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Małgorzata Łobacz*

Disability as a Challenge: Examples of the Biographies of Rose Czacka (Mother Elizabeth) and Professor Wojciech Chudy

Niepełnosprawność jako wyzwanie – na przykładzie biografii matki Elżbiety Czackiej i prof. Wojciecha Chudego

Abstract: Disability is most often associated with suffering, rejection and solitude. Indeed, people affected by physical deficiencies are often marginalised as they do not keep up with what is fashionable, do not fit into the standards of life and the canons of beauty. However, despite prevailing opinions, many have proved through their lives and personal dignity that they are not worse than those considered to be physically fit. In this article, I refer to the biographies of two people with disabilities: Wojciech Chudy and Mother Elizabeth – Rose Czacka. Using the examples of their lives, I describe how the fragile existence of man can become an inspiration for action, a role model and a source of reflection on our own life.

Keywords: disability, suffering, challenge, dignity, personal role model

* Małgorzata Łobacz (ORCID: 0000-0002-1476-8278) – PhD, assistant professor at the Institute of Pedagogy of the John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin (KUL), employed by the Department of Christian Pedagogy and Pedagogical Biography, contact: gkolomanska@wp.pl.

Streszczenie: Rzeczywiście, osoby dotknięte brakami w sferze fizycznej często są marginalizowane, nie nadążają bowiem za tym, co modne, nie wpisują się w obowiązujące standardy sprytu życiowego czy kanonów piękna. Jednak – na przekór powszechnie panującym opiniom – wiele z nich udowodniło i wciąż udowadnia swoim życiem, że w swojej osobowej godności w żaden sposób nie ustępują tym, którzy uchodzą za sprawnych. W przedstawionym artykule odwołałam się do dwóch biografii osób z niepełnosprawnością: Wojciecha Chudego oraz Matki Elżbiety Róży Czackiej. Na przykładzie ich życia pokazałam, w jaki sposób krucha egzystencja człowieka, może stać się inspiracją działania, wzorem do naśladowania, a także źródłem refleksji nad własnym życiem.

Słowa kluczowe: niepełnosprawność, cierpienie, wyzwanie, godność, wzór osobowy.

Introduction

In contemporary times, dominated by the specific cult of happiness and the related ease and comfort, people rarely notice the meaning of the experience of hardships in life. Meanwhile, people with disabilities, far from the relative values promoted today, may make today's society more human. They choose simple but at the same time the highest, autotelic values. Meeting a person experiencing an ailment is an important experience. It makes us realise the existential fragility of every human being and also shows the person's heroic struggle to confirm their humanity, which embarrasses many of us. Thanks to this, we appreciate what we have and begin to realise how many possibilities and talents we do not develop.

The aim of this article is to present disability as a specific challenge for those who experience it directly. I refer to the biographies of Mother Elizabeth (Rose Czacka) and Professor Wojciech Chudy to show how higher goals and a certain 'super meaning' of our existence can be found in illness and suffering.

The problem of disability in the twenty-first century

When addressing the issue of disability, it is first necessary to focus on the term 'disability' itself. In the literature on the subject, there are many proposals for its definition. In my analyses, I present a few examples that are also an intro-

duction to philosophical reflection on the problem of disability in the contemporary world.

In the analysis of the Committee for Rehabilitation and Re-adaptation of the Polish Academy of Sciences, people with disabilities are considered to be 'people with impaired psychophysical fitness, causing functional limitation of fitness or life activity to a degree that makes it difficult to fulfil their social roles. Disability refers to some element or arrangement of elements, not to the totality of an individual's properties.'¹ Theoreticians and practitioners of upbringing have adopted the term 'persons with disabilities', which is used simultaneously with the terms 'deviating from the development norm' or 'a person with a deviation from the development norm'.

According to the definition developed by the World Health Organization (WHO), disability is perceived as 'a multidimensional phenomenon resulting from the interaction between people and their physical and social environment'.² WHO uses three terms to describe a condition caused by a deviation from the normal level of human functioning:

1. impairment – indicates a loss or anomaly in the functioning of the physiological or anatomical structures of the human body;
2. disability – a condition resulting from the current damage, manifesting itself in a physical limitation or making it impossible to act and engage in activity typical of non-disabled persons;
3. handicap – an unfavourable condition in relation to other members of a given society, circumstances resulting from a defect or disability based on impeding or preventing a person with a disability from taking on roles assumed by a given society as normal for persons of their gender and age.³

Aleksander Hulek presents a similar position on disability in the approach of the Committee for Human Rehabilitation and Re-adaptation of the Polish Academy of Sciences. He defines a person with a disability as one who, due

- 1 A. Maciarz, *Uczniowie niepełnosprawni w szkole powszechnej*, Warszawa 1992, p. 6.
- 2 *International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health*, WHO, World Health Report, Geneva 2007, p. 255.
- 3 G. Dryżałowska, *Niepełnosprawność*, in: *Encyklopedia XXI w.*, (ed.) E. Różycka, Vol. 3, Warszawa 2004, p. 647.

to limitations in motor, sensory, somatic or mental aspects, has considerable difficulties in performing the tasks posed by everyday life, school, professional duties and leisure time.

A similar position in this respect is included in the American concept, the explanation of which is contained in the Americans with Disabilities Act established in 1990. A disabled individual is a person who meets at least one of the following criteria:

- is distinguished by physical or mental dysfunctions, illnesses or disabilities that limit their basic life activities;
- has a documented record about the presence of the above-mentioned limitations in the past or at present;
- is perceived by the environment as a person with the above-mentioned features.⁴

The above definitions reveal the difficult reality with which people with disabilities struggle in their lives. Disability itself is evil, just like the lack of anything else in a person's life (food, housing, work, and so on). Here we deal with a lack of fitness, a lack of specific abilities (seeing, hearing, walking, and so on), a lack of parts of the body (arms, legs) or intellectual limitations. In modern reality, such limitations are pointed out more and more often, and people who experience them are described as unproductive, a burden on the state budget or as being unnecessary, because they cause bad associations, pessimism and unnecessary sadness. This is because today's world judges contacts with others based on self-interest and self-benefit, propagating an egocentric vision of life in which too often there is no place for the weak and 'badly born'.

According to Robert Spaemann, people are the same because they are 'always unique and incomparable in their dignity'.⁵ So why are some people treated as a 'worse' and others as a 'better' part of society? It is contrary to human dignity to force people with disabilities out of social life, to treat them as an inferior part of society, to isolate them and to attempt any attacks

4 K. Błęzyńska, *Niepełnosprawność a struktura identyfikacji społecznych*, Warszawa 2001.

5 R. Spaemann, *Osoby. O różnicy między czymś a kimś*, (trans.) J. Merecki, Warszawa 2001, p. 226.

on their lives, even before birth, as this constitutes a real violation of their rights. A human rights-based approach must emphasise that it is the primary responsibility of every state to create a legal and political system conducive to the development of all people.

The first and fundamental dimension of man, which is the dimension of being a person, is determined by the ability of rational and reflective devotion to the highest values, primarily to love, understood as a selfless gift from oneself. The aforementioned personal dignity is the fundamental value indicated by the philosophical description. It is given to all people, regardless of the level of consciousness and health, and regardless of merit, villainy and external appearance. Dignity is related to the very nature of man, it is our inner and innate hallmark, independent of the social and historical context. A sense of dignity entails a whole set of requirements. Moreover, it obliges us to respect other people.⁶

The fact of being a human person shows the natural greatness of man, their superior position in relation to the environment and what is encountered in the world. To recognise the dignity of the human person is therefore to put them above all that comes from them. All human works and products are only the means that man uses to pursue a specific goal.⁷

Love is the highest criterion of dignity, which prevents the instrumental treatment of a human being. The world of persons, in all its scope, is for a person – the subject of moral action – ‘a field of responsible love’.⁸ Hence, it follows that ‘[i]n virtue of a personal dignity the human being is always a value as an individual, and as such demands being considered and treated as a person and never, on the contrary, considered and treated as an object to be used, or as a means, or as a thing’.⁹ Dignity is violated when we are objectified and not treated as rational and free subjects of our own actions.

6 Cf. S. Chrobak, *Koncepcja wychowania personalistycznego w nauczaniu Karola Wojtyły – Jana Pawła II*, Warszawa 1999, p. 46.

7 K. Wojtyła, *Osoba i czyn i czyn oraz inne studia antropologiczne*, Lublin 1994, p. 418.

8 A. Szostek, *Pogadanki z etyki*, Lublin 1996, p. 22.

9 John Paul II, *Christifideles laici*, http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_30121988_christifideles-laici.html (accessed: 9 September 2020) (online version; no pagination).

Why, then, should we affirm every person, and in a special way the one who is rejected for the so-called bad birth, for being burdened with illness and disability, and finally for not being able to 'fit in' into society? Because of their personal dignity – the innate value of the person. If a person disregards another person, particularly one who needs help, it means that they do not see the person. 'Not that they do not know some theory of man. It is not about theory, it is about recognising that the person is incomparable to anything but them, and also that they are, every one of them, incomparable to everyone else as well!'¹⁰

When we talk about the pricelessness of human life, we most often mean its immeasurability. It has no price. By losing our lives, we basically lose all other possibilities. There is no 'substitute' for human life, which we discover in a special way when we lose our loved ones. The value of life relates to the personal dimension: human persons are always unique and exceptional and there will never be two identical persons. Man is irreplaceable in the personal dimension of human life.¹¹

Today, '[t]he so-called "quality of life" is interpreted primarily or exclusively as economic efficiency, inordinate consumerism, physical beauty and pleasure, to the neglect of the more profound dimensions – interpersonal, spiritual and religious – of existence'.¹² Increasingly, people treat the highest values with indifference: they disregard human life when it involves more effort, ignore God's law and give up religious life. In the age of globalisation and progress, we rarely realise the value of toil and the meaning of suffering. Moreover, we often inflict the greatest pain and suffering on people with disabilities with our very harmful views. We contribute to reassuring them in their sense of being inferior, of little value and not deserving love or friendship.

10 T. Styczeń, *Kardynał*, 'Wojtyła – filozof moralista', *Roczniki Filozoficzne*, 27 (1979) 2, pp. 15–30.

11 Cf. B. Chyrowicz, 'Życie ludzkie: wartość bezcenna, ale kosztowna', *Służba Zdrowia*, 84/87 (2006), <http://www.Sluzbazdrowia.com.pl/html/more3585a.php>, accessed: 10 June 2010.

12 John Paul II, *Evangelium vitae*, http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25031995_evangelium-vitae.html (accessed: 8 September 2020) (online version; no pagination).

Rose Czacka (Mother Elizabeth), Wojciech Chudy and the 'super meaning' of suffering

Due to numerous obstacles and limitations, man is in some way isolated from various goods. The experience of hardship brings with it pain that affects various dimensions of the human structure. In the case of physical imperfections, this effort is usually caused by damage or disturbances in the functioning of individual organs. It is the most 'visible' type of affliction understood as suffering. It is also often a source of suffering in the mental and spiritual dimensions, manifested, for example, in a feeling of helplessness in the face of existing difficulties, and in asking questions about the meaning of one's own mutilated existence. It can also – in the case of spiritual limitations – take the form of moral suffering related to guilt, crisis or loss of faith, which is a kind of 'pain of the soul'.¹³

No man is perfect, perfect in every sphere of life, always fit and able to take on unlimited challenges. The human person is internally rich in as much as they are able to admit their powerlessness. Man's power is therefore intimately integrated in their powerlessness. Each of us is disabled in some way. Deficiency and limitation are features that every human being finds in oneself. 'Whoever seems healthy today may carry a hidden disease within them, may suffer misfortune and permanent disability tomorrow.'¹⁴

The examples of the lives of the people I refer to in this paragraph confirm that human existence is fragile and imperfect. However, this weakness often becomes a motivation to act. A kind of engine that helps to find the right meaning of life and, in fact, its 'super meaning' – it helps to rise above what is weak and limiting and to go further, higher.

13 John Paul II, *Salvifici Doloris*, http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1984/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_11021984_salvifici-doloris.html (accessed: 9 September 2020) (online version; no pagination).

14 Jan Paweł II, 'Byłem upośledzony i przyszliście mi z pomocą', Osnabruck, 16 November 1980. Anioł Pański, *L' Osservatore Romano*, 1980, No. 31 (11), p. 4.

Rose Czacka¹⁵ and Wojciech Chudy¹⁶ were among those who chose this path. Each of them testified with their lives that ‘power is made perfect in weakness’ (2 Cor 12: 9) and that it is possible to rise above human limitations.

- 15 Rose Maria Czacka (later Mather Elizabeth) was born in Biała Cerkiew on 22 October 1876. She was the great-granddaughter of Tadeusz Czacki – the founder of the Krzemieniec High School. Her father was Feliks Czacki, and her mother was Zofia née Ledóchowska. From childhood, she had problems with her eyesight, which she eventually lost at the age of 22. Czacka devoted the next ten years to improving her life, marked by disability, and learning to be independent. She also mastered the Braille alphabet and learned about the latest achievements in the science of the blind. Based on these experiences, in 1911, she established the Society for the Protection of the Blind in Warsaw, which exists to this day (in Laski). In 1918, thanks to Rose Czacka, a new congregation was established – the Franciscan Sisters, Servants of the Cross, whose goal is to serve the blind in soul and body. Mother Elisabeth died in the odour of sanctity in Laski on 15 May 1961; R. Wosiek, *Czacka Róża*, in: *Encyklopedia katolicka*, (eds) R. Łukaszyk, L. Bieńkowski, F. Gryglewicz, Lublin 1979, Vol. 3, pp. 745–746.
- 16 Wojciech Chudy was born in Dąbrowa near Wieluń on 8 December 1947. He was the son of Tadeusz Chudy and Anna née Gładysz. During his early childhood (when Chudy was 18 months old), the first signs of his illness (progressive muscular atrophy) appeared, as a result of which he lived all his life confined to a wheelchair. When he was six, he started primary school in his hometown, which was interrupted after five years. Then he independently developed a passion for science. He graduated from the Secondary School of Education at the Rehabilitation and Orthopaedic Sanatorium in Wrocław and completed studies in philosophy at the Catholic University of Lublin (KUL). In 1980, he obtained a doctoral degree, a postdoctoral degree in philosophy in 1994, and he was awarded the title of Professor of the Humanities on 16 November 2004. Professor Chudy was heavily involved in scientific life, actively participating in numerous conferences and symposia. He published a total of 11 original books, edited and co-authored two books (one in print), 148 scientific articles, 31 reviews, 42 reports and 13 entries. The professor’s scientific and social activity was awarded, *inter alia*, with 2nd Prize in the Reinhold Schneider Award (Poland-West Germany 1981), the POLCUL Award (Australia 1987) and the Award of the Minister of National Education and Sport for his book *Filozofia kłamstwa. Kłamstwo jako fenomen zła w świecie osób i społeczeństw* [Philosophy of Lies: Lie as a Phenomenon of Evil in the World of People and Societies]. In 2001, he was awarded the honorary badge ‘Meritorious Activist of Culture’ and was posthumously decorated with the Knight’s Cross of the Order of Polonia Restituta. He was a member of the Supervisory Board of the Regional Broadcasting Station of Radio Lublin, a member of the Supervisory Board of the Polish Security Printing Works, belonged to the Scientific Society of KUL and the Lublin Branch of the Polish Philosophical Society. He worked professionally and creatively until the last days of his life. He died in Lublin on 15 March 2007. ‘Biogram Wojciecha Chudego 1947–2007’, *Ethos*, 20 (2007) No. 79–80, pp. 17–20.

Mother Elisabeth accepted her visual impairment as a task and a vocation received from God himself, who wished, with her participation, to carry out a great work of mercy towards the weakest and disadvantaged, that is, blind people. Therefore, she decided not only to live with dignity and actively in the new reality but also to take care of other blind people, primarily children.¹⁷

In her life, suffering marked the direction of her mission. It became an impulse and a signpost for the implementation of her life vocation. Czacka was fully aware that only the religion of the Cross and the Resurrection makes it possible to understand the meaning of suffering, teaches us to consciously and creatively accept it and makes it a tool of victory over evil and suffering:

Only it [the religion – the translator's note] enables us to accept in truth the burdens and limitations imposed by blindness, and only it teaches us to transform them into a positive value. Only a blind, ardent believer, who has the fullness of God's life, will not bow to the burden of disability, but will transform it into their strength by accepting it fully.¹⁸

Mother Elizabeth found true freedom in suffering: 'Happy is the man who, in pain, freed from everything, only seeks God and finds Him. Then, amid suffering and pain, the man begins a new life, a life full of joy and happiness amid suffering, pain and tears.'¹⁹ Realising the fact of one's own insufficiency and finitude, of one's own limitlessness, may direct the poor and suffering man towards the search for unchanging, absolute values, in which they may find support and meaning.

The suffering in which Mother Elizabeth was immersed confirmed to her that it gave life real meaning. Everyone experiences suffering in their existence, but few people treat it as an opportunity, a challenge, a lesson in patience, a trial or a signpost in their lives. Mother Elizabeth emphasised that 'The entire human life is a school of suffering. Oddly enough, people do not use this school. Sometimes there are old people who cannot bear the slightest adversity and they even consider themselves pious.'²⁰

17 T. Naumiuk, 'Duch miłosierdzia w życiu sługi Bożej matki Elżbiety Róży Czackiej', *Brat*, 2016, No. 11, p. 10.

18 A. Dzwonnik, *Przez krzyż do Nieba...*, http://www.sekretariat-misyjny.pl/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=840&Itemid=45, (accessed: 3 July 2017).

19 Matka E. Czacka, *Dyrektorium*, Laski 2008.

20 *Ibid.*

Rose Czacka experienced a lot of suffering, both physical and spiritual, in her life. It was caused by blindness, numerous mortifications, great poverty, surgical removal of her eye and cancer. During the last decade of her life (after a stroke), she could not speak and did not get out of bed; she also experienced the dark night of her soul. Suffering is a mystery; it is neither good nor valuable in itself. '... the intention of suffering is to destroy man – physically and morally. And in this sense, suffering does not ennoble'. All those who suffer greatly know this. Czacka also knew this and claimed that '... blindness is a severe disability. She did not diminish the severity of the lack of sight...'²¹ In her *Directorium*, she described suffering as 'abhorrent to human nature', adding at the same time that 'there can be no sanctity without it'.²²

Wojciech Chudy is another person to whose biography I refer. Professor Chudy was a physically weak man, dependent on the help of others, yet he managed to achieve a lot in his life.

I think he was working every moment. His wheelchair was always loaded with books, and there was even a pocket in the back, also full of books and hard-to-read, slightly twisted handwritten notes. ... You could talk to him about books on philosophy, social and political thought and literature. ... He was fascinated by the poetry of Miłosz, Herbert and Kawafis. He absorbed new things and knew the classics very well. Everything was worthy of concern to him. He knew films, was familiar with theatre and listened to a lot of music.²³

He was a man of extraordinary mind, great suffering and fortitude.

The professor²⁴ was always willing to offer his help and advice. Despite his heroic struggle with fatigue and visible suffering, he often shared his time, was always present at consultations and welcomed each student.

21 J. Stabińska, *Matka Elżbieta Róża Czacka*, Laski 1986, p. 183.

22 D. Dajmund, *Miłość życia hrabianki Czackiej*, <http://apchor.pl/2013/10/24/Milosc-zycia-hrabianki-Czackiej>, (accessed: 3 July 2017).

23 A. M. Wierzbicki, 'Profesor Wojciech Chudy', *Przeгляд Uniwersytecki*, 2007, No. 2, p. 20.

24 I met Professor Chudy for the first time during my first year of studies at the Institute of Pedagogy of the Catholic University of Lublin. At that time, I saw him moving

A specific condition of a meeting or consultation was always a plan or text prepared by a student. ... This method motivated systematic and reliable work. ... The professor's requirements mobilised students to write, painstakingly analyse and interpret literature.²⁵

The truth of Professor Chudy's testimony, the truth of his life, is the most important – it transcends words and reveals what is important in a human being. Wojciech Chudy was able to visualise the value of a person's humanity and indicated the value of the effort undertaken with his tireless struggle. His company, the power of his intellect and cheerful disposition made it possible to forget about his physical shortcomings. Quite the contrary, they became a kind of wealth. He encouraged people to make an effort, fight their weaknesses and not focus on failures. He pointed out the value of every human being and taught people how to turn a weakness into a strength.

Blaise Pascal emphasised the fragile existence of man with the words: 'We want truth and find only uncertainty in ourselves. We search for happiness and find only wretchedness and death. We are unable not to want truth and happiness, and are incapable of either certainty or of happiness.'²⁶

No damage, disability of any part of the human body or disability of any organ cause any change in the status of the body as a whole – it is still the body of a human person. The poor condition of the body and certain defects in the body, even very severe ones, 'do not diminish the humanity of the human body'.²⁷ Man still remains a fully-fledged human person and their personal dignity remains intact. '... the degree of limitation of consciousness in no way affects the humanity of a given person: the one who sleeps is not "less a person"

along the corridor of the Catholic University of Lublin in a wheelchair – he was accompanied by his wife – Mrs Mirosława. A year later – the professor then gave lectures on ethics to students in the second year of pedagogy – he became my professor, then the supervisor of my master's thesis and later of my doctoral dissertation, which was not completed under his supervision. Our joint adventure related to discovering the world of science was interrupted by the professor's death.

25 E. Smółka, 'Profesor i nauczyciel', *Ethos*, 20 (2007) No. 79–80, p. 273.

26 B. Pascal, *Pensées and Other Writings*, Oxford 1995, p. 8.

27 A. Bartoszek, *Niepełnosprawność osób jako wyzwanie moralne*, w: *Osoby niepełnosprawne w społeczeństwie*, red. A. Bartoszek, D. Sitko, Katowice–Ruda Śląska 2003, p. 74.

than the one who is awake; the one with a profound handicap is not “less a person” than the one who is fully mentally fit.²⁸

**Physical limitations: a challenge for those who suffer,
an opportunity for everyone**

Looking at the phenomenon of disability, we can see how self-dedication – as long as it is sincere and genuine – enriches not only the recipient but also the giver. It expresses the truth about love, which is the most valuable content of the spiritual life.²⁹ A person looking after those in need should be aware of how much they gain by genuinely supporting people with disabilities. By helping them, they affirm the person as a person in their communal constitution.

A person with a disability, who treats their unique situation as a kind of path to fulfilment, can help others to implement their humanity. By adopting this difficult path and giving a kind of consent to be helped, they give others a chance for personal fulfilment. It turns out that it is not abilities, prestige, physical and intellectual fitness that determine the greatness of a person, but the values they affirm and the life they live.

Meeting another person is a fact that takes place ‘regardless of our intention to be with someone else’.³⁰ Nobody is able to find themselves in a place where they would exist without another human being (even on a desert island they would be aware that other people live elsewhere). There is co-presence in the space-time we inhabit. Man appears here as ‘one of the Others’.

‘To experience another human being is to meet them.’³¹ In a meeting, a person experiences the other person, and thus also oneself, directly. In the act of meeting, we discover a deep, axiological truth about man. The other is for us a value ‘demanding’ an answer in the form of a specific act. This value

28 *Ibid.*, p. 75.

29 A. Rodziński, *Na orbitach wartości*, Lublin 1998, pp. 53–54.

30 A. Walczak, *Koncepcja rozumienia Innego w kategorii spotkania*, in: E. Marynowicz-Hetka, *Pedagogika społeczna. Podręcznik akademicki*, Vol. 1, Warszawa 2006, p. 431.

31 J. Tischner, ‘Fenomenologia spotkania’, *Analecta Cracoviensia*, 10 (1978) p. 73.

can be denied or rejected, yet this entails rejecting the truth, the recognition of which is obliging.³²

Józef Tischner notices that the direct experience of another person is an ethical experience *par excellence*. The effect of this is the voice of conscience that makes itself felt. Obligation, which is a relationship that occurs directly between the participants of the meeting, is a source of ethical self-knowledge, which leads to direct knowledge of ethical values.³³ This characteristic skill of the human person calls them to take responsibility for the other (emphasised by the author).³⁴

Facing another, I am aware that they are a being like me and that the term 'man' applies to them. At the same time, they are completely someone else, not my alter ego – not me.³⁵ I experience this when I enter into a relationship with another person. Then I am even sure that they are other than me and that I am other in their eyes.

The sentence 'I am since you are' states that the encounter between 'I' and 'you' is not a coincidence, it is not arbitrary, that it is connected with the concept of man not incidentally, but essentially. ... And it states ontologically that we deal with a real man where and only where their existence is fulfilled in this encounter – only in the form of man with fellow man (emphasised by the author).³⁶

The value of the presence of people with disabilities in society is irreplaceable. Professor Henri Nouwen has called his intellectually disabled friend Adam a 'guide' and a 'teacher'.³⁷ People with disabilities play a particularly important role in a reality that adheres to such relative values as: consumerism, external

32 A. Szudra, *Personalistyczna filozofia wychowania jako fundament pedagogiki dialogu*, (typescript of a doctoral dissertation), Lublin 2007, p. 80.

33 Cf. J. Tischner, *Fenomenologia spotkania*, p. 73.

34 Cf. tegoż, *Myślenie według wartości*, Kraków 2000, pp. 364–366.

35 A. Walczak, *Koncepcja rozumienia Innego w kategorii spotkania*, p. 431.

36 K. Barth, *Podstawowa forma człowieczeństwa*, (trans.) J. Zychowicz, in: *Filozofia dialogu*, (ed.) B. Baran, Kraków 1991, p. 141.

37 W. Bonowicz, 'Milczący nauczyciel', *Znak*, 2009, No. 645, <http://www.miesiecznik.znak.com.pl/10404/5/milczacy-nauczyciel> (accessed: 2 October 2013).

appearance, honourable positions and titles, profitable social arrangements and smartness. As Jean Vanier says:

In a world that is becoming harder and more petrified, in which people have to work passionately to increase their wealth, and where the virtues of the heart cannot be respected..., people with disabilities play a special role. They who have time to see, contemplate, marvel and love are like a constant reminder of the importance of unity.³⁸

People with intellectual disabilities, far from the rule of power and fame, reveal the true value of humanity and teach mutual respect and authentic love, free from fatal compromises and selfish motives that depreciate fundamental values. Their discreet and silent presence contributes to the re-evaluation of the existing hierarchy of values among many contemporary people focused on their own needs.

A doctor who reliably carries out their duties cannot be in the service of the state, politicians, industrial concerns or some ideology. This profession obliges them in a special way to be faithful to an internal morality related to the performed profession. Financial issues, high positions or prestige should be of less importance. A sick patient – regardless of their stage of development – should always be at the centre of medical activities. Greed, bribery and insensitivity pay off in the short run, and a far-sighted look shows that the absolutisation of relative values destroys humanity.³⁹

People with disabilities, far from the consumerist and materialistic world, are endowed with a wealth of community-creating values.⁴⁰ It is they who ‘by requiring help and care, create a special chance to awaken and strengthen a specific “instinct of solidarity” which is the bond of the human community’.⁴¹ By their longing for friendship and love, their desire for altruistic care, they teach others that weakness is a creative component of human life. This atti-

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Cf. T. Biesaga, *Autonomia a dobroczynność w bioetyce*, in: *Etyka wobec współczesnych dylematów*, (eds) K. Kalka, A. Papuziński, Bydgoszcz 2006, p. 139.

⁴⁰ Cf. W. Chudy, *Powołanie osoby niepełnosprawnej w nauczaniu papieża Jana Pawła II*, in: *Osoba niepełnosprawna i jej miejsce w społeczeństwie*, (ed.) D. Kornas-Biela, Lublin 1988, p. 127.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 135.

tude shows that each person is called to discover the value of suffering present in the world, to release love and, thanks to it, to transform the entire human civilisation into a civilisation of love.⁴²

People with intellectual disabilities, although generally incapable of abstract thinking, are much more open to the presence of another person. Interpersonal relations and spiritual connection with the other person are at the top of their hierarchy of values. They usually dislike competition and self-promotion. Father Thomas Philippe⁴³ – a professor of theology and philosophy for many years – understood the actual meaning of Saint Paul's words: 'God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong.' (1 Cor 1: 27-28), only when he became involved in working with these people.

Society – thanks to the wealth given to them by people with disabilities by the very fact of their presence – learns to break its consumerist and utilitarian attitude. The moral, emotional and religious values present in the spirit and hearts of suffering people 'maintain a balance in the world, making it more human because they appeal to feelings and sort of force them to gain selfless benefits'.⁴⁴ Paradoxically, people with disabilities make us unique and fulfilled. They discover our strengths and weaknesses and can unconditionally accept us as we are. They help us discover the truth about ourselves and accept it. We need them as much as they need us: to discover and understand our own humanity.⁴⁵

The poor means of communication at the disposal of people with disabilities, their difficulties in communicating and the fear of misunderstanding make them especially appreciate the value of interpersonal bonds, friendship and selfless help, and trigger this need for closeness in others.⁴⁶ By communing with

42 Cf. John Paul II, *Salvifici Doloris*.

43 The clergyman inspired Jean Vanier with his work with people with intellectual disabilities.

44 J. Królikowski, 'Potrzeba ludzkiej wrażliwości', *L'Osservatore Romano*, 1993, No. 2, p. 41.

45 A. Karolak, *Jean Vanier – Kopernik naszych czasów*, <http://thekarolakfamily.wordpress.com/2012/07/28/4475/> (accessed: 7 January 2014).

46 Cf. D. Kornas-Biela, *Niepełnosprawność w rodzinie*, www.cmppp.edu.pl/files/Niepelnosprawnosc_Jan%20Pawel%20II.doc (accessed: 20 May 2007). 'I met... the parents of children with Down's syndrome, and although it is hard to believe, they all seemed very happy in some way. When I asked some of them where they got

suffering people in a way that reveals their dignity and contributes to their comprehensive development, healthy people participate in disability. This, in turn, makes them share the difficulties and pain, as well as the joy of discovering the richness and greatness of human life. Consequently, they have a chance to learn about everlasting values.⁴⁷

By accepting a person with a disability, we can establish a unique relationship of friendship with them. In such a relationship, there is no room for selfish and utilitarian aspirations: acquaintance with a disabled person is usually not associated with any profits and does not bring 'benefits' in the common sense of the word. It is not associated with gaining prestige or a specific position on the ladder of social promotion. If it is undertaken, it is precisely with the intention of multiplying good. This good is implemented by both parties: a healthy and physically fit person experiences the extraordinary dedication and commitment of people with disabilities to friendship, which they show through their emotional outwardness, the willingness to be constantly close to them and unconditional acceptance. In such a relationship, there is no place for pretending and keeping up appearances: the emotional intelligence of people with disabilities allows them to detect falsehoods in the attitudes of the people who are with them and exposes insincerity and hypocrisy.⁴⁸

A particular example is undoubtedly:

... people with mental retardation, so limited in the intellectual and manual sphere, who often show greater abilities in the emotional sphere. Their intellectual disability is compensated by the excess of naivety and trust in people. They are not familiar with the generally accepted rules of proper behaviour. These people live closer to what is most important.⁴⁹

both this strength and joy from, they replied that it was from the fact that their children needed them much more and much longer'; B. Skurzyńska, 'Wartość niepełnosprawności', *Niedziela* (Szczecin edition), 2008, No. 17, <http://www.niedziela.pl/artykul/53180/nd/Wartosc-niepelnosprawnosci>, (accessed: 13 January 2014).

47 K. Krakowiak, *Wspieranie człowieka niepełnosprawnego*, w: *Ja – człowiek. Wzrastanie w godności, miłości i miłosierdziu*, red. M. Kalinowski, Tarnów 2004, s. 195.

48 E. Domagała-Zyśk, *Elementy „filozofii niepełnosprawności” Jeana Vaniera a współczesne tendencje rozwiązywania problemów osób z niepełnosprawnością*, in: *Personalistyczny wymiar filozofii wychowania*, (eds) A. Szudra, K. Uzar, Lublin 2009, p. 285.

49 J. Vanier, *Każda osoba jest historią świętą*, (trans.) K. P. Wierchosławscy, Poznań 1999, p. 5.

In times of globalisation, it is pugnacity, taking up important positions and winning first places in various fields that count and it is therefore very difficult for people with disabilities to find their place and win any competition. The values these people introduce stand in opposition to what is considered a value today. The weakest individuals, thrown out of society, embarrass modern people with their unique sense of friendship and unity of heart.

As weak people, they can deeply move and transform the hearts of the strong, if they are willing to listen to the voice that comes to them from below. In our fragmented and constantly migrating societies, in cities of steel, glass and solitude, people with disabilities are like cement that can bind people together. So, we discover their place. They have an important role to play in healing.⁵⁰

Moreover, thanks to the presence of people with disabilities, man living in the era of globalism has a chance to notice their own weaknesses and limitations. 'Knowing this dark side of yourself and then accepting it is the first step in knowing yourself.'⁵¹

Paradoxically, one person's disability, powerlessness and weakness trigger the best qualities in others, which, in normal reality, could become dwarfed and unheard. Sensitivity to the needs of others, the joy of giving, an empathetic and kind way of looking at human otherness, as well as a mature, polarised view of one's life as a gift received are only a few examples showing the meaning of disability to contemporary people. What connects people is their weaknesses and imperfections, not honours and selfish aspirations.

Conclusion

The modern world promotes healthy, productive, independent and resourceful individuals, having a specific appearance and type of beauty. The Church, on the other hand, emphasises the indisputable value of every human being at every stage of their development, regardless of their physical condition, age

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

and degree of fitness. Christian personalism also places the person with their inalienable dignity at the centre. Disability is definitely a difficult challenge, requiring effort and suffering; it is a challenge particularly for modern people, who more and more often place secondary values, such as beauty, health and physical condition and, therefore, social recognition, honours and prestige in first place. They clash with another world, that is, people experiencing disease or disability, who show that the additional 'burden' they have received (motor, sensory or intellectual disability) often stimulates action. The lives of Mother Elizabeth and Professor Wojciech Chudy reveal an important truth – those whose existence is often treated as useless are an inspiration for action. They restore harmony to the world by choosing basic values (love and friendship), work for the benefit of others and become personal role models, particularly to young people, who are often deprived of a real authority figure.

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