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The cooperation between teacher of religion and parents according to *The religious education core curriculum of the Catholic Church in Poland (2018)*

Abstract

Currently one can observe the recession in involvement of parents in the process of education of their own children in faith. One of the symptoms is lack of interest of parents to actively cooperate with religion teachers. That is why the reflection on cooperation between parents and religion teachers is necessary and required. This article focuses on this issue in the light of *The new core curriculum of the Catholic Church in Poland (2018)*, which will take its effect on the 1st of September of 2020. At the beginning the understanding of the term “cooperation of parents and religion teacher” was described. Following train of thoughts of authors of the new document the work and dialog focused on education in faith of children and youth were emphasized. The author of the article took under consideration evangelization, catechization and education of parents. Then the focus moved toward goals and content, within the core curriculum itself, that are crucial to this kind of cooperation. Religion teacher must support parents in raising their children in faith by reminding them about their parental duties as first educators as well as through faith education of parents and their evangelization which can be accomplished through formation meetings. Such forms, according to authors of the new curriculum, are crucial in cooperation of religion teacher and parents. They need personal contact and relationship building, based on dialog and trust. Authors, though, are skeptic about indirect contact with parents (such as on-line class registry).

To sum up all of the proposals of the cooperation of religious teachers and parents included in new core curriculum, some pastoral postulates were formulated. The need for thorough diagnosis through empirical exercises has been highlighted. New technologies

as ways for dialog with parents were deemed important, as well as initiating evangelistic actions and religious education of parents too.

Keywords: catechesis, instruction in religion, religion teacher, family, parents, cooperation, education, dialog.

The act of instructing and educating children and youth in faith requires involvement of many people. Amongst them are parents, grandparents, relatives, teachers and ministers. Some of them are directly and systematically involved in religious education, some only occasionally (i.e. during family gatherings, preaching, saying homilies in the church or while administrating the Sacraments). Nevertheless, each and every one of them has a particular influence on a child or a young person. In the present times can be noticed more and more the absence of parents (conscious and voluntary or involuntary) in the religious educational process of their children. This situation, with its different factors, was already seen and highlighted, in their work, by certain catechists (like: Stala 2003; Osewska 2002; Osewska 2013). Thus a religious teacher often becomes one and only tutor for many young people, fully engaged and responsible for spiritual growth and faith. Thanks to his or her attitude of service and personal commitment many students have the possibility to know and love Christ and to learn and experience how to follow the Lord in their personal life. However, this is not enough. Systematic education in faith cannot be performed effectively without cooperation between catechists and parents. Lack of involvement of parents in this process weakens and sometimes even hinders authentic and effective education in faith of the younger generations. That is why, previously as well as currently, the cooperation of catechists and parents gathered a great deal of attention (Kulpaczyński 2011; Skreczko 2012; Walulik 1999; Zellma 2012). The more parents were involved in religious education of their children, the more effective and long lasting it was, also the instruction itself wasn't becoming a burden for teachers as their work with kids was easier and more efficient.

Taking under consideration all of the above, especially the fact that the process of upbringing in faith is not done outside of the family itself, the Catholic Church in Poland strives to continually reflect upon and examine the cooperation between parents and teachers of religion (Polish Bishops Conference, 2001). This aspect has a clear practical angle and is truly crucial for catechetical and pastoral ministry of the Catholic Church in Poland. It is reflected not only in the religious education core curriculum (Polish Bishops Conference, 2018) but also, as an issue, examined very often by Polish religion teachers, with the teaching

of the Church and popes as its background, particularly teachings that focus on religious education in families, schools and parishes (Bednarczyk 2012; Filipiak 2010, 65–85; Łabendowicz 2011, 61–70; Osewska, Stala 2003; Zellma 2012, 181–195). This issue urges catechists and religion teachers to create practical teaching aids (i.e. as a series of textbooks).

The objective of this scientific reflection is to look closer at different aspects of cooperation between teachers of religion and parents based on *The religious education core curriculum of the Catholic Church in Poland* that will take effect on 1st of September of 2020 (Polish Bishops Conference, 2018). The aim is to show how this issue of cooperation the aforementioned document presents. Thusly described aim requires particular focus on only some, most important, points. At first, an explanation of understanding of the term “cooperation of parents and religion teachers” according to authors of *The religious education core curriculum of the Catholic Church in Poland* will be presented. Secondly, the premises of such cooperation will be also discussed. Aims, contents, means, types and forms described in the analyzed document will be taken under consideration as well. All of the mentioned above will establish a ground for assessment of described presuppositions as well as for formulating catechetical postulates.

1. Understanding of the term “cooperation of parents and religion teachers”

While reading thoroughly the new core curriculum one can most certainly conclude that it neither explains how to understand cooperation of parents and religion teachers nor does it contain any sort of written definition. Among main terms, such as roles of catechesis, catechetical goals – general requirements and content – particular requirements, attitudes, correlation between lesson on religion and broader school education, formation, or religious education there are no references to the issue at hand (Polish Bishops Conference, 2018, 13–15). Nevertheless one can still see many different aspects within the core curriculum content that allow to define particular understanding of the cooperation between parents and teachers, as needed. While analyzing catechesis for kids in kindergarten the reference to cooperation with parents can be already noticed (Polish Bishops Conference, 2018, 25). Rightfully, this issue is included in the discussion on cooperation within catechetical community (ibidem). The authors of the new core curriculum highlight there also the need to engage families in faith formation of a child. Similar observations come to mind while reading the core curriculum content for teaching in grades I–IV

and V–VIII of primary as well as variety of high schools (Polish Bishops Conference, 2018, 48–49, 92–93, 136–137).

Generally, the cooperation itself, in the religious education core curriculum, is treated as teamwork of those particular subjects for the benefit of children and youth (*ibidem*). Assuming, of course, that both parents and teachers of religion, are essentially involved in religious education. Both parties perform, naturally, their educational actions and functions to achieve a common goal which is education in faith. Their partnership, for the benefit of pupils, is based on reciprocity, trust, dialogue and care for holistic growth of a child including care for his/her life everlasting (*ibidem*). This teamwork reveals that both religion teachers and parents are not alone in this education. What's more, they engage in different initiatives to assist children in their growth in faith and shaping of attitudes. They are open for each other, ready for a dialog and for connection. Both parties can work together for the benefit of common didactic goals and can find solutions to problems that occur during the process of instruction and upbringing.

Finally, we can conclude that the new core curriculum aptly understands cooperation between religion teacher and parents. The emphasis on teamwork is placed equally on the act of upbringing one's child as a human being as well as a Christian. Fittingly, both areas are not separated but treated as intrinsically connected with each other.

2. Presuppositions in the subject of cooperation of parents and religion teachers

From amongst different propositions, within the core curriculum itself, which alternate around the discussed problem of cooperation, emerge variety of aspects. These aspects are differentiated and subsidiary to each level of education of kids and youth. First and main presupposition of cooperation between parents and religion teachers are its goals. They can be described as ongoing education and catechization of parents as well as ceaseless support given to help parents raise their offspring in faith. Catechetical documents for kindergartens through each level of education in faith of children remind that the main purpose of this cooperation is in making parents understand their own important role in religious education of their young ones (Polish Bishops Conference 2018, 48–49, 92–93, 136–137). These documents present the necessity of showing the parents how important is their own testimony of life in faith (*ibidem*). Equally important, it seems to be, a support given to parents as they undertake their everyday educational and catechetical duty (*ibidem*).

To achieve the goals mentioned above, in the area of cooperation between parents and religion teacher, relevant topics need to be addressed and discussed. According to the new religious education core curriculum each level has its own challenges and presents the need to ponder upon particular issues. I.e. in kindergarten one should focus on God's love and friendship that can be understood by child through its own experience of parental, brotherly or family love (*ibidem*, 25). But that's not enough. Children on this level should learn the meaning of life in faith, personal prayer, personal engagement in rites and liturgical celebrations of their parents and respective adults (*ibidem*). These are the topics that the teacher should raise while interacting with parents of children on the kindergarten level. Furthermore, religion teachers should hold meetings with parents on topics such as: kids' identification with parental faith dispositions, emulation of their attitudes, reaching personal independence, understanding parental role in discovering God, Baptism and its meaning in young person's life (*ibidem*, 25–26).

Authors of the new core curriculum propose slightly different content regarding cooperation with parents of kids on grades I–IV of primary school. Because this is the time of preparation for the First Holy Communion, the core curriculum advises to focus on the Sunday Eucharist celebration and participation. It is advised to discuss such topics as signs of faith, sin, conversion, first confession, First Communion, Holy Mass, participation in seasonal devotions and in celebration of the Word of God, as well as the meaning of Christian life in a family. Rightfully, the curriculum focuses on the very need for evangelization especially when children live in single-parent households, parents live in non-sacramental marriages or don't participate in religious observations (such as, but not limited to Sunday's Eucharist) (*ibidem*, 48–49). In the level IV of primary school the core curriculum recommends topics on re-living and celebrating the first anniversary of the First Holy Communion (*ibidem*, 49).

In the next level of religious education, that is grades V – VIII of primary school, it is advised to remind parents that they play a very important role in religious education of their child (*ibidem*, 92). Parents are first teachers of faith and that should be repeated in the context of preparation for sacrament of Confirmation. This idea should become a main focus during meetings of parents with religion teachers (*ibidem*). The main purpose of this all is to lend parents a helpful hand with deepening of their own relationship with God (*ibidem*). Only then will parents be able to fulfill their catechetical mission on each step of their children's development.

In high schools, regardless of what kind and type of high school it is (general education, technical school, professional) the core curriculum calls for the need

to recall the personal experience of parents (ibidem, 136). It is crucial to know the environment of young people, where they live everyday lives (ibidem). Next to dealing with real and present problems, the core curriculum points out a need to remind parents about their indivisible mission in faith education of their children. At the same time the core curriculum's proposition for the contents of parent – teacher conferences are: meaning of a strong personal relationships for the proper holistic development of a young person, the idea of marriage and family life, dependability of positive atmosphere on strong resistance to different addictions and dangers in becoming a grown-up person (ibidem).

Considering catechesis for children with special needs the core curriculum strongly highlights not only the very cooperation of parents and a religion teacher but also very particular content. The accent lies in making parents aware what difference their own testimony of life makes, as well as reminding them the need to personally engage in faith education of their own offspring. This content focuses on Gospel, education in faith, maturing in faith, and vivid faith life (ibidem, 161–162).

Described in the new core curriculum goals and content require particular forms of cooperation between parents and a religion teacher. The authors of this document are very particular and clear about that. That is why one can find in quite a few places suggestions that can point to specific ways and forms of this cooperation. They correspond with guidelines included in 2001 *The Catechetical directory of the Catholic Church in Poland* (2001, no. 86) described also in following religious education core curricula (Conference of Polish Bishops, 2001; 2010). As a main forefront is brought the necessity for constant reminder of the important role that parents play in faith formation of their children, and invitation for ongoing motivation for their cooperation (Conference of Polish Bishops, 2018, 48–49, 92–93, 136–137). The authors keep this in mind and it is very clear as they write about this cooperation openly or through different suggestions and ideas (ibidem). This is clearly visible while analyzing each level of religious education, starting in kindergarten ending in high schools, including also religious education in schools for kids with special needs (ibidem).

It is very obvious that propositions, within *The religious education core curriculum of the Catholic Church in Poland* (2018) are crucial for practical faith education (Conference of Polish Bishops, 2018). One can see the predominant forms of direct and indirect education of parents in faith (ibidem; see Łabendowicz 2011; Zellma 2012). On multiple occasions it is clear that parents need special help in educating their children in faith and their role is unsurpassed. That is why catechists in parish and religion teachers at schools cannot fulfill education purposes like parents can, as it is a fundamental part of being called to parenthood

(Conference of Polish Bishops, 2018). Religion teachers support parents in their special mission to raise children in faith as people and Christians. Parents are the first tutors, teachers and witnesses that must take care of faith formation of their children (ibidem, 48–49, 92–93). From their attitude and involvement in faith formation come positive results of religious education of children not only in the family itself but also at school and in parish. Religion teachers need to fulfill their duty to support and help parents. Thus comes to light one of the particular forms of support. This form of support can be described – according to Polish catechists – as pastoral support (Bednarczyk 2012; Osewska 2003; Zellma 2012), which empowers parents to fulfill faith formation needs. Practically, it can have a direct character – i.e. as personal, individual sharing or talk as well as notes send via e-mail or through commonly shared teacher’s diary or on-line class register, or indirect – i.e. when a teacher asks a child to have his or her parents to get involved in homework or in liturgical celebration. The authors of this core curriculum recommend that such forms should be used especially when students are getting ready to participate and receive sacraments of Christian initiation (Polish Bishops Conference, 2018, 48–49, 92–93).

In kindergarten, interaction between parents and teachers is limited (ibidem, 25–26). Authors of the analyzed document do not present any particular forms of cooperation on this level of faith formation. Only in grades I–IV of primary school do they clearly describe tasks for catechists in the scope of systematic cooperation with parents, siblings, grandparents, godparents and other members of the family (ibidem, 48–49). As such, they widen the area of influence on the whole family. This is very important, especially when parents are not committed to life in faith and are not involved in religious practices, because more and more other family members step in to help prepare children for the sacraments of Reconciliation and Holy Eucharist. Authors of this new core curriculum correctly emphasize that “... forms of this cooperation should depend on local traditions and new school’s circumstances” (ibidem, 48). They propose teachers to use novel ways of communication with parents, such as dialog, organization of workshops, as well as other new forms of evangelization (ibidem). Cooperation between parents and teachers should not be limited to organization of the event and celebration of the First Holy Communion (ibidem, 49); to the contrary – it should also emphasize the education and evangelization of parents. Systematic meetings with parents of children in grades I–IV of primary school should serve as means to educate them and deepen their faith, while renewing their relationship with God and with the Church (ibidem). As noted in the core curriculum, the primary place for such actions is the parish. Meetings at schools should be arranged only after consulting with the principal (ibidem) and smaller

groups may gather at the homes of pupils. However, neither sessions at school nor at home can replace proper formation meeting held at parish (*ibidem*). These should be organized in agreement with the local parish priest as he is responsible for catechetical work in the parish (*ibidem*).

Slightly different propositions for grades V–VIII of primary school can be found in the core curriculum. Authors recommend careful planning and execution of both sequential and periodic meetings (*ibidem*, 92–93). “The goal of those meetings ... should be to help parents in fulfilling their mission of being the initial teachers of religion for their children by deepening their own personal relationship with God” (*ibidem*, 92). An appropriate opportunity for such a meeting is the need to prepare young people for the sacrament of Confirmation (*ibidem*).

Many of the aforementioned propositions are not included in the religious core curriculum for high schools. As mentioned in the analyzed document, this is because youth are more independent at this age and contact between a religion teacher and parents occurs mainly through school’s activities (*ibidem*, 136). It is further limited by the fact that students of both high and technical schools belong to different parishes. Additionally, the on-line class register, according to authors of the catechetical documents, highly diminishes personal interaction between teachers and parents (*ibidem*).

With respect to children with disabilities, many proposals for cooperation between parents and teachers focus on education assistance and managing difficulties, but in reality, rarely occur (*ibidem*, 161–162). Building a climate of trust is recommended to conduct a discussion, to undertake evangelistic actions, and to help parents find proper resources such as Jean Vanier’s “Faith and Light” (*ibidem*).

3. The assessment and proposals

All of the described proposals in the new religious core curriculum can be characterized as general, even brief. They don’t exhaust all of the problems combined with the topic as well as its possibilities. As a result, neither the list of possibilities nor the potential problems are comprehensive. They concentrate mainly on preparations for the sacraments of Christian initiation, and stress education in faith for children and youth. A religion teacher should in particular support parents in this task. Additionally, one can see deep care for education and instruction that can’t be missed in the cooperation between religion teachers and parents. Education of parents is, however, treated as a secondary goal.

It seems that it comes from the nature of *The religious education core curriculum of the Catholic Church in Poland* but it does not answer the social needs and pastoral challenges. Currently, parents need help in the process of upbringing their children. It is confirmed by attendance on such workshops like “School for parents” or by different courses and workshops focused on education (including trainings in ways to protect and prevent different unwanted and dangerous situations i.e. interactions with strangers). These ways of acquiring knowledge, although not directly connected with religious instruction, can become a starting point for a dialog with parents and for their evangelization. It is hard to encourage parents to take part in formation when there is lack of trust, no dialogue and cooperation on human level. Undoubtedly, supporting parents in their parenting creates a space for further evangelistic and formative actions. It would be worthy, then, to undertake proper actions in this area. Only then can one try to evangelize and catechize parents at the same time.

It is worth mentioning here that propositions in the new *Religious education core curriculum of the Catholic Church in Poland* signify a traditional approach to this problem of cooperation between religion teacher and parents. The proposals are an attempt to complementary view this problem but seem to be quite unrealistic. It seems they do not fit to present social conditions. One can come up with such conclusions i.e. when authors negate on-line class registers as a way of communication with parents. It may be very difficult to fulfill the idea of systematic formative meetings for parents in the scope of present pastoral situation in the parishes and at schools. It is well established (through observation, news, talks with parish priests, religion teachers and directors of Catechetical Departments) that parents are not interested in attending such formative meetings. Parents limit their involvement in their children’s life of faith to bare minimum. Hardly any parents are actively engaged in preparations of celebrations of sacraments of Christian initiation. Having children in Catholic schools or being personally engaged in ecclesial movements or communities gets the parents to be truly involved in faith formations of their children. Unfortunately, they seem to be a minority. Especially in these situations, contact with parents through on-line class register is quite crucial. One cannot diminish its value and importance. This on-line form of contact with parents currently is the main way (in some cases – the only way) for the teacher to systematically communicate with parents (also true for the religion teachers). Thus, it cannot be omitted but used for the cooperation and educational dialog .

Forms of cooperation of a religion teacher and parents are still evolving because social, cultural and religious factors are changing. The mentality of today parents, their approach to education, teachers, religion lessons and reli-

gion teachers is changing. This is why it is important to search for new ideas to boost cooperation, bearing in mind that only some of the parents will respond positively to invitation to dialog and collaboration for the good of children and youth. To achieve this one needs to decide to use new diverse technologies (like the Internet or different social groups and web-sites).

As it was mentioned before, propositions in this new core curriculum do not exhaust and explain all related problems. They try to describe a particular area of teacher's operations. However, they show certain directions of collaboration (i.e. goals and content) and thus, the need for development and adjustment to concrete needs of a diocese and parishes. To make this possible there should be a proper pastoral assessment through variety of empirical experiments on everyday cooperation of religious teachers and parents. The results will allow to evaluate whether and to what extent it is true that religion teachers face many different troubles with communication with parents of their students. At the same time this can provide valuable advice on what to do to encourage parents to cooperate with religion teachers of their children. It seems that such assessment is a burning pastoral need of the Church in Poland. The 30th anniversary, that will be observed in 2020, of religion being taught at school also speaks to the need. The anniversary itself should not hinder catechetical and pastoral endeavors in the Polish Church. On the contrary, it should urge everyone to ponder and reflect on new ways of reaching out to parents to communicate and cooperate, having in mind the desire to raise children in Christian values.

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