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*Man cannot simply consider himself to be an absurd being.  
Thus, the search for meaning is his life condition.*  
Joseph Ratzinger

## **Meaning in Life among Young People in Poland. A Sociological and Theological Perspective**

Cardinal J. Ratzinger noticed that

there is no doubt that we live in a historical situation in which the temptation to do without God has become very great. Our culture of technology and welfare rests on the belief that basically we can do anything. Naturally, if we think like that, then life is restricted to what we can make and manufacture and demonstrate. The question about God leaves the stage<sup>1</sup>.

The above thought shows that the consumerist lifestyle, practical materialism and prosperity that humanity strives for have brought about man's reification and the disappearance of moral principles. The lack of respect for life from the moment of birth to natural death and the weakening of brotherly bonds, according to the cardinal, result in a crisis of the sense of meaning in life. As we know, Christianity has taught us that radical love is the force that shapes true humanity. Meanwhile, the belief is growing that man himself is the source of progress, where objective values and the transcendent meaning of life are only illusions. We find ourselves in a reality that pulsates with rapid changes, living in an era waiting for a breakthrough. Our times are marked by the crisis of the old order based on Judeo-Christian values, Greek philosophy and Roman law.

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<sup>1</sup> *Bóg i świat – wiara i życie w dzisiejszych czasach. Z kardynałem Josephem Ratzingerem rozmawia Peter Seewald*, trans. G. Sowiński, Kraków 2001, p. 23.



This situation is deepened by lightning-speed developments in the area of cyberspace. The harbinger of these times was already noticed in the 1960s. American anthropologist Margaret Mead wrote at that time about the future as a space in which technologies and rapid changes will cause the cultural transmission to reverse its order: young people will become pioneers in areas in which they previously sought guidance from their elders. This is now manifested not only in the sphere of operating electronic devices, but also seen in fundamental issues, such as the values system that has been passed down from generation to generation over the centuries<sup>2</sup>. In short, these phenomena and the world's increasing secularization have led to rejecting God and people closed to immanence.

A particular symptom of the above-described crisis in feeling and finding sense in life and values, particularly among young people, is the high level of suicides. Police statistics inform about many such attempts, which, unfortunately, often ended in death. In the last seven years, there were as many as 820 deaths in the 13-18 age group<sup>3</sup>. The reasons for taking one's life vary, but the increased risk among this suicide group includes young adults and teenagers with a developmental crisis, a crisis in interpersonal relationships characterized by internal loneliness or questions about the very meaning of life<sup>4</sup>. V.E. Frankl<sup>5</sup>, considered the most outstanding psychiatrist, who combined philosophy and psychology, emphasized the problem of meaning and values in his considerations. Frankl noticed that there were reasons for man's reluctance to live in the so-called existential void. Its main manifestation is boredom, followed by despair, accompanied by replacing the *will to meaning* with the *will to power* or the *will to pleasure*<sup>6</sup>.

In the background of this problem of suicide is the situation of the current moral chaos in which the boundaries between what is good and what is evil are

<sup>2</sup> *Wartości chrześcijańskie a europejskie. Chrześcijaństwo kształtujące tożsamość Europy*, ed. P. Walewski, Pelplin 2022, p. 18.

<sup>3</sup> <https://statystyka.policja.pl/st/wybrane-statystyki/zamachy-samobojcze/63803,Zamachy-samobojcze-od-2017-roku.html> (accessed: 10 March 2024). In Poland, 115 suicides were recorded in 2017, 92 in 2018, 94 in 2019, 106 in 2020, 125 in 2021, 150 in 2022, and 138 in 2023.

<sup>4</sup> M. Makara-Studzińska, *Przyczyny prób samobójczych u młodzieży w wieku 14-18 lat*, "Psychiatra" 10(2013), no. 2, p. 76-77. "Suicidal behavior is influenced by many factors that interact with each other (...). Numerous studies in this area prove that the family environment plays the greatest role in the genesis of suicidal behavior in children and adolescents (...). Cekiera's research (1975) shows that the lack of a sense of security is the most important motive for suicide (...). Obuchowska draws attention to environmental influences that are particularly important during development. The older a child is, the more he observes his environment, and is sometimes a witness, at other times also an object of various cultural and civilizational denaturalizations, which, penetrating the psyche, build beliefs that constitute the "wicked world syndrome" (trans. J. Kobylecki). Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> V.E. Frankl (1905-1997) – the creator of logotherapy, the psychotherapy method based on "healing through meaning". Cf. A. Chojniak, *Człowiek i sens. Frankla koncepcja autotranscendencji*, Poznań 2003, p. 17-29.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. V.E. Frankl, *Człowiek w poszukiwaniu sensu*, Warszawa 2009, p. 160-163.

now blurring. This is accompanied by a rapid disappearance of traditions that have so far defined the nature of human behavior, the negation of spiritual reality and spiritual impotence causing a departure from values and creating a crisis of meaning in life<sup>7</sup>. It is sad to note that Christianity as a value, its unique perspective of dialogue with the personal Triune God and sharing life with others in a mysterious communication<sup>8</sup> are disappearing from young people's views and thoughts, and now they are in a difficult existential situation.

The following report presents the results of research concerning the feeling of meaning in life among teenagers. The literature on the subject already mentions this topic: Fr. J. Mariański's<sup>9</sup> work speaks of this and concerns the general feeling of meaning among young Poles and numerous texts devoted to the religiosity of school youth<sup>10</sup>. Fr. Jędrzej Machalski proposes an interesting approach to this issue. He examined the relationship between religiosity and the feeling of meaning in life among secondary school youth in the context of the concepts by V. Frankl and D. Hutsebaut<sup>11</sup>. It is presented here, based on research conducted in the last quarter of 2023 on 200 students aged 15-18 declaring to be Catholics. The aim was to show the understanding of the purpose and meaning of life of Polish youth in the context of contemporary realities, which often reduce or eliminate the religious element from the perspective of public life. The survey was conducted in November 2023 on two groups of young people aged 15-16 (grades 1-2) and 17-18 (grades 3-4). The collected empirical material was analyzed, conclusions were drawn, and the results were prepared in Excel and presented on charts. For the author, a religion teacher, it was an important way to evaluate work with students.

The article aims to diagnose the sense of meaning in life among young people. The conclusions from this study are helpful in education, namely, catechists, giving them an incentive to build a catechetical foundation on the mean-

<sup>7</sup> K. Michalski, *Antropologiczne podstawy logoterapii Viktora E. Frankla*, "Studia Philosophiae Christiana" 59(2023), no. 2, p. 28.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. *Między sensem a bezsensem ludzkiej egzystencji. Teologiczna odpowiedź na fundamentalne pytania współczesnego człowieka*, in: *Materiały VIII Kongresu Teologów Polskich, Uniwersytet im. Adama Mickiewicza, Wydział teologiczny, Poznań, 13-16 września 2010*, ed. D. Bryl et al., Poznań 2012, p. 205.

<sup>9</sup> J. Mariański, *Sens życia w świadomości młodzieży polskiej – analiza socjopedagogiczna*, "Chowanna" 56(2021), no. 1.

<sup>10</sup> "Research on youth is always a barometer that foreshadows changes in the future. It is worth noting that the period of adolescence is characterised by a sceptical or even critical attitude towards the existing world, arranged by adults (...). However, youthful rebellion does not always mean a complete rejection of the values of previous generations in the future. They are often internalised in different ways and passed on in identical or altered forms to the next generation in a relay of generations". T. Adamczyk, *Changes in the Religiosity of Secondary School Youth in Poland. A Sociological Analysis. Przemiany religijności młodzieży maturalnej w Polsce. Analiza socjologiczna*, "Zeszyty Naukowe KUL" 66(2023), no. 3(263), p. 7.

<sup>11</sup> J. Machalski, *Korelacje między religijnością a poczuciem sensu życia młodzieży szkół ponadgimnazjalnych w Poznaniu w świetle koncepcji Viktora E. Frankla i Dirka Hutsebauta*, "Humaniora. Czasopismo Internetowe" 27(2019), no. 3, p. 61-77.

ing of life, or in pastoral care – in both cases addressing the cognitive and practical dimensions. For the author, a religion teacher, the analysis also became an important form of evaluating work with students, as it provided valuable tips on what to pay attention to when conveying the content. The research results were already presented during a conference organized at the John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin by the Section of Fundamental Theology entitled “Towards an Argument for Great Meaning (in life and the world)”<sup>12</sup> (this article is an extended version of the paper presented at that time).

### 1. Showing Meaning in Life is the Task of Fundamental Theology

The issue of meaning in life is mainly a subject of interest in philosophy, philosophical anthropology, axiology, ethics and theology, yet it is also present in psychology. This interdisciplinary study poses certain research difficulties, if only because in the context of the latter science, spirituality is a purely theoretical construct that cannot be directly measured<sup>13</sup>. However, the author will attempt to define the concept of the meaning of life, although, as J. Mariański notes, it is a difficult term to define<sup>14</sup>.

In other words, meaning is values, significance, the reason for one’s existence and the purpose of life. It is a person’s conscious, purposeful action for implementing values that they generally accept or recognize. To deny the meaning of human existence is to deny the meaningfulness of being and the world<sup>15</sup>. Contemporary psychologist I. Heszen-Niejodek, using theological terminology, considers meaning to be transcendence, a kind of “upward movement” whose direction is determined by a person’s immaterial values. Transcendence is based on self-fulfillment, self-improvement and personal development. In a broader context, it will be directed towards values or a Higher Being<sup>16</sup>. When defining meaning, J. Mariański takes into account a person’s entire life.

Meaning understood holistically (globally), as a balancing and approving decision taking into account one’s entire life, is something more than the simple sum of individual (partial) meanings. It is an act of man’s hope and faith in life framed within the overall horizon of existential experience, reflecting on one’s “I” and searching for one’s identity<sup>17</sup>. In turn, V. Frankl stresses that searching for meaning comprises man’s essential life motivation, and the will to achieve it will comprise the basis for one’s ideals and values<sup>18</sup>.

<sup>12</sup> The conference was held on the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the announcement of the encyclical “Fides et ratio” by John Paul II as part of the 11<sup>th</sup> edition of the “Marian Rusecki Memorial Lectures” (December 12, 2023).

<sup>13</sup> Cf. P. Kozera-Mikuła, *Sens życia – analiza pojęcia w świetle nauk humanistycznych*, “Psychologia rozwojowa” 25(2020), no. 2, p. 12.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> J. Mariański, *Sens życia w świadomości młodzieży polskiej...*, p. 2.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. V.E. Frankl, *Człowiek w poszukiwaniu sensu*, p. 151-153.

The task of making sense of human life is most fully realized through fundamental theology<sup>19</sup>. The present-day existential lack of finding meaning and value in one's existence can only be removed by Christ. By entering one's personal history, He can profoundly transform it and give it a completely new dimension. A fundamental theologian, with human experience as his starting point, will therefore give a satisfactory answer to man's real-life problems while showing the meaning of Christian values (H. Bouillard, G. Phillips, J.A. Walgrave, E. Schillebeeckx, A. Szenney)<sup>20</sup>. He will postulate the need to enter into a life-giving relationship with God and discover the value of God's Revelation.

This is necessary so that there will be no conflict between the Christian faith and a world that is increasingly indifferent to religious values (E. Schillebeeckx). Rationally identified meaning in life will entail appropriate norms of conduct and motivate a person to choose appropriate material and spiritual actions based on values. A "natural defense system" constructed in this way will protect an individual against misusing their freedom, help overcome objective causes that violate the meaning of life, and, consequently, eliminate the feeling of meaninglessness or pseudo-meaning. This will provide a person the opportunity to objectify the praxeological dimension of the meaning of life following the soteriological norm, shown in the saving mystery of Jesus Christ and written in the Eight Beatitudes (cf. Mt 5-7)<sup>21</sup>. Worth noting is J. Ratzinger's broad understanding of reality and man's unprecedented role in all of human history. R. Kraśnicki notes:

Ratzinger points out that, for a Christian, the meaning of the entire universe is revealed in the context of Jesus Christ. The Logos, the Word of God, becomes the key element in making sense of life, because all of reality strives towards Him. This understanding leads to the integration of time and history, where every moment finds its place on the path to Christ. The creative meaning of God, framed in the context of theology, becomes not only the beginning but also the ultimate goal of the universe, and man plays a central role in evolution and becoming the fullness of the Great Meaning<sup>22</sup>.

Man, the main protagonist in the world's historical arena, can find meaning in life in the community in which he lives, including the broadest one – humanity. Thus, finding meaning in life is not a theoretical idea created by scholars, but part of a person who discovers it more fully the more he understands his place in the existing reality. Furthermore, Ratzinger points out that human beings are in

<sup>19</sup> Cf. M. Rusecki, J. Mastej, K. Kaucha, *Metodologia teologii fundamentalnej*, Lublin 2019, p. 155-156.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 157.

<sup>21</sup> K. Klauza, *Sens życia*, in: *Leksykon teologii fundamentalnej*, ed. M. Rusecki, K. Kaucha, I.S. Ledwoń, Lublin-Kraków 2002, p. 1095.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. R. Kraśnicki, *Sens życia i sens wszechświata według Josepha Ratzingera i Steve'a Stewarta-Williamsa. Studium porównawcze*, "Studia Elckie" 26(2024), no. 1, p. 91.

the process of development, because one's goal is to become a so-called eschatological person. The human person, therefore, strives for fullness in eternity, which is revealed as a community of life and love in God<sup>23</sup>.

## 2. Research Results

The study took place in November of 2023 on two groups of young people aged 15-16 (grades 1-2) and 17-18 years old (grades 3-4) based on a survey questionnaire written by Fr. Prof. Janusz Mariański entitled "Youth and the meaning of life" (1998)<sup>24</sup>. This questionnaire was chosen because it used independent variables (gender) and dependent variables (attitudes) that were appropriate for the research. The material was collected using the diagnostic survey method and the distributed survey technique. Respondents were asked to answer 21 questions. As a result, the level of their interest on issues about meaning (9 questions), values (4), goals (4), and faith (2) was revealed. The author of the study also collected additional information, asking for clarification on the following: 1. "To what extent does modern society develop a sense of meaning in life?" and 2. "How do young people perceive the issue of the objective existence of meaning in reality?" The survey questionnaire also included personal details (gender, age, place of residence, membership in religious communities). The collected empirical material was analyzed for percentage distributions without calculating correlation coefficients, then conclusions were drawn and the results were prepared (in Excel), which were presented in the form of charts.

### 2.1. Faith and Finding Meaning in Life

A key element for understanding meaning and sense in life is the role of faith in God. To grasp the level of religiousness, we used an indicator based on religious self-declarations.

Analyzing the data, it turns out that 74.6% of all respondents declared faith in God. These results are optimistic, especially in the context of nationwide CBOS surveys conducted in 1988-2021, which record a gradual decline in declarations of religious faith among school youth. The CBOS data show that a total of 54% of respondents are deeply religious or believers<sup>25</sup>. When considering these results, it is important to understand a young person's developmental phase. This is a period of forming one's worldview and identity, where religious interests may take a backseat and where individual beliefs are still being defined and one's future is being formed (see Table 1).

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 92.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. J. Mariański, *Socjologia religii i socjologia moralności. Kwestionariusze ankiet i wywiadów*, Lublin 2020, p. 67-76.

<sup>25</sup> R. Boguszewski, *Religijność młodzieży*, in: *Młodzież 2021. Opinie i Diagnozy nr 49*, ed. M. Grabowska, M. Gwiazda, CBOS, 2022, p. 126.

**Table 1. “Do you believe in God?”** (data in %)

Response	Demographics				Total
	Girls	Boys	Grades 1-2	Grades 3-4	
I really believe	22.1	38.4	27.4	28.3	28.0
I have doubts	48.9	42.5	47.6	45.8	46.6
I believe in a Higher Power	7.6	6.8	8.3	6.7	7.4
I do not believe in God nor in a Higher Power	5.3	4.1	2.4	6.7	5.0
Hard to say	13.8	8.2	13.1	10.8	12.0
No reply	2.3	0.0	1.2	1.7	1.0
	100.00	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: own research.

The author’s research shows that faith is not the only element that gives young people meaning in life. As many as 55% of respondents indicated that they also find meaning in love, family, relationships with others, happiness, respect, acquiring knowledge, curiosity, success, belief in one’s abilities, discipline, motivation, achieving dreams, experiencing beautiful moments in life, well-being, justice, equality, passions, sports, personal development and health (see Table 2).

**Table 2. “Can you tell me if only faith gives your life meaning?”** (data in %)

Response	Demographics				Total
	Girls	Boys	Grades 1-2	Grades 3-4	
Only faith	5.3	5.5	2.4	7.5	5.3
Not only faith	56.5	52.1	66.7	46.7	55.0
Beyond faith	9.2	11.0	7.1	11.7	10.0
I can’t say	27.5	27.4	22.6	30.8	27.3
No response	1.5	4.0	1.2	3.3	2.4
	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: own research.

## 2.2. Diverse Religious Attitudes among Respondents

Among the respondents, 5.0% are people who do not consider themselves to be believers, although they participate in school catechesis. Why don’t they believe? Their reasons vary, which indicates that belief cannot be clearly attributed to the general trend of the secularization of youth environments. Let us quote a few statements:

- Young people are unappreciated and it often depresses them (girl, 17).

- Young people are looking for their own way, they do not see God as a helper and an oasis of peace. They prefer to deal with difficulties on their own because they have never seen adults show faith (girl, 17).
- Most young people my age doubt their abilities, are overwhelmed by being abandoned by someone close to them or by time passing quickly, and more is expected from us than we can give (girl, 17).

These words show that some young people experience difficulties related to social pressure, which may lead to disrupting or losing one’s sense of meaning in life. The loss of faith in a Higher Power or God in this case results from the belief that they do not expect support from adults. An unformed life orientation, doubts about one’s personal abilities and social expectations are factors influencing their lack of faith. Low self-esteem may lead to abandoning the search for spiritual support. The conclusion from these observations is that young people’s attitudes toward faith are not uniform and are shaped by many psychosocial factors.

**2.3. The Meaning of Life in the Opinion of Respondents**

Based on the data obtained, it can be seen that the topic of sense and meaning in life is not only interesting for the vast majority of respondents, but also important (76% of responses are “definitely yes” and “rather yes”). Proof of this is the fact that as many as 72.7% of all respondents emphasize the importance and need to deal with this issue (see Tables 3 and 4).

**Table 3. “Does the topic of meaning in life interest you?” (data in %)**

Response	Demographics				Total
	Girls	Boys	Grades 1-2	Grades 3-4	
Definitely yes	35.9	26.0	23.8	38.3	32.4
Rather yes	42.7	45.2	46.4	41.7	43.6
Rather no	10.7	11.0	11.9	10.0	10.8
Definitely no	2.3	4.1	4.8	1.7	2.9
Hard to say	8.4	13.7	13.1	8.3	10.3
	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.00	100.0

Source: own research.

**Table 4. “Is the issue of sense and meaning in life important and necessary for you?” (data in %)**

Response	Demographics				Total
	Girls	Boys	Grades 1-2	Grades 3-4	
Definitely yes	26.0	26.0	16.7	32.5	26.0
Rather yes	48.9	42.5	53.6	41.7	46.7
Rather no	7.6	15.0	13.0	8.3	10.3

Definitely no	1.5	5.5	2.4	3.3	3.0
Hard to say	16.0	11.0	14.3	14.2	14.0
	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: own research.

A key indicator of the analyzed changes in perceiving meaning in life is the frequency of reflections on this issue. The replies “definitely yes” and “rather yes” were given 72.1% of the time, because the young generation is interested in the issue of meaning in life, even more than adults, which is confirmed by the nationwide CBOS survey in 2017<sup>26</sup>. The reason for this may be the bond to deep faith experiences, which comprises the next part worth exploring in the context of scholarly analysis of the attitudes and beliefs of young people (see Table 5).

**Table 5. “Do young people often reflect on the sense and meaning of life?” (data in %)**

Response	Demographics				Total
	Girls	Boys	Grades 1-2	Grades 3-4	
Definitely yes	39.7	32.9	35.7	38.4	37.3
Rather yes	36.6	31.5	27.4	40.0	34.8
Rather no	13.0	12.3	20.2	7.5	12.7
Definitely no	3.1	6.8	6.0	3.3	4.4
Hard to say	7.6	16.5	10.7	10.8	10.8
	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: own research.

It is also extremely important to understand that a significant change in the perception of the meaning of life may occur as a result of various events and life situations. The elements mentioned that influence this transformation include moving, loss of loved ones, sudden accidents or illnesses, and even mental crises and depression. Factors related to confusion, life’s monotony, loneliness, lack of stability, failures and life chaos should also be taken into account. On the other hand, deeper reflection on the meaning of life can be initiated by faith in God, participation in religious practices, prayer or conversations with deeply religious people. Sports successes or experiences related to love also play an important role. Below are some more statements by young people that shed light on their reflection on the meaning of life:

- When making important decisions, the following question came up: What gives my life meaning? What do I want to do in life? (boy, 15-year-old).
- I began to think about finding meaning in life when I became aware that everyone is the main hero of his or her life (girl, 16).

<sup>26</sup> Cf. J. Mariański, *Socjologia religii i socjologia moralności...*, p. 10.

- I thought about what will happen after death every day (boy, 17).
- The stress and negative thoughts hitting me without a cause were the reasons I began to deeply think about my existence. Things began to make sense when I read the Bible (girl, 18).
- I became aware of how fleeting life is and how a person can influence the entire world (boy, 17).
- Think about what would happen if I were not present in this world (boy, 16).
- Under the influence of the book “The Plague” and philosophy, I began to wonder about the meaning of my life (boy, 18).
- The deaths of young people who did not achieve their goals made me start reflecting (girl, 18).
- It’s hard to say whether I wonder about the meaning of my life, but I like talking about it. Most often, I do it under the influence of my family and religious lessons (girl, 15).

These statements show that what is crucial in the lives of young people arises in decision-making moments. Awareness of life’s transience and understanding an individual’s influence on the entire reality leads to the conclusion that every person brings something unique to the world and suggests that young people wonder about what transcends mortality. Pointing out the influence of literature and philosophy on the search for meaning in life reveals that the young generation reaches for various sources of inspiration to find answers to fundamental questions. Confronting the loss of peers and thinking about their unrealized dreams also makes them reflect on their lifestyles and goals in life.

Combining everyday difficulties with spiritual practices, such as reading the Bible, is an interesting aspect and shows the variety of sources from which young people get their sense of meaning in life. For young people, conversation turns out to be a form of searching for sense and meaning in life, which emphasizes the social dimension of their reflections. This means they are influenced by the values passed on by their family and religion classes. It should be noted that people involved in the life of the Catholic Church demonstrate a higher awareness of the purposefulness of their existence. For youth, religious formation, contact with spirituality and being active in their church community are important sources of inspiration and deeper reflection on the meaning of life.

Further analysis in understanding how young people find meaning and purpose in their lives shows that this meaning in human awareness is related to the subjective image of one’s existence. This may include both positive and negative, internal and external, objective and subjective experiences. In modern societies, a multitude of meanings are related to different values, lifestyles and personal preferences; an individual applying them independently constructs their own sense of meaning in life. Examples of this can be seen in the following statements:

- It makes sense to search for meaning in the daily here and now (girl, 18).
- It means living according to one’s values and striving to live fully, aware that you did not waste your life (girl, 17).

- It means being a good person to yourself and others, living one's dreams, supporting close people to you, getting experiences (girl, 18).
- We ought to remember that we have one life. We must be happy with this gift and not worry about unimportant things (girl, 16).
- Do everything in freedom, learn from your mistakes, search for happiness and help others find it (boy, 15).

In describing their sense of meaning in life, some respondents pointed to its personal foundations, such as love, friendship, family happiness, faith, a peaceful and healthy life, personal development (both mental and spiritual), pursuing passions, starting a family, setting goals and making plans, being remembered, expressing oneself towards others, and financial success.

For some people, in searching for their place in the world, the meaning of life and values, it was important to refer to God. About 10% of respondents emphasized the importance of ultimate values as the foundation of their lives, which confirmed the important role of religion. This is shown by the following replies of the respondents: "Meaning in my life comes from faith in God and pursuing Jesus; achieving salvation; striving for holiness and living according to God's laws; fulfilling God's will; deserving eternal life; my mission from God; living for the love that God has given and seeking the goal that God has assigned to us; keeping your faith in today's world; living to gain a ticket to enter heaven; the awareness that God created us just for ourselves, that everyone is valuable and plays a role in this world".

#### 2.4. The Feeling of Meaning in Life and its Objectivity

The research also provided answers to questions about the individual sense of meaning in life and young people's perspective on its objectivity. Concerning the first issue, 65.7% of respondents confirmed that they found meaning. A small percentage of respondents, 8.3%, denied it, and 25.5% of young people could not define it, especially those who had just started secondary school. About 5% of the people believed that there is no general meaning in life and that one has to find it themselves (see Table 6).

**Table 6. "In your opinion, is there meaning in human life?" (data in %)**

Response	Demographics				Total
	Girls	Boys	Grades 1-2	Grades 3-4	
Yes	58.0	79.5	60.7	69.2	65.7
No	10.7	4.1	4.8	10.8	8.3
I don't know	30.5	16.4	34.5	19.2	25.5
No information	0.8	0.0	00.0	0.8	0.5
	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: own research.

When it comes to the objective existence of the meaning of life, the vast majority, 77% of respondents (over  $\frac{3}{4}$ ) agreed with it, 7.3% denied it (“rather no”, “definitely no”) and 15.7% had difficulties with giving an answer. These results suggest that it is worth taking actions aimed at developing young people’s deeper understanding of the realities in the universe surrounding us (see Table 7).

**Table 7. “Do you think there is meaning in life even if you don’t see it at the moment?” (data in %)**

Response	Demographics				Total
	Girls	Boys	Grades 1-2	Grades 3-4	
Definitely yes	42.0	41.2	50.0	35.8	41.7
Rather yes	38.9	28.8	29.8	39.2	35.3
Rather no	6.9	4.0	4.8	6.7	5.9
Definitely no	1.5	1.4	0.0	2.5	1.4
Hard to say	10.7	24.6	15.4	15.8	15.7
	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: own research.

However, it is not optimistic that as many as 79.2% of all respondents agreed that modern society is not interested in developing a sense of meaning in life in young people. Insufficient involvement in this type of introspection may result from using ready-made recipes for “how to live”. Young people also do this. As a result, many of them may neglect to personally answer important questions about the meaning of life. Hence, this is a key task for the academic community and spiritual institutions trying to respond to the spiritual needs of new generations. Therefore, analysis of the meaning of life becomes an area of socio-cultural research, influencing the shaping of attitudes and values in society (see Table 8).

**Table 8. “Do you think that modern society places enough emphasis on developing meaning in life in young people?” (data in %)**

Response	Demographics				Total
	Girls	Boys	Grades 1-2	Grades 3-4	
Definitely yes	4.6	2.7	6.0	2.5	4.0
Rather yes	18.3	12.3	16.7	15.8	16.3
Rather no	33.6	45.3	35.7	39.2	37.7
Definitely no	19.8	17.8	17.8	20.0	19.0
Hard to say	23.7	20.5	23.8	21.7	22.5

No information	-	1.4	-	0.8	0.5
	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: own research.

## Conclusions

The most important conclusion from the research is the evident correlation between the declaration of faith and the feeling of meaning in life. The greater the maturity in faith, the higher the intensity of the feeling of meaning in life, similar to the research carried out by Fr. J. Machalski<sup>27</sup>. This means that the majority of young people participating in school catechesis have a deeper view of reality, themselves and other people than a person with weak faith or a non-believer. This is important in the context of actual data concerning the situation of the Church in Poland. It reveals that the contemporary generation of youth does not identify with the Catholic faith, as already observed 20 years ago<sup>28</sup>, and it is assumed that this secularization trend will continue due to the increasingly greater intergenerational gap in attitudes towards the faith<sup>29</sup>.

In a world where the meaning of life is often taken over by various “local narratives” and modern individualism is prominent, some young people outline a hierarchy of values with the highest standards, in which Christ takes first place, and these youth seek holiness and the implementation of God’s plan in their lives. This is an important conclusion for fundamental theology, because in young people’s perspectives, their horizon of meaning shifts from immanence to transcendence<sup>30</sup>. Such questions as “Why do I live, what makes me happy, what goals do I want to achieve in life?” guide us beyond everyday existence. It is not man who becomes the center of the meaning of life, but man discovers meaning in the objective reality.

Unfortunately, almost 80% of respondents showed that modern society is not willing to help young people develop a sense of meaning in life. This is an important sign for the Institute of Fundamental Theologians at the Catholic University of Lublin, because they want to undertake initiatives that will attempt to remedy this situation.

The research presented in this article also showed that a certain group of young people has difficulty defining the sense of meaning in life (25.5%), and another group denies that meaning exists at all (8.3%). When it comes to the objectivity of the existence of meaning in life and the world 7,3% of respond-

<sup>27</sup> Cf. J. Machalski, *Korelacje...*, p. 76.

<sup>28</sup> *Kościół w Polsce...*, p. 6.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. J. Mariański, H. Słotwińska, P. Mąkosa et al., *Religiosity and Secularisation of Polish Youth in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Quantitative Research Analysis*, “Rocznik Teologii Katolickiej” 22(2023), p. 200.

<sup>30</sup> In the context of finding meaning in life, it is worth deepening one’s understanding of what truth is. Cf. K. Kaucha, *Cóż to jest prawda? Argumentacja z prawdy za najwyższą wiarygodnością chrześcijaństwa na kanwie twórczości J. Ratzingera*, Lublin 2020.

ents denied it, while 15.7% had difficulty answering the question. A fundamental theologian, by introducing young people to the importance of the argument about the Great Meaning of life and the world, would help them see God revealing himself in empirical reality and human history<sup>31</sup>. Young people expect openness from priests who are to talk about their searching and problems, which was confirmed by recent research on the situation of the Church in Poland<sup>32</sup>.

Recent sociological analyses are also disturbing, showing that, according to respondents, love can also be realized in informal relationships. This shows that young people diminish the value of the family institution in favor of love in some other, freely understood way<sup>33</sup>. Here it should be noted that the Catholic Church plays an important role, since it influences individuals by presenting spiritual and moral values based on respect for the human person and one's transcendental dimension. It points to the central meaning of the family, shaping a selfless attitude of sacrifice and love towards one's neighbor, especially those most in need and suffering.

Hence, the task of fundamental theology will be to remind young people about Revelation, which justifies the meaning of God's act of creating the world, including man's life and his vocation to marriage and family<sup>34</sup>.

It is worth noting that, in this context, the Church plays an important role because it influences the individual by showing spiritual and moral values based on respect for human dignity and the transcendental aspect of all humanity. Moreover, it emphasizes the family's central importance, shaping an attitude of selfless sacrifice and love towards one's neighbor, especially towards those most in need and suffering. It is incomprehensible why contemporary culture rejects God, Christ and His Church, an institution that promotes objectively good values focusing on man and shaping his community and individual identity.

According to the teachings of St. John Paul II, the Church has a saving mission, undertaking spiritual care for the younger generation and preaching the saving message of the Paschal events of Jesus Christ, which gives young people meaning in life<sup>35</sup>. There is also a question as to why young people who are already experiencing suffering (depression, existential emptiness, loss, lack of support, loss of loved ones, addictions) cut themselves off from Christian values. After all, this rejection of faith results in harming themselves and society. It is also surprising that so few young people (3.9%) care about the good of their homeland. However, this issue requires a separate analysis.

<sup>31</sup> The topic of the meeting of theology and history in the signs of the times can be found in the article by F. Krauze, *Theology and History: an outline of methodological challenges in fundamental theology*, "Roczniki Teologiczne" 70(2023), no. 4.

<sup>32</sup> T. Adamczyk, *Młdzież*, in: *Kościół w Polsce 2023. Raport*, ed. J. Operacz, Warszawa 2023, p. 43.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. M. Rusecki, *Traktat o Objawieniu*, Kraków 2007, p. 97.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. K. Kaucha, *Sensotwórczy argument w świetle nauczania Jana Pawła II*, in: *Między sensem a bezsensem...*, p. 458-459.

This study is very valuable because it shows the meaning and purpose of life from the perspective of young believers. Although these people are currently in the minority, they fit into the diverse religious landscape in Poland. Importantly, a revival in religious life has recently been observed, which is not noticed by CBOS research. Research by the Institute of Statistics of the Catholic Church (SAC)<sup>36</sup> shows that in 2022 (compared to the previous year) the number of *dominicanos* – Sunday mass attendants – increased by 1.2% and *communicantes* – those receiving holy communion – by 1%<sup>37</sup>.

According to V. Frankl, man is the only creature who strives to live a meaningful life. Only in this way can he realize his goal in life<sup>38</sup>. If spiritual impotence weakens one's pursuit of meaning in life and makes a person exceptionally susceptible to what is devoid of value, thus leading to a crisis of meaning, then there is room for implementing the agapetological task based on fundamental theology – showing God's Revelation as a category of saving love. In this way, order can be restored in the unbalanced hierarchy of values<sup>39</sup>. Awareness of God's love will be important here, because it gives significance to human life (J. Ratzinger)<sup>40</sup>. Therefore, it is necessary for fundamental theology to help young people define themselves in relation to God, other people, society and the world. This will introduce a religious aspect into their lives and open them up to God, His Revelation and Christ, who specifically intervenes in a person's life and transforms it, giving them a new dimension of existence<sup>41</sup>.

\* \* \*

### Summary

The article focuses on analyzing how Polish youth understand the purpose and meaning of life, taking into account the contemporary tendency to marginalize or eliminate the aspect of religion from the public sphere. The growing belief that man is the main source of progress, and that objective values and transcendent meaning are merely illusions, provides an important context for research on one's perception of meaning in life. The research, conducted in the last quarter of 2023, employed a diagnostic survey method using the questionnaire technique. The study found justification in the field of fundamental theol-

<sup>36</sup> <https://www.ekai.pl/w-parafiach-w-calej-polsce-odbylo-sie-liczenie-wiarnych/> (accessed: 12 March 2024).

<sup>37</sup> [https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dominicanos\\_i\\_communicantes\\_w\\_Polsce](https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dominicanos_i_communicantes_w_Polsce) (accessed: 14 March 2024).

<sup>38</sup> Cf. K. Michalski, *Antropologiczne podstawy...*, p. 56.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. M. Rusecki, J. Mastej, K. Kaucha, *Metodologia...*, p. 173.

<sup>40</sup> *Bóg i świat...*, p. 22.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. M. Rusecki, *Traktat o Objawieniu*, p. 604. Fr. J. Mastej, Ph.D., professor at the Catholic University of Lublin, inspired by the works of J. Ratzinger, developed a monograph entitled *Jesus Is Meaning*, concerning the fundamental Christology of meaning. Its release is planned for April 2024.

ogy, whose task is to show meaning in life to contemporary man. The uniqueness of the study lies in conducting a sociological and theological analysis among young people with faith, allowing for a better understanding of how religious aspects influence their perception of the meaning of life.

**Keywords:** fundamental theology, survey, purpose in life, meaning in life.

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