



Inclusion of People with Disability in the Church Community Life in the Perspective of Disabled Individuals: The Role of the Priest

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Abstract: The physical presence of people with disability in the extent of the parish community is based on two main components: (I) activities undertaken by a priest to organize religious life, including those for people with disability, and (II) activities undertaken by people with disability within the parish community. The aim of the article is to answer the question: What is the importance of a priest in the context of the presence of people with disability in the church community? The empirical article is based on results of the nationwide qualitative research that was conducted among people with disabilities (using the FGI group interview; targeted group selection; the participants of the study were people with physical disabilities, deaf and hearing impaired, blind and visually impaired, and people with intellectual disabilities). The analysis of the data obtained allows us to put forward the thesis that the inclusion of people with disability in parish life is a consequence of a close, personal relationship with a priest who has at least basic knowledge of the physical, mental, and sometimes also intellectual capabilities of a faithful person with disability. The results obtained may constitute a contribution to pastoral discernment regarding the factors influencing the presence of people with disability in the Church community.

Keywords: Catholic Church, Church, community, priest, disabled person, disability, parish, inclusion

The available research allows to observe that the rate of parishioners' involvement in the life of the community depends, to a large extent, on the level of their religiousness and internal motivation, but also on the level of trust in the institutions of the Church and the openness of priests (Boguszewski 2014; Wciórka 2005). In order to build confidence, close relationships with the clergy and other members of the parish community, based on trust and characterized by kindness and acceptance, are very important (Ault et al. 2023, 138–45; Mariański 2014, 81–106).

The world of barriers for people with disability is much more complex and difficult to overcome than in the case of “healthy” people, as it usually requires constant engagement of others who are more or less involved in providing assistance. It should be emphasized, after John Paul II, that it is important for a person with disability

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to be surrounded by care and love, but also that he/she is aware of his/her abilities: the ability to communicate with others, to cooperate with them, or to support and help others; and that he/she constantly struggles to retain his/her abilities and secure their further development (Jan Paweł II 1993, 74). People with disability are willing to report access to various types of activities within the parish only if they feel safe and needed at the same time. This need for community, agency and commitment was often pointed out by Pope John Paul II in his speeches. In the homily delivered during the Jubilee of the Disabled, John Paul II addressed people with disabilities, assuring them that he was aware of indifference which deepens suffering and loneliness, and of love which, supported by selflessness, builds up strength and gives meaning to life. At that time the following commitment was also made: “In Christ’s name, the Church is committed to making herself more and more a ‘welcoming home’ for you.” (Jan Paweł II 2001, 43) Therefore, it should be assumed that the Church as a community, and the parish as a small part of it, is a place where every person with disability feels needed, important, and valuable; where he/she receives strength and at the same time can give strength to others; where he/she receives but also gives; and where he/she feels at home, but also invites others to this home. Erik W. Carter also refers to this idea of hospitality, emphasizing that the need for a sense of belonging to the community of the Church is not only the domain of people with special needs, but it is a universal need. In his concept of belonging, Carter mentions the following aspects of needs: real presence, being invited, included, known (not anonymous), accepted, supported, cared for, befriended, needed and loved (Carter 2022, 6–12).

The available literature on the subject allows to conclude that there are several basic types of barriers that significantly hinder, discourage, and sometimes even completely prevent the participation of people with disability in the religious life of the parish. Some of the most serious barriers determining the participation and involvement of people with disability in the life of the parish are those related to the attitude of priests and members of the parish community. They are attitudes that can be described as lack of commitment or empathy, lack of initiative aimed at the needs of people with disability, and often being prejudiced and reluctant. They are also attitudes that result from not having basic knowledge of the functioning and the needs of people with disability (Janocha 2020).

On the basis of a nationwide research carried out in Poland, it should be pointed out that, according to the clergy, on average, in every parish there are: 30 parishioners with physical disabilities, 7 people who are blind or visually impaired, 10 people who are deaf or hard of hearing, 14 people with intellectual disabilities, 11 people with developmental disorders or autism spectrum.

Disability caused by hearing organ defects is the least excluding factor – 74% of deaf or hard of hearing parishioners participate in Holy Mass, parish groups and the life of the parish community in general, and 23% of them receive the sacraments at home. Physical disability is the greatest barrier to active participation in the life of

the parish community – only 20% of physically disabled parishioners have the opportunity to actively participate in religious life, and 46% receive the sacraments at home. In the case of blind or visually impaired people, 43% of parishioners are religiously active, while 28% receive the sacraments at home. Among people with intellectual disabilities, similarly to the group of people with developmental disorders or autism spectrum, slightly fewer than a half of parishioners take an active part in parish life, while about 40% of people with disability receive the sacraments at home. There are no comprehensive studies on the involvement of people with disability in the life of Church communities (Janocha 2020, 112). Partial, local research conducted by Dariusz Lipiec among the blind in Poland showed that a very small percentage of them sit on parish councils. Research conducted by Wiesław Przygoda shows that over a quarter (26.5%) of the members of the parish Caritas and charity groups are 66 years old and older, which allows to assume that among the disabled there are also people with disability related to old age (Lipiec 2018, 139). The percentage of people with disability involved in religious associations in the parishes remains unknown.

Forms of pastoral work with the disabled are properly structured if they aim at enlivening and deepening religious life and showing the proper meaning of life in suffering. In addition, they prepare for conscious and active participation in the liturgy, help in rehabilitation, which consequently leads to the acceptance of one's disability and reconciliation with God's will. The work of priests in the environment of people with disability should indicate ways to regain faith in their own strength, which show the right role models mobilizing people with disability to oppose their dysfunctions (Pyżlak 2020, 48)

Considering the above, it seems reasonable to analyze the reasons for the relatively low involvement of people with disability in the parish life. The empirical material collected during the nationwide research is abundant in the statements of people with disability which illustrate the importance of the priest with regard to the idea of the parish being a “welcoming home.”

1. Methodology

A nationwide qualitative research was carried out (by means of the Focused Group Interview [FGI] and purposive sampling) among people with disabilities as part of the project “Postanowienia Konwencji ONZ o prawach osób niepełnosprawnych a legislacja i praktyka pastoralna Kościoła Rzymskokatolickiego w Polsce” (Provisions of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in the light of Legislation and Pastoral Practice of the Roman Catholic Church in Poland). The study involved people with mobility disability, deaf and hard of hearing, blind and visually impaired, and people with reduced intellectual capacity. The research

was carried out in January and February 2020, and was preceded by a pilot study conducted at the turn of November 2019, the aim of which was to develop the final version of the survey used during the interviews.

The study involved 15 homogeneous focus groups (the same type of disability) in each category of disability, 7 heterogeneous focus groups (different types of disability) – 1 per each examined diocese, 5 focus groups with families/carers of people with disability, 3 focus groups with disabled members of pastoral groups and Catholic activists.

The conducted qualitative research focused on ensuring maximum variability in the sample, which allowed for capturing the variability and diversity within the research field. The adopted assumption allowed to identify the areas of activity in the religious life of people with various types and degrees of disability who live in different areas.

The research material contains transcripts of 49 individual in-depth interviews (IDI) conducted in five groups of participants: individuals with hearing impairments (7 interviews), those with mobility impairments (4 interviews), blind and visually impaired (5 interviews), those with intellectual disability (24 interviews), and carers of people with disability (9 interviews). The interviews were used to elicit how participants perceived the issues under study and enabled them to present these issues from their own perspective and in their own words. The analysis of the interviews involved reconstructing the information from participants' statements on the issues specified in the scenario. This analysis was not quantitative in nature but focused on the meanings expressed by participants. The following central topics were identified in the interviews: faith in God, prayer and Holy Mass, sacraments, involvement in liturgical ministries, involvement in parish groups, attitudes of other parishioners, expected attitudes of parishioners and priests, and barriers to participating in religious and parish community life. While transcribing the interviews, we developed a detailed description that included qualitative differentiation, such as the different types and specific characteristics of phenomena, as well as new information in the description of a given phenomenon. The following research operations were used in the analysis: coding of meanings, condensation of meanings, and categorisation of meanings. The categories were developed in two ways: (1) in connection with the central topics of the interviews, and (2) ad hoc during analysis. The limitations to data collection and analysis arose from the specific context of the study (a diverse group of respondents with disabilities). These limitations included: the need to develop specific communication relationships and adapt questions to each respondent; the difficulty in assessing the range of spontaneous, cognitively rich, specific, and adequate responses of interview participants with disability; the occurrence of statements that were logically unrelated to the topic of the interview, inaccurate, brief, or prompted or suggested by the interviewer; the involvement of third parties in the interviews (e.g., mother or carer). The interviewer's development and explanation of

the thematic threads obtained in participants' responses, as well as the quality of the transcript, were satisfactory (with some minor stylistic and typographical errors, and occasional gaps in the transcripts with the annotation: incomprehensible).

Due to the subject of the study, it was assumed that people who declared being a Roman Catholic would be invited to participate in the qualitative research. At the same time, however, at the stage of recruitment for the study, the level of religiousness of these people was not assessed (except for the interviews with Catholic activists) because the degree of activity in the life of the parish was to be discussed.

2. Results

In order to understand the context of the activity of people with disability in the parish community (or lack thereof), one should take a closer look at the attitude of this group towards faith. People with disability have a specific, personal understanding of spiritual matters. To some extent, faith seems to be "mediated" by mental and/or bodily deficiencies (Poston and Turnbull 2004, 95–108). The issue of including the cause and meaning of disability in religious reflection is manifested in the statements of the respondents, both people with disability and their carers (Zhang and Bennett 2001, 143–54). People who experience suffering often ask themselves about its meaning while searching for answers in prayer and/or in the teaching of the Church.

Speaker 1: I like going to church. I am [...] a believer. And if I hadn't trusted my life to Our Lady and God five years ago, I would have been under a lot of stress.

Speaker 2: It was very difficult for me. But I got over it. I got over it. [...] So I'm happy with the faith. Very happy even. (FGI, people with disability)

Faith provides the disabled with a meaning of their own situation, and of the resulting limitations and difficulties, but it also gives them hope (Canda 2001, 109–34; Gaventa 2009). Depending on the moment of acquiring a disability (inborn or developed during one's lifetime), one's own faith is understood and perceived differently.

Speaker 1: [...] For me, faith is a very important thing. The moment I lost my sight, it was like I'd found God. And on him I base my blindness, in a way, and my life. And faith helps me a lot. Every day, I start my day with a prayer and go out. God is like this guide on the paths of life [...]. When I could see, they called me Night Owl. Without God, I went where I wanted to go. But today it is different and I can say that I lost sight and I would not change it, but I found God in my life and I would never change this situation [...]. And today I'm a happy man because I have someone who loves me. I found God, and that's the most important thing in my life. (FGI, person with disability)

What is more, in the opinion of the carers, who observe the disabled and their struggles with the disease on a daily basis, faith makes it easier to endure hardships and understand suffering in terms of grace or act of God (Lysne and Wachholtz 2011, 1–16; Hebert et al. 2006, 497–520), while giving hope and consolation, which in turn leads to better well-being and discovering the meaning of disability and faith (Zhang and Bennett 2001, 143–54; Gordon et al. 2002, 162–74; Hatun et al. 2016, 209–35).

Researcher: Does faith help people with disabilities?

Speaker 1: It gives hope.

Speaker 2: Yes.

Speaker 3: It helps.

Speaker 1: It also explains certain issues, because they wonder why they were born with a disability. So they can figure out if something's going on; why it's happening; why it's happening to them. This question is most often asked: why them. What have I done? Is this punishment? Why did fate, or God, treat me like this? (FGI, carers)

Personal relationships with the priest and knowing each other have a great impact on the activity of people with disability in the life of the Church and the parish. A priest who, through personal, honest conversations, knows the specificity of a disabled person's illness, situation, problems or needs, is able to personalize the message and, while respecting the limitations resulting from the disability, suggest a more active, adapted participation in the Holy Mass and/or the life of the parish. "There are also different priests. There may be, simply, a priest who doesn't encourage other parishioners to participate in the life of the parish, because there are nice priests, etc., but there are also not so nice ones. This may also discourage parishioners from having contact with the priest who may be so cold." (FGI, disabled person)

Some respondents point to the indifference of priests, paying attention to the lack of empathy, interest or simple ignorance. In a natural way, such an attitude is discouraging, building barriers and even giving the impression of being uninvited to activity in the Church. "A lot depends on what the priest thinks of himself. There are priests who respond positively to people with disabilities, and there are priests who just have to serve their duty and that's it. It makes you feel like a thing, unnecessary in any case." (FGI, disabled person)

Disability is very often a barrier to active participation in the life of the parish. If the clergy do not take the trouble to establish closer relations, despite the explicit needs related to the experienced disability, people with disability remain passive and, apart from the participation in the Sunday Mass at best, they do not engage in activities within the parish community, although they could and would like to.

People who are completely deaf seem to be in the worst situation, because without the help of a qualified person who knows sign language they are not able to participate independently and actively in the life of the parish community.

Researcher: Tell me about groups or parish communities. What makes it difficult to participate in such groups? Are there no such groups, or does disability make it difficult?

Speaker 1: Unfortunately, no one speaks sign language in those groups.

Researcher: So there is no signer, I understand.

Speaker 1: I have no opportunity to speak, which makes me unable to understand them, and they do not understand me.

Researcher: Do you have a sense of being invited by the priest to participate in the above activities?

Speaker: No, I don't feel that way. (IDI, person with disability)

Some of the respondents not only declare their willingness to participate more actively in the parish life and engage in religious activities, but also know of other people with disability who expect some initiative from priests to give them a clear signal to join. These are often well-connected groups, whose inactivity results only from the lack of an "invitation." The respondents emphasize the profound lack of such initiative on the priests' part. Research indicates that this is a potential group of people who, in a collective manner and under favorable circumstances, could get involved in the life of the parish. "It would surely give her a lot of pleasure. She'd love to. That's the kind of thing she's interested in. She would like to help and do something, take part in something. She knows many deaf people who would also like to participate in such a thing. And deaf people also very rarely take part in masses in general, because they are deaf and simply can't do many things. There are no such forms for the deaf." (FGI, disabled person)

The respondents also point to situations in which priests respond to the needs of people with disability and initiate various types of events in which they can participate. Such invitations are received very positively and, as a rule, people with disability appear at these meetings and take an active part in them. For believers suffering from various types of diseases, these initiatives are a source of a sense of agency but also an opportunity to leave home and get rid of the stigma of an inferior person.

Researcher: Were there any priests who, for example, encouraged you by saying, "Listen, come, we have such a great meeting. Maybe we could organize something together?"

Speaker 1: I think that's not the case.

Speaker 2: Unless, for example, there already is a great meeting or something. Then, Father Rafał says, "An interesting meeting, so come, you're welcome, it will be fun" or something.

Speaker 3: There is a chapel.

Speaker 2: There are young people. They have a performance, so it is the parish priest who invites you to this performance at 7 pm.

Speaker 3: Ours invites, too. Recently there was the 5th anniversary, so “Come, because there will be a mass and then the outdoor party by the church, by the chapel.” (FGI, people with disability)

Some people with disability, whose level of disability allows, are also very willing to engage in the activities for the benefit of other people. This is largely due to the experiences associated with the disease, the desire to be needed and the need to share the good with other people. Faithful with disability who are involved in helping others are usually able to reach those in need, as it is easy for them to apply an empathetic approach due to personal experiences related to their own limitations. The obtained data shows that it is a group that could help others and at the same time benefit from doing so.

[...] There is this foundation “Dzieci Dzieciom” (Children for Children) in Warsaw and Father Małachowski gathered us all from different Polish cities. It was beautiful. We simply helped to care for children with disabilities. I am disabled myself, but I helped as much as I could. And just then it felt like this community. We were at the center. Then, we went to the Eucharistic Congress. And we often made various remarks to the priest, hoping that he would pass them on somewhere higher up. We had a visit from one bishop, then another bishop. I think then, in those days, twenty years ago, it actually made a difference. And now, not so much. (FGI, disabled person)

An initiative aimed at people with disability does not necessarily have to include the element of aid. For the purposes of self-esteem and being needed, it is often enough to assign work that is perceived by this person as important and serving others. A tailored, well-thought initiative that serves all members of the community may be an excellent opportunity to improve qualifications and intensify contacts with others. “In our parish, a priest once had the idea to open a parish library. And he asked me to help him. There was this MAG program. I forgot, I didn’t know much, I was studying and there I borrowed materials from my older friends, so that I could, as they say, eat it all up.” (FGI, person with disability)

The respondents with disability particularly highly appreciate all kinds of initiatives of the clergy, which are addressed directly to them and result from the proper understanding of their needs.

And in our parish, the parish priest introduced occupational therapy workshops for people with disabilities. And there they meet, they do things, they learn, so to speak, plastic things, some ceramics, etc. And I think that the priest also gives the opportunity to do something with their time to those disabled people who come to these workshops. And

he also organizes some trips to Warsaw, to the cinema, to the theater, to the pool. For the disabled, and for the fit ones. That's a cool initiative, too. Now, he has also organized a rental of rehabilitation equipment for the disabled, so it's also a nice thing, additional, for these people. Maybe I don't need it, but I know that it can be a big facilitation for others. It's a cool thing, in my opinion, especially for those who are in wheelchairs or not walking. (FGI, person with disability)

Initiating the activity of people with disability by priests also involves creating certain conditions and, above all, recognizing the potential of such integration. In the case of people with intellectual disability, one can usually observe a lot of motivation to actively participate in the Holy Mass, for example through activities reserved for altar boys. Only formal considerations, which are based on the adequacy of strictly defined activities at a given time, may constitute a barrier. The aforementioned kind and inclusive attitude of the clergy is associated with "turning a blind eye" to certain deficiencies resulting directly from the disability and not from ill will or lack of sufficient motivation of such a person.

Researcher: And the participation in the Holy Mass itself, do people under your care have a need for participation? Would they like to?

Speaker 1: Very much.

Researcher: And serving at the Holy Mass?

Speaker 2: They want to as well.

Researcher: Well, because not everyone can, to be sure.

Speaker 1: It also depends on the priest, how he approaches such a child.

Researcher: And how does he approach?

Speaker 1: There are different approaches so it's possible and just so that a healthy altar boy could also tell you at some point what you should do, whether you should ring the bell or pass the chalice. It's all about helping them all the time.

Speaker 2: He does not.

Speaker 3: I'd like to give my example, in our church there's a disabled boy who serves at every mass.

Speaker 4: [...] If he knows anyway, he understands what it's about, of course, there's no problem, because we were in Tuchów at the mass and our boys served as we were there. No problem. At least I haven't come across it. (FGI, carers)

Certainly, the mechanisms involving believers with disabilities in the life of the community include the clemency and kindness of priests who understand the specificity of disability and make the rules more flexible, so that people with disabilities have the opportunity for a comfortable and dignified participation in religious practices. Such priests, through their inclusive attitude, build personal and lasting relationships with the faithful with disability, which have an impact on

the motivation of this group of people to participate in the liturgy and in the life of the parish community.

I'll be honest. Since I've had trouble kneeling, because I haven't been kneeling in church in the last three years, I sit or stand. Unless my spine hurts. And I've had so many problems lately that I went to confession and I couldn't kneel. I just simply couldn't kneel before a priest. It was recently that I've come across such very understanding priests who stood up. The priest got up and heard my confession standing, I did not have to kneel at the confessional. Similarly, when it comes to confession in Miodowa Street, there is a separate room in the church, where one confesses. And there, no priest made me kneel. I could stand, calmly. I didn't have to kneel. No one reproached me; no one reprimanded me. It was really very touching for me that the priest stood with me and heard my confession in a church, for example, because I wouldn't kneel. (IDI, disabled person)

Initiating the activity of people with disability is an important and delicate matter, because it requires deeper knowledge of the disease itself, but also of the mental condition of a specific person. The respondents' statements indicate that the satisfactory inclusion of people with disability in the life of the parish is a consequence of a close, personal and trustful relationship with a clergyman who has at least the basic knowledge of physical, mental and sometimes intellectual capabilities of a believer. It should be pointed out that the parish creates opportunities for various subjective involvement of people with disability in the scope of each basic function. The disabled can perform liturgical functions: an altar boy, a lector, they can sing in parish choirs, children's and youth schools, as well as be extraordinary ministers of the Blessed Sacrament. They can engage in parish catechesis and prepare children, youth and adults for the sacraments, work in family life counseling centers. It is also possible to involve people with disability in various bodies and parish teams. Among these we can include: parish pastoral or economic council, as well as the parish Caritas team. People with disability can also engage in various social and cultural activities. The only limitation in this respect is the one caused by the degree of disability and physical possibilities of existence (Lipiec 2018, 139).

When someone simply asks me: could you sing the psalm because you sing nicely? Well, if that's how they see it, then why shouldn't I do it? When it's said that the liturgy is to be held at the highest possible level. And if I can add something that will make this liturgy more beautiful, then why not? And the same goes for... because I didn't mention it, I sometimes play at weddings or funerals, like for the same reason: because it's important to someone that I play, or just like that. Like, that is for the glory of God, but also for people – through people for God. I don't know how to say this, but like I never wondered, I didn't assume that it's me who would do something for God. What can I do for God? Then, I'll sing the psalm. It's just that on the other hand, since I have a voice... I have this voice practiced...

I'm prepared for it, so, well, it befits to just share it. And that's how I can share it, how I can contribute. (FGI, person with disability)

It is worth pointing out that in Polish parishes, lists of people with disability are practiced, which are intended not only to record people with disability, but are also related to the recommendation that parish priests visit them. This concerns in particular pastoral visits, apart from the one-year visit, which clergy are obliged to make each year. It is recommended that parish priests visit homes where families with a disabled member live more often, preferably on a regular basis, providing them with spiritual support, as well as all their relatives. It is also important that parish priests know the living situation of these families. The Church believes that carol visits once a year do not provide the basis for adequate knowledge of the living conditions of disabled parishioners (Fedorowicz 1960, 1–4).

Conclusion

The sense of belonging to the Church community is a common need of all who want to be in the Church. It is not only the domain of people with special needs, people with disability or the elderly. Undoubtedly, the possibility of being in the community results not only from the willingness, which seems to be crucial, but also from several other factors including architectural accessibility, mobility, adaptation of infrastructure and liturgical setting, and, to a large extent, the attitude and openness of priests. The last factor, in turn, is the result of not only pastoral empathy, but also of the knowledge they have about disability, the specificity of the needs of people with disabilities, creativity or a simple acknowledgment of the demand for action dedicated to people with special needs. For people with disability, priests' attitude is one of the key factors which affect their "being" or "not being" in the Church. To further problematize the issue, it is worth quoting Father Witold Dobrołowicz, who recalled the words of one parish priest: "Why should I organize something in the church for people with disability? Let these people come and say what they expect," while answering the question about the presence and the role of people with disability in the life of the Church (Dazbłąż 2021).

Therefore, it should be considered whether the level of activity and participation of people with disability in the community of the Church depends on the attitude and openness of the priest, or whether it depends on the disabled articulating their own needs, personal willingness and involvement in determining the paths of reaching the Church. Should activities for the inclusion of people with disability come "from below" (bottom-up initiative) or "from above" (top-down initiative)? Dialogue

and understanding on this issue seem to be the key to effective activity for the benefit of both the Church community and the presence of people with disability.

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