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RACISM IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY IN THE LIGHT OF CHURCH TEACHING. DISCUSSION OF THE MOST IMPORTANT DEFINITIONS AND A NEW INTERPRETATION OF THE PHENOMENON

Abstract

The paper undertakes the topic of racism and its moral evaluation by the Church's Magisterium. It begins with an inductive study which consists in a lexical analysis of selected texts of the Church's Magisterium and papal encyclicals aimed at tracing the topics of race and racism. The study has shown that although not numerous, the documents addressing this issue are very significant. The paper additionally reviews selected definitions of racism. Finally, the author makes an attempt to interpret the phenomenon of racism and provides a theological proposal to overcome this problem in a theoretical and definitional sense. The article is a contribution to further research and exploration.

Keywords: Church's Magisterium, racism, antisemitism, John Paul II, popes

RASIZM XX WIEKU W ŚWIETLE NAUKI KOŚCIOŁA.
OMÓWIENIE NAJWAŻNIEJSZYCH DEFINICJI ORAZ NOWA INTERPRETACJA ZJAWISKA

Abstrakt

W artykule podjęto temat rasizmu i jego oceny moralnej przez Magisterium Kościoła. Najpierw zastosowano badanie indukcyjne, polegające na leksykalnym prześledzeniu wybranych tekstów Magisterium Kościoła oraz encyklik papieskich w poszukiwaniu tematyki dotyczącej rasy i rasizmu. Okazało się, że nie ma wielu dokumentów podejmujących tę kwestię, ale są one znaczące. Przejrzano także niektóre definicje dotyczące rasizmu. Na koniec podjęto próbę interpretacji zjawiska oraz przedstawiono teologiczną propozycję przezwyciężenia tego problemu, przynajmniej w sensie teoretycznym i definicyjnym. Artykuł jest przyczynkiem do dalszych badań i poszukiwań.

Słowa kluczowe: Magisterium Kościoła, rasizm, antysemityzm, Jan Paweł II, papież

INTRODUCTION

Racism is one of the concepts that are commonly known and referred to colloquially in everyday conversations, which makes it even more necessary to clarify its meaning and find out what people mean when they talk and think about *racism*. It must be said that not all wrong and stigmatizing human behaviour that bears the hallmarks of social injustice and discrimination can be defined as racism *sensu stricto*.

From the theoretical point of view, racism is an ideology and such attitudes of man that originate from the hatred of the *Other* based on skin colour or origin (Garaguso 1976, 1028-1034). Secular institutions and organizations may vary in their approach to this concept and use different definitions of it than churches or religious associations. In the dictionary of the Polish Language, we read that *racism* is “a view based on the thesis of biological, social and intellectual inequality of human races, usually combined with the belief in the inherent superiority of a particular race, often recognizing its right to rule over others” (“Rasizm” 1996, 19). Similar thoughts are expressed in the Catholic encyclopaedia by A. Jabłoński, where it is stated that racism is “a set of views based on a pseudoscientific thesis about the inequality of human races, striving to justify it on the basis of studies and the findings of anthropological, psychological, sociological and genetic research” (Jabłoński 2012, 1213).

K. Korab, on the other hand, refers to it as an unsubstantiated theory assuming that there are “better and worse human races” (Korab 2003, 413). The European Union, in turn, uses a broader definition, adding to the above-mentioned elements also language, religion and nationality. It must be emphasized, however, that, for methodological purposes, this definition should not be unduly expanded to include all types of discrimination occurring in societies in racism. Racism was officially condemned in 1948 by the UN General Assembly, and then, in the 1960s, by UNESCO, but further conferences and declarations were still needed in the following decades, and thus in 1993 the third decade of combating racism was proclaimed, as the previously set goals had not been achieved.

In the 19th century, the first theoretician of racism was J.A. de Gobineau (1853), a French count, diplomat, ethnologist and politician who wrote about the purity of the race dividing them into white, black and yellow. It is also worth mentioning in this respect H.S. Chamberlain (1899), a German philosopher and ideologue of Pan-Germanism, of British descent, who had a significant influence on Nazism, and who dealt with ideas of racism in his works. Knowing history and wishing to make it a “Teacher of life”, we realize more and more clearly that some concepts and theories developed by philosophers and humanists were irresponsible and wrong from the moment they were formulated, and not just when they were used by others. The Pontifical Commission “Iustitia et Pax” states with reference to this phenomenon: “racial prejudice, in the strict sense of the

word – that is, awareness of the biologically determined superiority of one's own race or ethnic group with respect to others – developed above all from the practice of colonization and slavery at the dawn of the modern era” (Pontifical Justice and Peace Commission 1988, 2). Those theories exerted an influence on people in a variety of ways to find their dramatic manifestation in the 20th century, a century to which John Paul II referred later as a period in history when “a worldview was created in the name of which a man can take the life of another man because he is of a different race because he belongs to a given ethnic group, because he is Jewish, because he is Gypsy, because he is Polish” (John Paul II 1991, 5).

In the light of the above, it should be noted that although various concepts of man have been proposed in the past (economic, existential, sexual being, “being leaning towards death”), it seems worth reconsidering the Christian concept of man, long-known in Europe and in the world. The fundamental value and social idea in the mentality of people should be personal dignity of a human being, who, quoting H. Skorowski, “is a biunity of the bodily and spiritual elements. Man understood in this way surpasses the entire surrounding reality” (Skorowski 1999, 23). Only in relation to man can we talk about his unique value. Only in relation to man can we talk about dignity. This notion carries axiological implications. It provides the foundation for human rights (cf. Skorowski 1999. 23-34). The state and every community within which a person exists should protect human rights and create conditions for the implementation of those rights (cf. Skorowski 2015, 320-321). This normative basis can never be the result of either a social contract or any power or ideology. Human rights are inherent to each individual person and their existence does not depend on a conception or establishment by other man, authority or society. Human dignity is linked to freedom and justice. Whenever this fundamental knowledge about man was dismissed, people succumbed to a more or less distorted vision of humanity born by subsequent ideologies. It should be emphasized that neither personal dignity nor the rights resulting from it are relative. In Europe and in the world, long forgotten are the words of St. Paul (first a Jew, a Roman citizen educated in the Greek world, and finally, a Christian who became the citizen of the world): “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3:28). It should also be recalled that “the Church, sent to all peoples of every time and place, is not bound exclusively and indissolubly to any race or nation” (PCC 58).

1. YESTERDAY AND TODAY OR EXAMPLES OF RACISM IN THE 20TH CENTURY (SELECTION)

Racial discrimination in North America: the term “colored” with designating black-only spaces (e.g., black-only water points). Mass exterminations of the population of some nations: the Armenian genocide in 1915-1917 in the Ottoman Empire; Nazi crimes during World War II against Jews, Poles, Roma; The

Vietnamese and Cham people genocide during the rule of the Khmer Rouge in the 1970s; Apartheid in South Africa until the mid-1990s.

An example of racism on the largest scale was the ideology of Nazism (which made it its program for the National Socialist totalitarian party in Germany) leading to the tragedy of the *Shoah* (i.e., extermination of the Jews which is called *holocaust* in Greek, however, as the term seems inappropriate, the Hebrew term *shoah*¹ is used here). Anti-Semitism certainly stems from racism, but it should be emphasized that not all anti-Jewish behaviours in the history of the world and the Church can be identified as anti-Semitism (anti-Judaism and anti-Jewishness should also be distinguished, since, as much as they are reprehensible from the ethical point of view, they are not *strictly* racism and have other etiology).

The Holy Office of the Catholic Church condemned anti-Semitism already in 1928, while Pope Pius XI, condemned Nazi doctrines in 1937 in the encyclical *Mit brennender Sorge* (it was read on Passion Sunday on March 14, 1937, in churches in Germany). The encyclical contains, among others, the following statements: “None but superficial minds could stumble into concepts of a national God, of a national religion; or attempt to lock within the frontiers of a single people, within the narrow limits of a single race (...). The peak of the revelation as reached in the Gospel of Christ is final and permanent. It knows no retouches by human hand; it admits no substitutes or arbitrary alternatives such as certain leaders pretend to draw from the so-called myth of race and blood” (Pius XI 1937, 15-23). It is interesting to note that the same pope began work on an encyclical that pointed to the unity of the human race as the sufficient, the first and the main argument against racism and anti-Semitism¹. Pius XI spoke out against racism in many of his meetings. During one of them he said: “Catholic means universal, non-racist and non-nationalist! (...) The human race, the entire human race, is one great universal human race! We ask why, by unfortunate imitation, Italy had to follow the example of Germany? (...) Human reality and human dignity demand one big family, the human species, the human race (...) It is only there that multiple differences occur. (...) This is the answer of the Church!” (Pontifical Justice and Peace Commission 1988, 7).

Moreover, it should be noted that racial divisions can function in an ambiguous way. In Africa (Rwanda – 1990s), people were both victims and perpetrators of racism (Galtung 2014, 119f). Races or nations persecuted in the past may, under certain conditions, become the authors of new racist behaviour. In an extremely dramatic way, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger asked: “how was this possible? How is it possible that in Rwanda, the coexistence of *hutu* and *tutsi* tribes suddenly turned into mutual bloody conflict? (...) the cynicism of ideology has darkened consciences” (Ratzinger 2005, 87). C.M. Swain, disagrees with the theory that only

¹ This encyclical was not completed due to the Pope’s death. The circumstances of its origin were described in a book by Suchecky and Passelecq (1995). For more on the subject, see Horoszewicz (1998, 179-201).

white people can be racist, and refutes the notion that a member of a minority cannot be racist (Swain 2002).

Bearing in mind proper methodology (as not everything is *strictly* racism), it is also necessary to identify and eliminate racist or discriminatory behaviour during public gatherings, e.g., in stadiums during matches, marches, demonstrations, etc. Sometimes there are no simple solutions or easy answers. The situation in contemporary ghettos of great European capitals seems complicated when city dwellers are afraid to enter them. John Paul II called on Catholics to help immigrants and show solidarity with them, but at the same time he appealed to immigrants “to recognize the duty to honour the countries which receive them and to respect the laws, culture and traditions of the people who have welcomed them” (John Paul II 2003, 4).

It should be emphasized that in the past, racist attitudes were sanctioned by legal provisions, and not, for example, by doctrines or rules of any religion known to us. In 1935, the “Nuremberg Race Laws” were passed in the Third Reich, which concerned Jews, Roma and the “black race”. Contrary to the diplomatic efforts of Pius XI, the Italian state spectacularly received Hitler in Rome in 1938, and then legislative attempts were made to transfer anti-Semitic ideas to Italy². In South Africa, in 1950, the Census Act was passed, dividing society into “whites, blacks and people of colour”. Prior to this, in 1949, mixed marriages were banned. In subsequent years, further segregating laws were introduced in South Africa, while the so-called Jim Crow laws imposed in the US deepened racial segregation and, consequently, racial segregation continued in some states despite the abolition of slavery. These are only selected examples.

The 1968 UN Convention includes racism among “Crimes against humanity” and prohibits the statute of limitations for such crimes. Unfortunately, as the Second Vatican Council noted, even today “Differences crop up too between races and between various kinds of social orders” (PCC 8). “The Church admonishes her own sons, but also humanity as a whole, to overcome all strife between nations and race in this family spirit of God’s children” (PCC 42).

In an extremely insightful and interesting way, John Paul II in the apostolic exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa* wrote: “Despite the modern civilization of the ‘global village’, in Africa as elsewhere in the world the spirit of dialogue, peace and reconciliation is far from dwelling in the hearts of everyone. Wars, conflicts and racist and xenophobic attitudes still play too large a role in the world of human relations” (John Paul II 1995a, 79). The Pope will repeat this thought on the 30th Anniversary of the Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* in 1995, saying: “Unfortunately, ethnic and religious hatred, fuelled by the memory of the tribal and national past, continues to trigger conflicts, genocide and slaughter, and leads to all the

² Cf. the famous Race Manifesto of July 14, 1938 (quoted after Podemski 2012, 108). This author, for the sake of accuracy, claims that this is another argument in support of the thesis of the ‘African’ rather than ‘anti-Semitic’ origin of state racism. Only later, in 1943, did the issue in Italy change.

tragic consequences that are associated with such painful events, such as famine, epidemics and millions of refugees. It is time for the appeal of the Council to be heard” (DPCP 8)

The latest European Commission document states: “Discrimination based on racial or ethnic origin is forbidden in the European Union (EU). However, such discrimination still exists in our society. It is not enough to be against racism. We must actively oppose it” (European Commission 2020). John Paul II appealed to the media that in today’s world it is they who bear the greatest responsibility in creating “a public opinion of constantly growing strength in favour of peace, and of what serves to bring it about and preserve it” (John Paul II 1986, 3). He also repeatedly appealed to parents and teachers to “combat racism and xenophobia by inculcating positive attitudes based on Catholic social doctrine” (John Paul II 2003, 3).

2. UNEQUIVOCAL MORAL EVALUATION OF RACISM BY THE MAGISTERIUM OF THE CHURCH

As regards the question of racism, documents of the Magisterium of the Church or statements of popes on this subject seem rather scarce (compared to the great social topics addressed in numerous texts and official documents). It seems, in fact, obvious considering the unequivocal moral evaluation of this phenomenon as well as the significance of both documents and statements directly addressing this subject.

The Second Vatican Council, in addition to the *aggiornamento* of the contemporary Church and the great theological themes, also dealt with many social problems. The authors, called the Council Fathers, raised these issues in many documents and undertook their moral evaluation. When it comes to racism, the question is discussed in a broader context that is worth quoting. In the constitution *Gaudium et Spes*³ of the Second Vatican Council, we read: “Although the world of today has a very vivid awareness of its unity and of how one man depends on another in needful solidarity, it is most grievously torn into opposing camps by conflicting forces. For political, social, economic, racial and ideological disputes still continue bitterly, and with them the peril of a war which would reduce everything to ashes. True, there is a growing exchange of ideas, but the very words by which key concepts are expressed take on quite different meanings in diverse ideological systems. Finally, man painstakingly searches for a better world, without a corresponding spiritual advancement” (PCC 4). It is significant that these words, written more than half a century ago, seem to accurately describe the world today. Pope Francis wrote in his encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*⁴, that racism is

³ It is known that Karol Wojtyła, as a cardinal, participated in the work of the subcommittee preparing this constitution and that his texts that had been published earlier were used.

⁴ The encyclical was written in the 21st century, but we deliberately go beyond the framework of the title of the article to show that the problem of racism did not disappear with the end of the 20th century, and that is why Pope Francis’ encyclical mentions it.

“a virus that quickly mutates and, instead of disappearing, goes into hiding, and lurks in waiting” (Francis 2020, 97). These words are known to the wider public because of a tweet in which Pope Francis repeated the phrase on the occasion of the International Day Against Racism, adding that “our supposed social progress is not as real or definitive as we think” (@Pontifex March 21, 2021).

Equality among people results from the fact of their being created by One God, therefore any divisions are unacceptable and stand in conflict with the faith of Christians. As H. Skorowski said: “The basis for the right to equality is the very nature of each person, the nature that comes from and is sanctified by God” (Skorowski 1999, 57). This equality results from the dignity of each person because it is through this dignity that all people have the same rights.

In 1987, John Paul II wrote with great firmness: “On the *international level*, that is, the level of relations between States or, in present-day usage, between the different ‘worlds,’ there must be complete *respect* for the identity of each people, with its own historical and cultural characteristics. It is likewise essential, as the Encyclical *Populorum Progressio* already asked, to recognize each people’s equal right ‘to be seated at the table of the common banquet,’ instead of lying outside the door like Lazarus, while ‘the dogs come and lick his sores’ (cf. Luke 16:21). Both peoples and individuals must enjoy the fundamental equality which is the basis, for example, of the Charter of the United Nations Organization: the equality which is the basis of the right of all to share in the process of full development” (John Paul II 1987, 33).

The Catechism of the Catholic Church states: “Every form of social or cultural discrimination in fundamental personal rights on the grounds of sex, race, colour, social condition, language or religion, must be curbed and eradicated as incompatible with God’s design” (CCC 1935)⁵. The Church’s position on racism is clear. Racism is incompatible with the teaching of the Church on the common origin of all people and the unity of the human race. Moreover, Baptism makes believers members of the Body of Christ, thus transcending “all the natural or human limits of nations, cultures, races and sexes” (CCC 1267).

In the Declaration of the Second Vatican Council on the relationship of the Church to non-Christian religions “*Nostra aetate*” the words of the Bible are recalled: “The one who does not love does not know God” (1 John 4:8) and the conclusion: “No foundation therefore remains for any theory or practice that leads to discrimination between man and man or people and people, so far as their human dignity and the rights flowing from it are concerned. The Church reproves, as foreign to the mind of Christ, any discrimination against men or harassment of them because of their race, colour” (NAe 5). In another document of Vatican II, it is said that the right to education cannot be limited on account of race (GE 1), and Christians are to earnestly strive “for fundamental decisions to be taken in

⁵ The Catechism of the Catholic Church repeated here the words of the Second Vatican Council (PCC 29).

economic and political affairs, both on the national and international level” serving all people, regardless of “race, sex, nation, religion or social condition” (PCC 60).

It is significant that the teaching of the Church equates the situation of racial worship and exaltation with idolatry (CCC 2113). It seems that it is not possible to go further in condemning racism using religious language.

In the teaching of the Catholic Church, a very important, but almost absent from public awareness, is the document *The Church Against Racism* (Pontifical Justice and Peace Commission 1988), and in particular its chapter entitled “Contribution of Christian, in Union with Others, to Promoting Fraternity and Solidarity Among Races.” It contains very interesting observations and suggestions that can serve as guidance in reflection on the concept of racism. John Paul II in 1987, during a meeting with African Americans, said: “There is no black Church, no white Church, no American Church; but there is and must be, in the Church of Jesus, a place for blacks, whites, Americans, for members of every race and culture” (quoted after Kłos-Skrzypczak 2019, 87). And in the Message for the World Day of Migrants, he taught: “This is the Church’s missionary path: to go to meet women and men of every race, tongue and nation with friendship and love, sharing their conditions in an evangelical spirit, to break the bread of truth and charity for them” (John Paul II 1997a, 4).

CONCLUSIONS, SUMMARY AND “REMEDY” PROPOSAL

1. Racism, as other important concepts, has never been and still is not a monolith, so one should always pay attention to the context of its occurrence, its causes and effects. It is also necessary to study the evolution of this concept analysing it through historical accounts, since racism is a global, not only a local phenomenon.

2. Racism is a concept about which there is still no consensus in science as regards its definition, although it must certainly be evaluated unequivocally and defined as an unacceptable and reprehensible phenomenon. There can be no doubt about it, no justifying circumstances. Ethically or religiously, racism is always wrong.

3. The position of the Church’s Magisterium on racism is unequivocal. Throughout the centuries, racism has always been condemned by subsequent popes in their statements and writings. *Fundamental equality* among people, resulting from the inherent dignity of man is one of the fundamental motives which make the Church invariably oppose every form of racism.

4. In the past, racist attitudes were sanctioned by legal provisions and not, for example, by the doctrine or rules of any religions known to us.

5. Racial divisions can function in an ambiguous way.

From the point of view of the Catholic Church, racism is caused by ideological reasons, but also by sin, which is in a symbolic and descriptive way already presented in the Hebrew Bible in the episode about Cain and Abel. The fact that the three great monotheistic religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam, refer to

this sacred text significantly shows that racism can be born in the human heart⁶. This heart is the space where the battle between good and evil takes place. “In his heart, man is sensitive to the absolute values of good, to justice, brotherhood and peace. The disorder of the heart is notably the disorder of the conscience when the latter calls good or bad what it intends to choose for the satisfaction of its material interests or its desire for power” (John Paul II, 1984, 2). Presented in this way, the problem seems to go to the heart of the discussion on the causes of racism. The human conscience can become erroneous and it can be shaped by racial prejudices (unfortunately also supported by the so-called pseudoscientific theories). In 1997, in the Message for World Migration Day the pope wrote that “thanks to the sending of the Holy Spirit, ‘the first disciples of Christ – regardless of language differences – were able to find the royal way of peace and brotherhood’. At the Tower of Babel, pride destroyed the unity of the human family. The Holy Spirit came to restore this lost unity with His gifts” (John Paul II, 1997b, 6).

Thus, remembering and respecting the teaching of John Paul II and examining the Magisterium of the Church, we can conclude with the following proposal. A new heart (mind), and thus a proper perception of man and a new spirit (awakened and strengthened by the Holy Spirit) may become, in our opinion, a *recipe* for the complicated problems of human coexistence on this planet, where racism should never again have a place in the space of thoughts and actions.

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⁶ In biblical language, the Hebrew ‘lev’ i.e., heart means primarily the seat of thought.

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