

Humanity and mental disability. Study in theology of disability

In the 1960s there appeared a movement in the Western societies which demanded full respect for the rights of people with disability, however, in the field of the Church teaching it was not until the 1930s that the theological reflection on the issue of discrimination of disabled people emerged. This new branch of theology, called theology of disability, departed from a medical model of perceiving disability, that is, from the understanding of disability as a problem of an individual who must be incorporated into society through proper treatment and rehabilitation. It based its ideas on the analyses developed by *disability studies* – cultural studies of disability – which demonstrate that disability is not only objective medical reality, but it is to a great extent dependent on the model of normality adopted by a particular society.

This approach can be easily illustrated on the example taken from our everyday experience: the use of cars in highly developed countries is so common that an average citizen has worse and worse physical condition. However, the fact that he/she could not run a distance of 20 kilometers is not considered as a disability. But would not the lack of this ability be considered as a disability among the Tarahumara, a Native American people of northwestern Mexico, known as a tribe of runners, for whom running several hundred kilometers is quite a normal thing? It is very probable that it would.

Therefore, by supplementing the medical model of perceiving disability with the results of the analyses provided by *disability studies*, we can notice that the practice of society (and the Church) towards people with disability cannot be based only on the actions aimed to restore an individual to society, but on such actions which would adjust society to the needs of an individual person.

However, one can ask whether the Church needs liberation theology which stands up for the disabled. Is it really true that the Church discriminates persons with disability? Has it ever discriminated them? Theologians of disability give affirmative answers to all of these questions. Taking into consideration the history of Christianity, it cannot be denied that there were such drastic examples of injustice towards the disabled as a famous history of a disabled boy whom Martin Luther ordered to drown. The reformer claimed that the boy did not have a soul, thus he was not a human being, and as a result his body could become a tool of an evil spirit. On the other hand, it may be difficult to find an institution which gives the disabled so much help, attending them with constant care and compassion. Although theologians of disability acknowledge the value of the Church's efforts, they still maintain that the stance of the Church is far from an ideal because, firstly, it is based on the medical model, which insists on "adapting the sick" to society, and not on thinking that we (that is, the abled-bodied) must adapt ourselves to the persons with disability. Secondly, the Church promotes a paternalistic attitude towards the disabled instead of giving them power and building their self-esteem. Thirdly, the Church unequivocally equates disability with suffering, which is not always the case, since disability itself is neither necessarily linked with physical suffering, nor deprives people of a chance to lead a happy life.

Still, what may be encountered in the Church is not only an oppressive – in the view of theologians of disability – practice but also the teaching which causes certain problems. One of the examples can be the doctrinal statements which define human nature through the prism of rationality. They become very problematic when referred to people with mental disability. Here we reach a paradoxical situation since the Church, on the one hand, has no doubts concerning the humanity of the mentally disabled, yet, on the other, it understands a human as a being of rational nature.

It seems, however, that it is possible to find a solution to this peculiar situation. Such a possibility is offered by a tradition already present in the Church, which does not perceive a human through the prism of his or her rational nature, but in the context of relation, which makes him or her a human being. Such a way of thinking is based on the belief that all human beings carry within themselves the image of God and similarity to their Creator. For Christians God is God-Trinity, that is, a community, in which each of the Divine Persons is a Person because of its relation to the Other. Likewise, a human person is fully a person thanks to his or her relation to the other person.

Recognizing the problematic nature of the teaching of *magisterium Ecclesiae* about rational human nature as well as noticing the possibilities of supporting the Church's conviction about the full humanity of the mentally disabled on the basis of the Church's own tradition, the project wishes to build theoretical foundations for this statement. The research intended to be strictly theological will move within the field outlined by dogma, yet understood not only as a dry text, but as a sense which the Church expresses by means of such linguistic formulations which are available to it.