsible parenthood. Research and didactic centers which deal with such problems should successfully support responsible motherhood and fatherhood. They should pay attention to the fact that every human being, also children, should be respected and that the criterion of every choice was disinterested gift<sup>13</sup>.

The welfare of every child is rooted in the culture of responsible parenthood. It cannot be any other way. One cannot build the welfare of a child on the basis of one's lack of good upbringing, lack of health – not necessarily physical – on the basis of lack of responsibility. This responsibility is born from interpersonal relations which do not interfere with human dignity, especially in the case of marriage and procreation. With this approach, children will always be the spring of family and society. John Paul II drew attention to this during World Family Meeting III in Rome. It was preceded by the International Theological Pastoral Congress, which took place in Paul VI Assembly Hall 11<sup>th</sup>–13<sup>th</sup> October 2000. Its subject was: "Children are the spring of family and society". The previous World Family Meetings took place in Rome in 1994 and in Rio de Janeiro in 1997. During the World Family Meeting on 14<sup>th</sup> October 2000 John Paul II addressed the participants with a few important thoughts:

Looking at Blessed Family you feel, as Christian spouses, the need to think about tasks that Christ gives you together with your great but difficult calling. The subject of your jubilee – "Children are the spring of family and society" – can show you important aspects of this thought. Isn't it true that children put parents under a constant examination? They do it not only by asking questions all the time

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<sup>13</sup> John Paul II, *The culture of responsible parenthood*, "L'Osservatore Romano" 2004, No. 4, p. 19.

but also by expressions on their faces, sometimes happy sometimes sad. All their manners, sometimes their childish whims, include questions asked in a number of ways which could be read e.g. in the following way: mom, dad do you love me? Am I a gift for you? Do you accept me the way I am? Do you always want the best for me? Those questions are asked with eyes more often than mouth but they make parents aware of their responsibility and they are the echo of God's voice<sup>14</sup>.

It is enough to go deeper into the words spoken by Pope to realize your own attitude towards children – first your own and then somebody else's, that we contact on different occasions. Not only parents should think about it, although it is directed mainly to parents, but also other people who are partly responsible for the bringing-up process, like teachers and people for whom children are not indifferent. To clarify the notion of children as spring Pope said:

It takes us into the atmosphere full of life, colours, light and singing which we associate with spring. All of this is naturally in children. Children are hope that constantly blooms anew a project that is constantly made real, the future that is always open. They are the fruit of marital love which, thanks to them, is revived and strengthened. Coming to this world they bring the manifesto of life which points to the Creator of life. They depend on us practically with everything, especially at the beginning stages; they are a natural call for solidarity. It is not by chance that Jesus addressed pupils to keep childish hearts (Mk 10, 13–16)<sup>15</sup>.

It is not easy to see so much beauty in a child when parents are burdened with everyday problems of different kinds. The fast rate of present-day life is not conducive either. The child is put in the background and other priorities are put in the foreground. More and more people for whom professional career is most important think this way. The future does not belong to people like that. For such people a child is often not a gift but danger. John Paul II saw this problem and he also said that children and their situation is a challenge for society.

The situation of children is a challenge for the whole society directed straight at families. Nobody like you, dear parents, experiences how important it is for children that they can count on both of you – father and mother whose gifts complement each other. Supporting activities which overshadow this truth is not the sign of the progress of civilization. Aren't children hurt enough by the plague of

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<sup>14</sup> John Paul II, *Children are the spring of family and society*, "L'Osservatore Romano" 2001, No 1, p. 13.

<sup>15</sup> There,.



divorces? How sad is the life of a child who must say yes to living with fighting parents. This stage in their life when their parents say goodbye to each other will forever leave a mark on their psyche<sup>16</sup>.

Pope does not leave this problem without solution. In the case of a child being left by adults he suggests the advantages of adoption. A child deserves being able to grow up in a full family. If the natural family cannot do this task properly, there should not be any problems with finding them foster parents. Addressing the participants of World Family Meeting III Pope also said:

In this problem you cannot avoid the fundamental question about your up-bringing mission. If you gave life to children, your obligation is to support them in a way suitable to their age. Support them in their choice of life decisions, respecting all their rights. In our times there has been unquestionable progress in respecting children's rights. But in practice those rights are often violated and there are more and more cases of frightening violation of children's dignity. We must be careful and put children's welfare before everything else. Starting with the moment of a child conception. A tendency to use morally unacceptable methods of procreation is a result of absurd way of thinking which stresses "the right to a child" instead of "the right of a child" to be born and grow up in a fully human way. How different from this attitude is the practice of adoption! It is a true act of love which conduces to the welfare of a child and not to fulfilling parents' needs<sup>17</sup>.

This message clearly points to the direction of thinking and acting in a humanitarian way. Lack of order in this aspect of life is manifested in mess in the whole society. We do not need any examples to support this truth. It is enough to look closely into Polish reality to see that there is still a lot to be done about protecting children's welfare taking into consideration both family life and life in the whole of Poland. There are still no examples of proper adoption cases and foster families. The problems of natural, social- and euro-orphanage<sup>18</sup> are still solved with old legal regulations. There are still no proper solutions to material support of multi-children families, dysfunctional or pathological. In families like that about 2 mln children are raised. For them

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<sup>16</sup> There.

<sup>17</sup> There.

<sup>18</sup> See: K. Ostrowska, *Teachers about the problems of children whose parents go abroad to make money*, in: *Around the problems of helping children and family in a crisis situation. Interdisciplinary approach*, ed. B. Kaldon, I. Kurlak, Sandomierz–Warszawa 2011, pp. 13–50; E. Kozdrowicz, B. Walczak, *Migration – Family – Child*, "Social Pedagogy" 2008, No. 3.

even the smallest helping gesture gives a lot of joy and hope that in their own country they can feel like at home. Behind those problems there are specific people, specific politicians.

## Conclusions

It is difficult to say now whether Poland is a wealthy and democratic country or a country of failed hopes, lack of prospects and full of controversy. One cannot be happy about the media showing the truth about reality very selectively and sensationally. In certain scientific papers attention is drawn to social inequalities and disproportions. As an example, Iwona Wagner said that:

Social inequalities and polarization of Polish society are the result of re-structuring the local economy and introduction of free market. There are no results of the research devoted to poverty and wealth and lifestyles, only sporadic articles in newspapers. The problem of division into social strata is a very important issue from the point of view of social politics and pedagogy in relation to specific groups and families. Lack of empirical materials makes verifying this important social issue very difficult. [...] Isolation of families troubled by poverty because of no chances of development is described very rarely (chances and barriers of better life thanks to well-paid jobs, education, migration). There is a clear lack of material on the subject: social degradation of families, especially multi-children families, not full families and pathological families and the worsening of quality and restriction of access to communication services, cultural and recreational; decrease of feeling of safety, increase of alcoholism, crime and other pathology<sup>19</sup>.

The author of the cited material pointed that people with no education are especially in danger of poverty. Also those who maintain multi-children families. This is also the problem of country people, those who live in villages<sup>20</sup>. This example shows that the problem of children's welfare is especially important in Polish reality and we should hope for major changes in this respect in the future.

The problems shown in this paper make children's welfare in the context of John Paul II teaching closer. For Poles this teaching is a special challenge and obligation. It is a paradox that while having such a spiritual leader Poles could

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<sup>19</sup> I. Wagner, *Social inequalities – chosen aspects*, "Social Pedagogy" 2009, No. 1, pp. 63–77.

<sup>20</sup> Com. There, pp. 64–65.

not and still cannot make children free from any kind of harm. To make it possible we have to work out a report dealing with children's harm in Poland. On the basis of such a report it would be possible to make a real plan of repair beginning from legal regulations and ending with housing and employment issues. To do this a wise group of political leaders is required, which as yet has not been chosen via election. Now only one thing can be done – permanent upbringing of young people and preparing them for parenting tasks. It is also important to properly raise future politicians. John Paul II put the will of the Primate of the Millennium into being. But the will of John Paul II must be put into being by all Poles. And this will is putting family life in order and liberating children of any possible harm.

## STRESZCZENIE

Warto zauważyć, że współczesnemu człowiekowi trzeba koniecznie przywracać człowieczeństwo, w którym dobro dziecka ma najwyższe usytuowanie. Upadek cywilizacji następuje zazwyczaj przez zamęt i deprecjonowanie najwyższych wartości. Dlatego przypominanie nauczania Jana Pawła II jawi się obecnie jako konieczność dla podejmowania wysiłków odbudowywania tożsamości chrześcijańskiej przede wszystkim w płaszczyźnie życia rodzinnego. Dobro dziecka jest jedną z najważniejszych i zarazem strategicznych wartości społecznego rozwoju. Deprecjonowanie tego dobra świadczy o wyraźnej dekadencji współczesnej kultury. Dla zatrzymania tego procesu niezbędne są wysiłki zmierzające do permanentnego pedagogizowania rodziny i społeczeństwa. Jesteśmy świadkami toczącego się boju o człowieka i prawdę w jego życiu. Na pierwszej linii znajdują się rodzice i wychowawcy, dla których dobro dziecka jest wyzwaniem do coraz większej ofiary i poświęcenia. W prezentowanym materiale zwrócono uwagę na dobro dziecka w kontekście nadziei rodziny i przyszłości społeczeństwa w dobie licznych zagrożeń oraz na fakt, że dobro rodziny jest ewidentną podstawą dobra dziecka. Myśli te oparto na wybranych fragmentach nauczania Jana Pawła II z końcowego etapu jego pontyfikatu, traktując je jako testament, wobec którego nie możemy przejść obojętnie.

**SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:** nauczanie Jana Pawła II, dobro dziecka, dobro rodziny.