

# God's mercy revealed in the ministry of charity: The Church in Poland reaching out to 'the periphery'

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The ministry of charity is an important dimension of the Church's mission, because in this way it shows the mercy of its founder to the world. Christians incarnate God's mercy to the world by serving other people. This is how we should understand the words of Pope Francis, who said that the Church needs to reach out to the periphery, i.e. the poor, the homeless, the migrants, the unemployed, the sick and the socially excluded. What the essence of God's mercy is how it is shown in the community of the Church and how the Church in Poland takes care of those who remain on the periphery of the world. These are the questions which the author of this article will try to answer. The reflection undertaken is mainly based on biblical sources and the teaching of Pope Francis.

**Contribution:** Theological reflection on God's mercy, combined with a reflection on the ways of concrete help for socially excluded people, based on the example of the Church's charitable initiatives in Poland, is a contribution to the development of existential and inclusive ecclesiology, which is postulated by Pope Francis. It also shows how research in the field of practical theology can use the achievements of contemporary praxeology. This juxtaposition of theological and praxeological fields of reflection coincides with the focus and scope of the journal to promote the multidisciplinary aspects of studies in the general theological area.

**Keywords:** Mercy; Charity; Ministry; Diaconia; Poverty; Homeless; Migrants; Unemployed; Sick.

## Introduction

The God of Christians is the God of love (1 Jn 4:8.16). Although in His public revelation we will also find His other names (*Yahweh*, *Elohim* and *Adonai*), the most important name – which summarises them all – is love. At the same time, God who is love revealed to people His merciful face (*Misericordiae vultus*). God did that historically by the incarnation of the Son of God, Jesus Christ, who loved human beings so much that he gave His life for them on the Cross, so that they have life in abundance (Jn 10:10). This sacrificial love of Jesus Christ to humanity gave birth to the Church, which in its very nature is the community of persons loving each other. Regardless of whether formally joined to the fellowship of the Church through baptism, a person who does not love, in fact, does not belong to it, because only love is the true sign of belonging to the community of Christ's disciples (Jn 13:35). The ministry of charity is an important dimension of the Church's mission, because in this way it shows the mercy of its founder to the world. Christians incarnate God's mercy to the world by serving other people.

In the first year of his pontificate, Pope Francis called on all Christians 'to go forth from our own comfort zone in order to reach all the "peripheries" in need of the light of the Gospel' (Pope Francis 2013c:20, cf. 30, 46, 53, 59, 63, 191). Now, the world radiating from the Gospel is contained not only in God's word but also in the experience of His love. People who are poor, unemployed, homeless, migrants, sick and socially excluded can experience God's love primarily through the various forms of charitable service of Christ's disciples. However, for the works of love of neighbour to develop in the Church's communities, the biblical message about the grace of God, which is expressed in His mercy, must be proclaimed and received by the faithful. In contrast, the word of God lived in the liturgy gives birth to a community of believers who is ready to go out to the peripheries of the poor and make them feel God's love. Practical theology develops thanks to the skilful connection of theory with pastoral practice. Therefore, the aim of this article is to analyse briefly God's mercy in the biblical message, then, to show the place of charity in the

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mission of the Christian Churches and, finally, to reveal the application of theology of mercy in the pastoral practice of the Catholic Church in Poland. For the author of this study, an important motive is to show the reader on a global scale how the Church in Poland cares for the poor remaining on 'the outermost fringes of society: fringes which modern society itself creates' (Pope Francis 2015:15).

## Gracious and merciful God in the message of the Bible

God's love for humans is passionate and irreversible. However, in the distant past human broke the bonds of this love, intentionally turning away from God. The story of this separation is known in many Church traditions as original sin. Yet God did not leave human in this desperate condition, but in the face of human's rebellion showed the power of His love, which became merciful in the new context of sin. Pope Francis (2015) in his bull *Misericordiae vultus* has stressed that God's mercy has accompanied people since the beginning of humankind:

After the sin of Adam and Eve, God did not wish to leave humanity alone in the throes of evil. And so he turned his gaze to Mary, holy and immaculate in love (cf. Eph 1:4), choosing her to be the Mother of man's Redeemer. When faced with the gravity of sin, God responds with the fullness of mercy. Mercy will always be greater than any sin, and no one can place limits on the love of God who is ever ready to forgive. (p. 3)

It is worth noticing that, on the one hand, the first married couple, who were also the first parents mentioned in the Bible, experienced the terrible cost of sin, but, on the other hand, they did not escape the merciful influence of God. Although the consequences of sin were not abolished but, on the contrary, have affected all humanity, the hope of redemption from evil and its tragic consequences appeared immediately. Adam and Eve became the first recipients of *protoevangelium*, which points to the future victory over sin and its aftermath (cf. MV 3). This victory will be achieved thanks to a mysterious 'woman' (see Gn 3:15). Undoubtedly, this woman is Mary the mother of Jesus. However, in the context of the Apostle John's writings, the Church – the 'sign and tool' of the merciful God – can also be considered here.

How does the merciful God act in response to human betrayal? First of all, He does not condemn human beings, but sends His Son to the world (see Jn 3:16; Gl 4:4). This Son becomes a man to sympathise with our weaknesses and 'be tempted in every way, yet without sin' (Heb 4:15). St Paul reflecting on the incarnation of the Son of God stresses His humbleness and even deprivation (see Phlp 2:6–11). Jesus humbles Himself to the role of a servant (Gk. *doulos*), because He wants to enrich everyone, without exception (2 Cor 8:9).

What does God the Father revealed in Jesus Christ like? Above all, He is more of a father than a judge. God did not

want to judge people, before becoming a human being. Jesus pointed out that 'the Father judges no-one, but has entrusted all the judgement to the Son, that all may honour the Son just as they honour the Father' (Jn 5:22–23). Therefore, God's mercy means, for instance, that despite being the Creator and having the right to pass judgement on people, He did not do so, until He Himself had experienced human fate in the person of the Son. The Son of Man, which is the title preferred by Jesus Christ, lowered Himself to the position of the most humbled – the rejected, deceived, betrayed, those who are spat upon, deprived of dignity, cruelly beaten and murdered. When on the cross, He was praying the words of Psalm 22 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?', thus becoming close to those who have thrown God out of their hearts. Even for them there remains hope, because the merciful God does not write anybody off.

Even though Jesus Christ received from His Father the right to judge people, he does not condemn anyone, but shows His Father's merciful face (*Misericordiae vultus*) to all those who want to embrace it (cf. Pope Francis 2015:1). He has affirmed it solemnly in the following words: 'Whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life' (Jn 5:24). Therefore, it is so important for a Christian to recognise the merciful God, the Father in the countenance of His Son, who is the only source of hope for a human being steeped in sin.

What is the essence of mercy which has its source in God and should be reflected in the relationships between people, because a human being has been created in the image and likeness of God? According to Pope Francis (2015), the term 'mercy' includes the synthesis of the mystery of Christian faith:

We need constantly to contemplate the mystery of mercy. It is a wellspring of joy, serenity, and peace. Our salvation depends on it. Mercy: the word reveals the very mystery of the Most Holy Trinity. Mercy: the ultimate and supreme act by which God comes to meet us. Mercy: the fundamental law that dwells in the heart of every person who looks sincerely into the eyes of his brothers and sisters on the path of life. Mercy: the bridge that connects God and man, opening our hearts to the hope of being loved forever despite our sinfulness. (p. 2)

Mercy is love that is faithful despite everything and never gives up, even in the case of human unfaithfulness. It is affectionate, sympathetic love, like that of the best mother. Mercy does not restrict itself to what has been spoiled by sin, but aims at a new creation, renews what has been damaged or destroyed. Mercy is an increasingly subtle and sensitive intervention in the life of a lost human being who is plunged into sin (cf. Pope Francis 2015:9). As the etymology of the Latin term shows, mercy (*miseriordia*) is a heart (*cor*) given to a person in need (*miser*). Mercy means active compassion, which does not leave anyone who is in material, psychological, social or spiritual need without help. God is merciful above all else, but He wants us to follow Him and build our relationships with others on mercy. 'Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in

Christ God forgave you' (Eph 4:32) – this is the most important task for the Church – the *kerygma* for the third millennium (Ryś 2015:165).

## The Church – The community of mercy and forgiveness

Jesus ultimately completed His mission of revealing the merciful countenance of His Father (Jn 13:1) when He stretched His arms on the cross and gave His life for the people. As He Himself pointed out, 'greater love has no-one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends' (Jn 15:13). When Jesus died, which was confirmed by the fact that His heart was pierced with the spear of a Roman soldier, the Church that He gathered began its mission in the power of the Holy Spirit. Till the second coming of Christ, this Church should preach God's mercy, celebrate it in sacraments and show in deeds of mercy. Thus, the Church is a place where God's merciful countenance (*Misericordiae vultus*) is continually shown to all generations of men to the very end of the world (Przygoda 2019:643–644).

According to Pope Francis (2013a), the Church is not a bureaucratic institution, but a love story:

We, the women and men of the Church, we are in the middle of a love story, each of us is a link in this chain of love. And if we do not understand this, we have understood nothing of what the Church is. It is the story of love. (pp. 28–29)

The Church is continually being born in the heart of God who is love (1 Jn 4:8). God the Father 'so loved the world that He gave his one and only Son that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life' (Jn 3:16). The Son, loving the Father continuously, loved people to the very end and for them he let Himself be crucified, but rose from the dead on the third day, so that they have life in abundance (see Jn 10:10). This is the origin of the story of love between God and human, which has been established in the Church and has been present mainly in the Eucharist for 20 centuries now. It is God's intention that this story be never-ending, because true 'love never ends' (1 Cor 13:8). Consequently, the true disciple is the one, who identifies with His 'love to the end' (Jn 13:1), whilst shaping his heart according to the Sacred Heart of Jesus – a burning fire of love.

Pope Benedict XVI (2005) pointed out the thesis, which has been long established in theology, that is:

The internal nature of the Church is revealed in the triple task: preaching God's word (kerygma-martyria), administering the sacraments (leiturgia), practising the ministry of love (diaconia). These tasks are closely connected and cannot be separated. (p. 25)

As stated by Pope Francis (cf. Pope Francis 2015:25), mercy should be practised across the spectrum of all Church tasks mentioned. As noted by Cardinal W. Kasper, 'the Church without caritas and without mercy would cease to be the Church of Jesus Christ' (Kasper 2013a:54; cf. Kasper 2013b). No one in the Church should be excused from practising

merciful love. Pope Francis (2013b:22), alluding to the biblical vision of the Church as the body of Christ, stresses that everyone should find their own place and role given by Christ in this community:

Those who believe come to see themselves in the light of the faith which they profess: Christ is the mirror in which they find their own image fully realized. And just as Christ gathers to himself all those who believe and makes them his body, so the Christian comes to see himself as a member of this body, in an essential relationship with all other believers.

Mercy can be seen as the ideal of the Christian life and the criterion for the credibility of the Church's ministry whose aim is to save people. Mercy is a keyword to understand the main message of God's revelation, which in various ways expresses the truth that God loves us, is responsible for us and wants our happiness, joy and peace (Pope Francis 2015):

This is the path which the merciful love of Christians must also travel. As the Father loves, so do his children. Just as he is merciful, so we are called to be merciful to each other. (p. 9)

Today's world has the right to expect the model of servant and sacrificial love from the Church. Being 'the sign and the tool', the Church should become the teacher of humility, sacrifice and service to the modern world. In fact, there is nothing that raises the authority and credibility of the Church more than the testimony of its members' selfless love (cf. Baumann 2017:15–19).

In public debate, there is sometimes a dilemma, should one develop charity or rather strive for social justice? According to Pope Benedict XVI (cf. 2005:26), this dilemma goes back to the 19th-century Marxist thought, according to which the poor do not need charities but justice. The solution to this dilemma is simple: on the one hand, the Church's charitable activity does not justify neglect in the state's social welfare system, but on the other hand, even a well-managed, just state does not release the Church from her obligation to help those in need. According to Benedict XVI (2005:28), 'the just ordering of society and the State is a central responsibility of politics'. The Church guarantees the autonomy of temporal realities (Second Vatican Council 1965b:36), which is why it does not want to take over the power of the state and carry out political tasks. Justice, however, has an ethical nature, which is why the Church, starting from reason and natural law, tries to cooperate with the state 'through the purification of reason and through ethical formation, her own specific contribution towards understanding the requirements of justice and achieving them politically' (Benedict XVI 2005:28). It is the duty of the Church to awaken spiritual strength in people, without whom justice cannot be established and developed. According to Benedict XVI (2005):

[T]here is no ordering of the State so just that it can eliminate the need for a service of love (...) There will always be suffering which cries out for consolation and help. There will always be loneliness. There will always be situations of material need where help in the form of concrete love of neighbour is indispensable. (p. 28)

## The Church in Poland as the servant on the periphery

Polish bishops in *The pastoral letter concerning the ministry of charity in the Year of Mercy* stressed that (Polish Bishops Conference 2016):

The social and constitutional transformation together with economic changes, which have taken place for a quarter of a century in Poland, did not improve the standard of living for all citizens. Some of them have indeed managed to achieve civilizational advancement and improve, even considerably, their living standards. It needs to be remembered, though, that in comparison to Western European countries, we are still a society of poor people. (p. 1)

Unfortunately, the transition from centrally planned to liberal economy caused the impoverishment of the weakest links of Polish society. The free market is ruthless with not only the less-educated people with a rural or small-town background, large families and single parents but also the terminally ill and the disabled. We would like to present briefly how the Church in Poland follows Pope Francis' command to become the witness to God's mercy on the periphery of the poor people's world.

### Concern for the poor in the family circle, children and youth

The Central Statistical Office in Poland annually calculates and publishes the indexes concerning the scope of economic poverty, which are based on research findings regarding household budgets. The indexes shown are the annual average data. The calculations take into account three different borders: the extreme poverty line (existential minimum), relative poverty line (expenses lower than 50% of the average spending of households, in general) and the level of applicable amount (threshold of social intervention).

According to the data from the Central Statistical Office in Poland, extreme poverty, measured by the spending below the existence minimum, reached 4.3% in 2017 (The Central Statistical Office 2017:1). It seems that the factors, which had the greatest influence on the improvement of the households material situation and the reduction of extreme and relative poverty scope in 2017, were as follows: pay increase, decrease in unemployment and, in the case of families with children, the child-support benefit 'Family 500 plus' (The Central Statistical Office 2017:2).

The poverty of families, which directly results in the poverty of children and adolescents, is the priority of charitable work carried out by the Church in Poland. To protect maternity and family, various Church institutions have organised Single Mother's Homes, homes for mothers with children and orphanages. Single Mother's Homes are places of permanent residence and serve women who have been rejected by their own community because of their pregnancy. Such places offer their charges comprehensive care during the perinatal period and, most importantly, refuge from the

destructive influences of the environment. Single Mother's Homes not only guarantee full existential care but they also provide legal, psychological and pedagogical help. Currently, various Church institutions in Poland run about 40 Single Mother's Homes and crisis intervention centres for mothers with children who suffer from domestic violence.

Charitable help, offered by the Church to single mothers and poor families, is continued through the care for children and youth. Those who have become orphaned or rejected by their biological parents have especially been put in difficult situations. The best solution is for them to be adopted or put into foster families. Not all children, however, are lucky enough to become members of adoptive or foster families. Therefore, it is necessary for them to stay in Children's homes. For centuries, such places have been traditionally run by monastic orders. After 1989 they opened 27 orphanages and 23 educational and care-providing centres for older children and adolescents. At present, the Church runs 92 orphanages, 27 homes for mothers with children and 30 crisis intervention centres (Institute for Catholic Church Statistics 2015:17). Moreover, it has been a great field of the monastic orders' activity to take care of children and adolescents with mental disabilities.

The Church in Poland helps children and teenagers who come from a poor and dysfunctional background through the programme of day centres. The care in such centres is provided by a group of educators, which consists of retired teachers, catechists and volunteers from secondary and high schools. Some day centres are rehabilitation oriented, because they carry out special didactic and therapeutic programmes. Contemporary community centres, especially those run by monastic orders, are enthusiastic about the preventative educational methods of St. John Bosco. At present, various Church institutions in Poland (orders, parishes, Caritas and associations) run 378 sociotherapeutic centres and 105 neighbourhood youth clubs, which are attended by 116 000 beneficiaries (Institute for Catholic Church Statistics 2015:17).

An important example of charitable ministry of the Church in Poland aimed at children from the poorest and most neglected families is organising leisure time during summer and winter holidays free of charge. Diocesan Caritas and parishes are especially active in this field. The majority of donations collected during the action 'Christmas Work of Helping Children' ('Wigilijne Dzieło Pomocy Dzieciom') goes towards the organising of winter and summer camps for children. In 2014, for instance, institutions run by the Catholic Church in Poland organised 257 sessions of summer or winter camps enjoyed by almost 45 000 children (Institute for Catholic Church Statistics 2015:17). Caritas has more than 60 recreational centres situated in attractive surroundings. These places are visited not only by children and teenagers but also by the elderly, sick, disabled, poor families and so on. Special camps for children who have gone through the loss of one of their parents or siblings are

an initiative worth making known. The camps, which have been aimed at helping children cope with grief, healing their spiritual wounds and bringing ease to the longing for a close relative, were organised by Home Hospice from Olsztyn in 2003.

An important task for the Church in Poland is to help poor children receive education corresponding with their ability, because in this way the cycle of poverty transmitted from one generation to another can be effectively broken. It is worth mentioning that in this area of the Polish Church's charitable activity, the scholarship programme called 'Work of the New Millennium' for talented children from the poorest areas of Poland is organised by a Foundation of the Polish Episcopal Conference.

The campaign of collecting funds for scholarships, which has been organised since 2000 by this foundation on the Papal Day, brings better results each year. The foundation also receives money from donations, bequests and charitable events that it organises. At present, the scholarship programme is provided to more than 2000 young people. The foundation not only supports children and teenagers financially, but it also runs training camps, competitions and involves young people in various forms of voluntary service. Moreover, other institutions of the Church in Poland have organised 65 scholarship funds, which are offered to about 4000 beneficiaries (Institute for Catholic Church Statistics 2015:17).

A well-known form of children and youth charitable involvement is to act in Caritas School Clubs (SKCs). The first circles were created in Rzeszów Diocese in 1995. Currently, there are more than 2500 SKCs gathering about 50 000 volunteers (Caritas Handbook 2015). Inspired and supported by Caritas, SKCs aim at developing practical ways of showing brotherly love, especially in the school environment. Apart from children and teenagers, there are catechists and teachers who are involved in the work of such circles. The work includes taking part in well-known charitable campaigns of the Church in Poland, especially the Christmas Work of Helping Children, Lent Alms, Week of Mercy and World Day of the Sick, but it also means organising charitable works such as fairs, concerts and fundraising activities for the poor children in their environment. The money collected is spent on school supplies, dinners in school canteens, summer camps or expensive surgeries of poor peers.

The Second Vatican Council strongly encouraged the Church believers to 'learn from childhood how to show compassion and generously support the needy' (Second Vatican Council 1965a:31). These are SKCs in Poland, which are the means of apostolic formation of children and youth. Their members come to know Jesus' teaching about Christian love and mercy, develop sensitivity to various examples of human misery and overcome the fear of a sick, disabled or needy person. Furthermore, their personality is shaped into a mature and altruistic one. This Polish idea about the practical

apostolic formation of children and youth can be popularised worldwide.

## Ways of helping the homeless

The Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy has published on its websites a research report concerning homelessness in Poland in 2017 (Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy of Poland 2017). The investigations, which were conducted during the night of 8/9 February for the fourth time across Poland, aimed to estimate the current number of homeless people in Poland. In comparison with the data from 2015, the number of homeless people decreased by 2753 persons and amounted to 33 408 during the research. Men comprised 83.5% (27 911 persons), whilst women 16.5% (5497 persons) of the group in question. It is a very sad fact that as many as 1201 of the homeless (3.6%) in Poland are not 18 yet.

A large regional variation of the homelessness rate can be observed in Poland. The majority of the homeless stay in the following Voivodships [region, administrative area]: Mazowieckie (4785 people), Śląskie (4782 people) and Pomorskie (3319 people), whilst numbers are the smallest in Podlaskie (693 people), Świętokrzyskie (762 people) and Lubuskie (886 people) (Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy of Poland 2017). There is a clear correlation between the number of derelicts and the degree of urbanisation in each region. It is easier for the homeless to survive in the environments where the degree of urbanisation is high. Therefore, even the derelicts from villages or small towns migrate to metropolitan areas.

The main cause of homelessness mentioned by those investigated was: eviction – 45%, family conflict – 36.4%, addiction – 29.2% and unemployment – 17.3%. These were followed by poor health, disability – 14.2%, debt – 10%, leaving prison – 6.1%, domestic violence – 4.4% and the unsuccessful search for a workplace beyond one's place of residence – 3.3%.

The organisation of centres and places where the homeless, those addicted to alcohol or drugs and those living in abject poverty are offered help is an important sector of activity for many organisations. These are Caritas, monastic orders and associations – especially St. Brother Albert Aid Society. Shelters for derelicts are run either as direct access hostels or homes of permanent residence. The former merely offer shelter and the possibility of staying overnight. The latter provide food, clothing and therapeutic help, which is usually aimed at recovery from alcoholic disease. A nominal fee is charged for a stay at 24-h shelters. As the residents do not usually have any money, it is suggested that they do minor services instead. All residents are required to follow the rules of the shelter, which explains why derelicts are unwilling to stay in the shelter for a long time. Besides, by definition, the time of stay in the shelter is restricted. It is the goal of the shelter's staff to bring a homeless person back to independent life in society.

Unfortunately, it is achieved extremely rarely. At present, various Church institutions in Poland run 61 shelters for the homeless, 28 direct access hostels, 25 places offering warm shelter without beds, 121 places of sheltered housing, 40 public baths, 286 places where clothing is handed out and 302 dispensaries (Institute for Catholic Church Statistics 2015:18).

Providing food free of charge is the most widespread form of help directed towards the homeless and the poor. Kitchens and canteens for the needy give away hot meals at certain times. Some canteens allow meals to be taken home or organise their delivery to the homes of disabled people. In some places, food is given away in exchange for meal vouchers, which are allotted to poor people by single parishes in a town or deanery. At least theoretically, such distribution allows meals, the number of which is restricted because of limited finances, to be provided to the most needy. Various Polish Church institutions run currently 270 canteens for the poor, which have been visited by more than 840 000 people. More than 580 000 have benefited from European Food Aid Programme PEAD. Temporary aid is provided to more than 65 000 people in 126 social care centres (cf. Fiałkowski 2006:488–498).

### Support of migrants and refugees

There are more and more refugees and economic migrants from other countries who are crossing the territory of Poland. They regarded Poland as a transit country on their way to the European Union in the 1990s of the 20th century. Nowadays, many of them wish to settle in Poland. According to The Office for Foreigners, in 2014 – 4927 foreigners, in 2015 – 12 325, in 2016 – 12 319, in 2017 – 5078 and in 2018 – 4135 people lodged an application for the refugee status or international protection in Poland. Most frequently, these are the migrants from Russia and Ukraine who appeal for permanent residence (The Office for Foreigners of Poland 2019).

At the beginning of the 21st century, Caritas Poland organised four Refugee and Migrant Centres (Białystok, Lublin, Siedlce and Zielona Góra) by using the funds from abroad. These institutions provide mainly informational and consulting services. Sometimes the migrants receive also practical help, especially overnight accommodation, assistance in administrative matters or financial support. In 2015, the aforementioned centres provided help to 752 people (Caritas Handbook 2015; cf. Lipiec 2017:67–80).

Thanks to the support of government funds, new Refugee and Migrant Centres organised by Caritas were created in 2018 in the following cities: Szczecin, Kalisz, Warszawa, Olsztyn and Przemyśl. In the period from July to December 2018, these centres provided help to foreigners who, because of poor health, required intensified care and thus could not stay in sheltered housing for foreigners. Caritas would offer its care to various groups of foreigners, e.g. the

victims of human trafficking and unaccompanied minors. Beneficiaries receive comprehensive help, especially in the form of legal and social assistance (Current Caritas Projects in Poland 2018:7–8).

### Care for the sick, disabled and elderly

Since 1992, the project of Caritas Care Stations has been developed in Poland. It is a comprehensive programme implemented by Caritas supported by government and local institutions, which provides nursing care and rehabilitation to the sick, disabled and elderly. The project was launched in 1992 in Dobrzeń Wielki on the initiative of Caritas from the Opole Diocese. A dynamic development of the network of Caritas Care Stations was seen in Poland after the signing of a contract with Caritas Germany. Pursuant to this agreement, in the period of 1994–1997, Caritas Germany supplied several dozen Caritas Care Stations with cars as well as medical and rehabilitation equipment. At present, nursing care is offered in Poland by 122 Caritas Care Stations and 63 Health Care and Curative Institutions with the number of beneficiaries exceeding 50 000 (Institute for Catholic Church Statistics 2015:17).

Caritas Care Stations offer nursing care and simple rehabilitation to sick, disabled and elderly people in their own homes. The Stations staff not only eases the strain of care provided by family members to the terminally ill, but they also give training in the areas of nursing the sick, rehabilitation, hygiene and nutritional habits. Nurses are equipped with cars and mobile phones in order to reach the patients where they are. There are various rehabilitation aids in the Care Stations, but it is also possible to borrow rehabilitation equipment for the sick and disabled (wheelchairs, walking frames, walkers, orthopaedic crutches, anti-bedsore mattresses, rehabilitation beds, etc.) free of charge.

As part of medical care, the Church in Poland develops hospice work. Hospice care for people in the final stage of a terminal illness, frequently cancer, is provided by a well-qualified hospice team (cf. Kalinowski 2000). It usually comprises a doctor, a nurse, a psychologist and a chaplain. An immense support to the hospice team and the patient's family is offered by volunteers. Currently, various Church institutions in Poland run 61 home hospices and 40 stationary hospices, which care for over 43 000 patients (Institute for Catholic Church Statistics 2015:17).

An area of the Church's charitable and social ministry, which is similar to caring for the sick, but at the same time not identified with it, is the help and care provided to the disabled. This type of service involves the rehabilitation of the disabled people. Therefore, it requires good organisation and well-qualified staff. At present, various Church institutions in Poland run 108 occupational therapy workshops, 18 professional stimulation offices, 81

rehabilitation centres, 116 places of rehabilitation equipment rental, 16 day-care centres, 34 special purpose education centres and 122 other support centres for the disabled. All these institutions together provide help to over 120 000 disabled people (Institute for Catholic Church Statistics 2015:17–18).

The Church in Poland also tries to remember the elderly and lonely. Social help for these people is organised by parishes, Caritas and monastic orders. The elderly uses the services of Caritas Care Stations and rehabilitation centres more frequently than others. Day-care centres and Senior Citizens Clubs allow the elderly and lonely people to meet and talk with their peers. Furthermore, they provide decent entertainment and sometimes a cultural or religious programme. Some day-care centres also grant a meal and medical advice, whilst permanent residential homes offer decent living conditions to those who are self-reliant but often physically or mentally disabled. Such homes provide medical aid and various forms of therapy, which are possible to organise. Nuns minister to the elderly people within the scope of parish ministry, in Caritas Care Stations as well as in public health and social care institutions. At present, various Polish Church institutions run 160 Social Aid Homes for the elderly, 67 Community Care Access Centres, 69 Senior Citizens Clubs and 108 other welfare centres for the elderly people, which together provide care to over 90 000 senior citizens (Institute for Catholic Church Statistics 2015:17).

### Help for the addicted and socially excluded

The most common cause of social marginalisation in Poland is addiction to alcohol, drugs and other abusive substances. One of the Polish youth chaplaincy's priorities is preventive activity aimed at protecting young people from any kind of addiction. At the same time, people who are already addicted receive help from specialised rehabilitation centres run by male religious orders, such as Society of Divine Word, Camillians, Pallottines, Missionaries of the Holy Family or Christian associations. Some of these centres are prepared to provide medical treatment and rehabilitation to patients with human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS). In this difficult field of charitable and social work, the religious orders are supported by the government and associations. Various Church institutions in Poland run currently 31 addiction treatment centres for youth and adults, 62 information and consulting offices dealing with alcohol problems and 53 other support centres for the addicted and their families (Institute for Catholic Church Statistics 2015:17).

The Church in Poland does not leave imprisoned and arrested people without care. Apart from the prison chaplains' and private benefactors' ministry, the prisoners can count on the moral support as well as charitable and social help provided by the Prison Brotherhood. Its

members supported by prison chaplains try to help the convicts materially and spiritually. It is especially important to care for the prisoners who leave penal institutions after finishing their sentence. Since 2017, Caritas of Siedlce Diocese has carried out a pilot project 'Two Steps', which focusses on the prisoners and their families. It is the first programme of this kind, which provides comprehensive help to the convicts and their families. In 2018, about 100 prisoners of the Siedlce Penal Institution participated in this program (Current Caritas Projects in Poland 2018). Prisoners who leave the penal institutions can find huge support in the form of social cooperatives. They offer quick employment with accommodation in a hostel, as well as the opportunity to acquire vocational qualifications. At present, Caritas runs 20 social cooperatives, which offer help to 229 people (Institute for Catholic Church Statistics 2015:18).

## Ministry of mercy as an ecumenical experience

In its charitable ministry, the Church in Poland is open to cooperation with the charitable institutions of other Christian denominations. The ministry of charity provides a wide scope for ecumenical cooperation in accordance with St Paul's words 'let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers' (Gl 6:10). In respect of charity, there are no doctrinal or legal barriers, which would hinder mutual help provided by various Churches and Christian communities. Love is a reality that binds together and unifies all Christians. The Document of the Second Polish Plenary Synod encourages Catholics to undertake charity activities together with the brothers from different Christian Churches. According to this document, the platform of cooperation may be created by not only national, diocesan and parish charitable institutions but also monastic orders and associations working within the Church in Poland (The Second Polish Plenary Synod 2001).

The actual examples of ecumenical cooperation in the area of charitable ministry are proportionate to the confessional situation of Polish society and the needs of the Church in Poland. What can be considered as a good example of cooperation on the national level is the campaign called 'Christmas Action of Aid for Children', which has been organised together with *Diaconia* of the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession and *Eleos* of the Orthodox Church. Likewise, the European Charitable Congress organised in Warsaw in 1999 by Caritas, University of Freiburg and Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University had an ecumenical character, as it gathered Catholic theologians alongside Protestant and Orthodox ones (cf. Łazewski, Pompey & Skorowski 2000).

It is hard to estimate the amount of specific donations that come to Poland from charitable institutions of other Christian

Churches. The greatest amount of those donations reached the victims of floods in 1997 and 2000 through Caritas. In the case of natural disasters, it is also Caritas Poland that sends aid to Christians of other denominations or members of other religions all over the world. Special aid has been organised in recent years for the orthodox communities in the Balkans and for the Muslims in Chechnya, Kosovo, Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Indonesia, Jordan, Syria and many other countries (Current Caritas Projects in Poland 2018:13–23).

## Conclusion

Pope Francis, who was shaped mentally and spiritually in Latin America, is especially sensitive to the problems of the poor. Not only in the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* and in the bull *Misericordiae Vultus*, but also in many speeches and homilies, he has expressed his personal concern for people needing material and spiritual help. Moreover, numerous caring gestures during audiences have shown how much Pope Francis wants the Christian faith to bring forth the fruits of merciful acts towards fellow men. According to Francis, the poor comprise the ‘capstone’ of the Church, and it is from them that revival may begin. Owing to the fact that ‘the Lord comes (...) presenting Himself as a pauper’ (Pope Francis 2014:19), the revival of the Church requires fellowship with the poor. Such a company gathered around Jesus, and it is in this company that He is present nowadays as well. Thanks to the fellowship of the Church, Jesus still co-suffers with the needy, heals and encourages them, as well as feeds them with His bread, although nowadays He does it by the hands of His disciples.

It seems that Pope Francis is trying to be a continuator of the process of disenchanting the Vatican and the restoration of Peter’s ministry to ordinary people, initiated by Pope John XXIII. Thanks to his simplicity, humility and childlike trust, he was very positively perceived by modern people – after all quite critical and usually distant from the Church. Pope Francis seems to be convinced that only in this particular way, the project of new evangelisation can be reliably implemented, to which he constantly encourages pastors, religious and secular Catholics. Austrian pastoralist P. M. Zulehner claims that Pope Francis began a new era in the Church, in which there is a new – built on mercy – pastoral culture (cf. Zulehner 2017, 2018).

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### Author’s contribution

W.A.P. is the sole author of this research article.

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## Data availability

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