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SOCIAL DIMENSION OF MERCY

SPOŁECZNY WYMIAR MIŁOSIĘDZIA

Abstrakt

Życie społeczne jest siecią interakcji, jakie zachodzą pomiędzy wielorakimi podmiotami społecznymi: jednostkami, grupami społecznymi, jednostkami i grupami społecznymi. Interakcje te obejmują nie tylko wszelkie wymiary życia, ale również ich głębię i etyczny charakter. Życie społeczne jest regulowane zwyczajami, obyczajami i prawami.

Nie ma jednak zasad, które regulowałyby życie społeczne w sposób doskonały. Nie jest nią sprawiedliwość, chociaż stanowi bazę, na której mogą się opierać inne zasady, jak na przykład solidarność. Nawet prawo, chociażby byłoby sprawiedliwe, lecz stosowane literalnie, staje się niesprawiedliwe. Zatem, w ramach funkcjonowania każdego społeczeństwa, rodzi się potrzeba miłosierdzia.

Miłosierna aktywność była, jest i zawsze będzie aktywnością na wskroś pożądaną. Rzecz bowiem w tym, że ludzkie potrzeby, które mogą być zaspokajane tylko na drodze miłosierdzia, są wielorakie i ponadczasowe. Im większa niemoc jednostki, tym szersze otwiera się pole na uczynki miłosierdzia.

Słowa kluczowe: społeczne interakcje, zasady życia społecznego, proces socjalizacji, miłosierdzie, miłosierdzie w kontekście społecznych interakcji

Abstract

Social life is a network of interactions that occur between multiple social entities: individuals, social groups, individuals and social groups. These interactions include not only all dimensions of life, but also their depth and ethical character. Social life is regulated by customs, mores and laws. However, there are no rules that would regulate social life in a perfect way. It is not justice, although it is the basis on which other principles can be based, such as solidarity. Also the law, even if it was just, but used literally, becomes unjust. Therefore, within the functioning of every society, the need for mercy arises.

Merciful activity has been, and always will be a thoroughly desirable activity. The point is that human needs that can be satisfied only through the path of mercy are manifold and timeless. The greater the weakness of the individual, the wider the field opens to the works of mercy.

Keywords: social interactions, principles of social life, socialization process, mercy, mercy in the context of social interactions

Introduction

Social life is a network of interactions that occur between multiple social entities: individuals, social groups, individuals and social groups. „Trough interaction with others people learn appropriate behavior patterns; they learn their rights, duties, and obligations, and they learn which actions are approved which are forbidden”¹. It means that interactions include not only all dimensions of life, but also their depth and ethical character. Nonetheless societies differ in the way they function, each of them functions according to a certain model. This is its lifestyle. In sociology this lifestyle is called culture. It consists of knowledge, beliefs, customs, mores, laws... that regulate the behavior of individuals and groups. Culture understood in this way is a social product, not an inherent property of a human being. This means that when a man is born, he does not

¹ E. W. STEWART, J. A. GLYNN, *Introduction to Sociology*, New York 1979, p. 76.

bring any cultural pattern with him. He acquires this pattern by participating in social life. The process of assimilation of cultural patterns is called socialization. „Man, growing into the civilization of his environment and taking part in normalized relations and social groups – notes F. Znaniecki – learns with the help of others to deliberately organize his social personality. The results of this organization of one’s own social personality exert a profound influence over the entire cultural life of a human being, far more important than the influence of any other factor”².

The individual’s behavior in accordance with the models adopted in the given community is called conformism. It guarantees social order, which is a necessary condition for the survival and functioning of society.

An important element of culture are values. The type of value, the degree of their acquisition and the impact on the behavior of individual members of the groups and communities determines the way these entities operate. In the Catholic perspective, there are three basic principles of social life: social solidarity, justice and love. However, only the latter can be the final principle of the functioning of society. Only she has an element of mercy, without which even justice does not guarantee the proper functioning of social life. Love is the basis of natural, social and spiritual life. „Love inspires human action, directs it in personal and social life, gives meaning to the whole of life and determines its quality”³. An important element of such an attitude is mercy understood as a compassionate response to human misery, whatever form it may have.

1. The Social Character of Man

The definition of a human being as a social being is so common that it is used not only by professional sociologists, but also in a broad social consciousness; it is a truism. The universality of this understanding of man has its source both in everyday experience and in Hellenistic-Roman philosophical thought. In the first case, the multiple forms of inter-

² F. ZNANIECKI, *Ludzie terażniejsi a cywilizacja przyszłości*, Warszawa 1974, p. 105.

³ S. KOWALCZYK, *Człowiek a społeczność*, Lublin 1996, p. 199.

action clearly speak for such an understanding of the individual. This is also evident throughout the entire life of a person from birth to death. Philosophical thought also benefited from this observation. The most-known definition of man referring to his social dimension is the definition given by Aristotle – *animal sociale*. In the sense of Stagirite, this meant that „a man is born to function with others”, and also that „he is a being destined to live in social life”⁴. Participating in social life, however, the individual does not create the drive, but only activates the natural impulse in it.

It is a natural orientation towards life in the community, there are no inherent and therefore naturally defined forms. This means – as J. Loke notes – that these forms are shaped in relations with others in the process of socialization. As part of this process, the blank state – *tabula rasa* of human personality takes on form specific to this particular community. The lifestyle thus acquired integrates the individual with the group, making it part of the social unit. In this way, the process of socialization is a concrete form of the social formation of the human personality. It is the activation of the potency voided in man – being a social being.

There are several meanings that are attributed to the term „human being – social being”. The first is the social nature of culture or the way of life of different societies, because there is no reason to claim that cultural differences arise in the context of biological conditions; they must therefore have a source in the social character of man. The second understanding refers to the human social instinct – *appetitus socialis*. This common belief in such a human attitude can not be verified, because there are no valid arguments for its existence; it can not be found in the individual’s functioning whereas the fact that a person always lives in the social environment. Another understanding of man as a social being refers to its normative character. Social in this case means conduct taking into account the social good and social interest. This obligatory dimension is only appropriate to man. Because although the animals take care of their offspring, they do so on within their innate instinct. Finally, understanding man as a social being can mean that an individual de-

⁴ ARISTOTLE, *Etyka nikomachejska*, Warszawa 1956, p. 1196b and 1097b.

velops his human characteristics only in a social environment. Anthropologists find confirmation of this thesis in cases when a young person lives in isolation from the social environment. As a result of such a situation, a significant delay in development and deficiencies in the acquisition of human traits are observed⁵.

The socialization of the individual is not a process suspended in a vacuum, but has a specific reference to socializing agencies: family, peer groups, school, mass media... And although each of these agencies is important, the family is the most important, considering that it is the primary agenda, an agenda covering all dimensions of socialization, and hence a holistic agenda. Moreover, at least for some time, there is no any other agenda competing with family. In this way, the new role of the family is revealed. In addition to biological procreation, the family prepares for life in society – it gives birth to society. The family constantly „... nourishes (society) through the task of serving life: it is from the family that citizens come to birth and it is with the family that they find the first school of the social virtues that are the animating principle of the existence and development of the society itself”⁶.

2. Mercy as a Moral Category

Although sociology uses the notion of norms and norms of behavior, its understanding is quite different from the understanding of the norm in theology. The norm of behavior in sociology is average behavior – normal. Units that deviate in their behavior from what they appear on average are deviants. The more someone deviates from the average behavior, the greater is the deviant. Hence, the sociological understanding of the norm does not contain an assessment, and the sociologist in his analysis of the norm can only state its functionality or dysfunctionality in relation to various entities.

⁵ J. J. WIATR, *Społeczeństwo. Wstęp do socjologii systematycznej*, Warszawa 1973, p. 15-22.

⁶ JOHN PAUL II, *Familiaris consortio*, Rome 1981, 42.

The theological understanding of the norm takes into account the principle regulating human behavior, regardless of the behavior of others. The proportion of non-norms to those who retain it does not change its character and obligatory, binding strength. This applies to negative standards (prohibiting specific conduct) as well as positive ones that require specific behaviors.

Mercy as a moral category refers to conduct expressing compassion, kindness as a response to human misery, whatever form it has. It is an active, supportive form of love, helpful goodness. If, then, the basic norm of Christian conduct is love, mercy becomes a valid and important principle of Christian morality⁷. Everyone, to the best of their abilities, has the obligation to show mercy to others who experience misery. In Christianity, the mercy of God is the reason for mercy. We read in the Gospel: „Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful” (Lk 6:36).

The deficiencies experienced by man can concern both the soul and the body. The latter, however, are more specific and easier to see. In fact, they are universal. „They did not change though social conditions and some forms of occurrence of the needs changed. There are also hungry people today, though not in direct contact, about which feeding needs to be taken care of. And today there are homeless people in the world, prisoners, sometimes innocent battered – whose fate can not be indifferent to us. The contemporary mass media greatly expand contact and make us close to the needs of our distant from others, even those from distant continents”⁸. A classic example of a merciful attitude is the parable of a good Samaritan who comes across the beaten and robbed man and helps him: heals his wounds with oil, provides them, and takes him to the inn, where he launches further help for the needy.

Catholic theology divides the works of mercy into works regarding the body, referring to the material acts of love (mercy), corporal needs of others⁹ and the spiritual work of mercy which concern the spiritual need

⁷ See: S. OLEJNIK, *W odpowiedzi na dar i powołanie Boże*, Warszawa 1979, p. 519.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 520.

⁹ Corporal works of mercy: to feed the hungry, to give water to the thirsty, to close the naked, to shelter the homeless, to visit the sick, to visit the imprisoned, to bury the dead. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Vatican 1994, 2447.

of others¹⁰. The latter are a kind of psycho-spiritual support of the neighbor. Their character clearly indicates that they go beyond the obligations that make part of justice. They are an expression of love, an active love of one's neighbor. Their ultimate justification is the fact that God is love and constantly witnesses it to all people. This means that the motive for works of mercy is ultimately God, whose goodness is revealed in many ways, and in particular in the person of Jesus Christ. „Christ, personifying the Father's mercy, became for the people an example of merciful love expressed in works of mercy; leaning over the suffering, the wronged and the sinners, to serve them with their actions”¹¹.

3. Social Interactions and their Conflictogenic Nature

Social interactions can assume various forms. The most important of them are: cooperation, competition and conflict. In the context of the issue that interests us – charity in social life, each of them, in its own way, creates an opportunity for charitable attitudes.

Cooperation understood as the combined effort of individuals or groups to achieve their goals is a condition for staying alive of any society and is therefore an important form of social interaction. The space where a place for mercy is born grows out of the fact that cooperation does not necessarily have its source in altruism. It may happen that the initiated cooperation is born on the basis of pursuing common goals, but it could be also inspired by selfishness. An even more visible space for mercy in cooperation is the fact that the cooperation does not assume an equal distribution of gains. Given these two qualities, it becomes obvious that there is a lot of space for mercy within the framework of cooperation. This applies both to the allocation of charges and the division of the gains of cooperation.

¹⁰ Spiritual works of mercy: to instruct the ignorant, to counsel the doubtful, to admonish the sinners, to bear patiently those who wrong us, to forgive offenses, to comfort the afflicted and to pray for the living and the dead. *Ibid.*

¹¹ W. SEREMAK, *Uczynki miłosierdzia*, in: E. GIGILEWICZ (ed.), *Encyklopedia katolicka*, Lublin 2013, vol. 19, p. 1285.

Competition is by its nature directed against the one that competes. The point is that in this case only one of the competitors becomes a beneficiary. Therefore, by competing for it, it is in opposition to the competitor's person. Mercy in this case could assume withdrawal from the competition, but it would result in omission to select the most functional and morally correct solution. On the other hand, it would be inconsistent with mercy and even justice to create unequal chances in competition. A good example of this is breaking the rules of competition. In this case, not only is there no place for mercy, but the basic justice system is undermined.

The last group process, which is the conflict, leaves a significant space for mercy. First, the attitude of mercy aims to reduce conflict-related relations, and if these already take place, the effort to eliminate them. In the case of conflict, attitudes of mercy are possible and desirable on two levels: on the plane of conquest, submission of the parties to the conflict and the dimension of wounds that occur in these cases. In the first case, the defeated side in the conflict is not destroyed so that it can function in new relations. As for wounds, this merciful forgiveness has a great role to play. Fortunately, the great ally in this situation is time. Time heals wounds pushing even huge resentments into the space of the future. The awareness that the things that have happened cannot be annihilated, also blunt the blade of their wounds. The voice of rational attitudes is acting in the same direction: life goes on!

4. Mercy on the Forum of Economic Relations

The starting point for reflection on mercy in the economy forum may be the parable of the merciless debtor. Let us recall its essential elements. Here the king decided to settle with his servants. One of the debtors, unable to pay the debt, was to be sold with his family. However, he began to ask his creditor to show him mercy, extend the deadline for debt repayment. The king for pity's sake not only did not take advantage of the possibility of debt enforcement and recovery, but even released the debtor of the debt. And this is an example of the great mercy and magnanimity of the king.

The second part of the parable is an example of the lack of mercy in the performance of a recent debtor who has just experienced mercy. He, having met his debtor, began to enforce his payment, he threw him into prison until he gave it back to him.

The epilogue of the parable, however, presents a change in the King's mercy attitude towards the newly pardoned debtor: the king ordered to put him in prison until he repaid the entire debt. The reason for this was the unmerciful attitude of the debtor pardoned by the king.

Mercy in the economic sphere affects reality, which by its very nature, is anti-merciful. The point is that nothing is free in economics. Received good (benefit) is never done „free”, without charging anyone. The term zero sum applies to the economic dimension. If someone receives more, someone else is deprived of this size. Showing mercy gives up the material good that is due to him, so he suffers loss.

The principle to which mercy in the economic sphere applies is the principle of the universal destination of goods, which precedes the right to possess. It shows that everyone is entitled to possess the minimum, which is a condition to keep him alive. Every person has an innate right to it. The reason is that the right of use takes precedence over the right to own it – *ius disponendi*. From natural law, material goods have universal destinies. This means that „the right to have a private property, as an individual right, gives way to the hierarchy of moral values of the law of use which is represented by *bonum comune*”¹². This is a higher-ranking law.

In this context, it is useful to adopt the idea of the division of goods that St. Basil made. He distinguished between – circulating capital – *ktemata* and frozen capital – *chremata*. A compassionate duty exists in relation to the *chremata* goods and all goods which, withdrawn from circulation, lose their universal destination. Consequently, there are no limits on productive capital, because it is inherently directed at all, and therefore fulfills the role of common destiny.

The mercy provided in the economic sphere must be extended to other circumstances of life. It mainly concerns the redistribution of goods. The principle of mercy should find its application in the so-called fami-

¹² CZ. STRZESZEWSKI, *Katolicka nauka społeczna*, Warszawa 1985, p. 209.

ly pay. An employee should be rewarded not on the basis of justice, but on the basis of an attitude of mercy that takes into account his specific situation. In this case, even such an important principle of social life as justice is unmerciful, it becomes insufficient as an attitude of mercy.

Conclusion

Although the concept of mercy is usually used in the context of religion, mercy becomes an important factor in shaping social life. There are no rules that would regulate social life in a perfect way. It is not justice, although it is the basis on which other principles, such as solidarity, can be based. Also, the law, though equally binding everyone, and used literally, becomes unjust and, therefore, stripped of mercy. This is expressed by a well-known saying: *summum ius, summa iniuria*. Even love itself as a principle of social functioning, to be active love, must contain the dimension of mercy. Sooner or later, attitudes of mercy will have to be activated in it. This applies to both their dimensions: negative and positive. The first one makes us forget memories, make us forgive, forgive offenses, and even debts...; the other is a form of active and free involvement for those who are in need.

Merciful activity has been, and always will be a thoroughly desirable activity. The point is that human needs that can be satisfied only through the path of mercy are manifold and timeless. The greater the weakness of the individual, the wider the field for merciful attitudes opens. And – as the *Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation* of the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith stresses – „the perfection, which is the image of the Father’s perfection, and for which the disciple must strive, is found in mercy”¹³; being merciful „even as your Father is merciful” (Lk 6:36).

¹³ CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, *Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation*, Rome 1986, 55.

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Ksiądz prof. dr hab. Władysław Majkowski był wieloletnim wykładowcą socjologii ogólnej, historii myśli społecznej, socjologii rodziny oraz problemów współczesnej rodziny polskiej najpierw w Akademii Teologii Katolickiej, a następnie na Uniwersytecie Kardynała Stefana Wyszyńskiego w Warszawie; obecnie jest też wykładowcą socjologii i katolickiej nauki społecznej w Wyższym Seminarium Misyjnym Księża Sercanów w Stadnikach oraz wykładowcą w Akademii Polonijnej w Częstochowie.

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