**Resilience and Christian Hope. Good practice for religion teachers of students with ASD**

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The phenomenon of positive adaptation, known as “resilience”, has emerged thanks to the authors of the long-term prospective study, Norman Garmezy and Michael Rutter. The pioneers focused their research on the development of children and young people growing up in unfavourable living conditions. (Rutter 1987, 316-331).

In Poland, “resilience” is explained as man’s resistance to adversity or other traumatic events (Borucka and Pisarska 2012, Bzymek 2021). This concept is gradually becoming more meaningful in pedagogy (Junik 2011). “Resilience” in pedagogy is defined as a person’s ability to adapt to life well, regardless of the risks he has faced (Olsson et al. 2003, 1-11). In addition, this term can also be interpreted as the ability to overcome the negative consequences of life events (Ogińska-Bulik i Jurczyński 2001, 7-28). The English-language term “resilience” poses several difficulties related to its correct translation into Polish. Often in the official documents as well as everyday language, “resilience” is translated as resistance, less commonly as flexibility, suppleness, robustness or litheness. The problem with the translation stems from ambiguity, as “resilience” in literal translation means: “to bounce back” or “to return to its original state”.

The conception of resilience, in the last decade, has been applied not only to sudden events but also to ongoing slow changes that people have to cope with. The gradual accumulation of small, incremental negative changes over time has a negative impact on the development of countries, cities, regions, and education.

There are particular challenges that have been associated with the period of the pandemic or the current full-scale war in Ukraine. The abovementioned challenges pose a specific problem for children with ASD. This phenomenon is evident in Polish schools; therefore, religious teachers try to support their students with ASD and help them overcome fears and anxieties. Framing the topic in the key of resilience and Christian hope is new, but good practice by religion teachers of students with ASD has been moving in this direction for some time.

**1. Catholic religious education for students with autism spectrum disorders**

The Ministry of Education and Science reported that by the end of September 2022, 82,199 children and adolescents in Poland received an assessment of the need for special education due to autism spectrum disorders. Most of them attend religious classes. Autism is a condition that is related to neurodevelopmental disorders with a multifactorial aetiology. The autism spectrum disorder (ASD) manifests cognitive limitations and deficits in emotional and social functioning. Consequently, it results in isolation, deprivation of psychological needs and standardisation. Executive functioning disorders affect the emotional-social functioning of people with autism spectrum disorders. Based on contemporary diagnostic classifications, three criteria can be distinguished for the diagnosis of the axial symptoms of autism (qualitative abnormalities of reciprocal social interaction; qualitative abnormalities of communication; restricted, repetitive and stereotyped patterns of behaviour, interests and activities), which have arisen as a result of neurocognitive deficits.

In addition to the analysed criteria for the axial symptoms of autism, distinguished in the contemporary diagnostic classification and the accompanying circumstances, particular attention should be drawn to the aspect of the occurrence of challenging behaviour among students with ASD. When considering the importance of the reaction of the teacher and the pupils around a child with ASD who manifests challenging behaviour, it is important to note that when the undesirable behaviour is ignored and there is no influenced stimulation it is likely to disappear. However, the unfavourable habits will be intensified and perpetuated as a result of the attitude adopted and the clear submission to the arousing constant controversy. Clear examples of atypical or ineffective responses to the social interventions of others and challenging behaviours considered atypical, unpredictable and problematic can be seen among students struggling with special dysfunctions arising from autism spectrum disorders. The occurrence of inadequate behaviour determines the level of stress experienced by students with ASD due to the difficulties of experiencing “otherness” and social situations (Kiciński, Przytuła 2023).

Catholic religious teachers have developed many good practices, such as resilience, to resist experiencing social or environmental shocks and pressures. Although the following question, how to use the concept of “resilience” effectively, is not easy to answer. Each student with ADS has his own specificity and requires a different approach to strengthen or build his resilience. In religious education in an inclusive manner, teachers follow such documents as the Magisterium of the Universal Church, as well as the Core Curriculum developed by the Catholic Church in Poland.

**2. Covid-19 and the war in Ukraine**

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, in the public debate, one could increasingly hear about "building resilience" of society, country, city, region, and one's Church. Resilience has accompanied human activity for centuries – but it has not always been called that. At the Eufres 2024 symposium, we have the opportunity to trace the evolution of the meaning of this concept to understand how it can help to deal with the crises affecting humanity – concerning not only mental health but also we would add spiritual health.

COVID-19 pandemic – COVID-19 infectious disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus – began as an epidemic on 17 November 2019 in Wuhan city, Hubei province, central China, and was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organisation (WHO) on 11 March 2020. The first case of infection with this coronavirus was found on 4 March 2020 in a hospital in Zielona Góra, where a 66-year-old man who had arrived by bus from Germany was diagnosed with the disease.

On 24 February 2022, Russia’s full-scale military invasion of Ukraine began. After two years of war, the current situation in the east now seems to be an everyday occurrence in Western countries, although, in the case of Ukraine, it is still as much of a struggle for its territory as it has been for the past few decades.

When war broke out in Ukraine, Polish people did not have time to build any resettlement strategy. They helped everyone out of the need of our hearts, and without building any camps, they welcomed most of the Ukrainian people into their own homes. Today, we can report that 956,633 people from Ukraine residing in Poland have an active PESEL number. According to projections by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, UNHCR – there will be 1.1 million refugees in Poland by the end of 2024. Many of them have children who go to school, some of them receive a diagnosis of ASD, and their parents seek help. We admitted all of them to school, initially also to teach them the Catholic religion. Unfortunately, a dispute arose with the Orthodox Church, and many of these children are not attending anywhere. A certain group of Catholic religious teachers have become adept at responding to this trauma and the difficulties involved.

**3. The way of beauty and art therapy to serve students with ASD**

Christian culture has played a decisive role in the conservation of the surrounding cultures. Among other things, Christians were able to read the great achievements of Greek philosophy and Roman law in a new spirit, making them the heritage of humanity. Christians also shaped perceptions of goodness, justice, truth and beauty, which resulted in literary and musical works, scientific works, and masterpieces of architecture and painting – which, as a mental, moral and aesthetic heritage, will remain as a testimony to the contribution of the Christian faith. This heritage of great historical and artistic value is a source of inspiration for teachers of religion, as it conveys the Christian vision of the world through the creative power of beauty.

Art therapy involves the use of a range of art forms (music, visual arts, dance, theatre) in the rehabilitation process of children and adults. It is important to remember that disability can cause embarrassment because it highlights the difficulty of accepting “otherness”; it can also arouse fear, especially if it is permanent because it refers to the radical dimension of every human being's weakness, which is suffering and ultimately death. Meanwhile, people with disabilities, precisely as witnesses to the most fundamental truth about human life, should be welcomed as a great gift. Enriched by their presence, the community becomes more aware of the saving mystery of Christ’s cross and, through mutual acceptance and solidarity, sets an example of good living and becomes a call to the world.

*3.1. Realism*

Optimism in special education is what drives and allows us to pick ourselves up after successive failures. But it can be a trap when things go wrong more than once. If positive outcomes never materialise, it is easy to become depressed. That is why it is so important to root yourself in realism. Optimism is an indispensable drive for our actions, but it mustn’t distort our perception of reality. In religious teaching, we find realism in the Bible. Job and other characters show us how difficult it is to resist various shocks and pressures.

*3.2. Meaning*

Seeing meaning in what we do is a skill that is essential in difficult times. It enables us to define the goals we strive for but also to build our individual value system on which we can rely in stressful situations. Every person, including a student with ASD, seeks to soothe the anxiety that dwells in his heart through a sincere search for the meaning of his existence, help him fully understand himself in Christ and, through intimacy with Him, see that he is walking the path of truth. The Word of God reveals the relational nature of every human being and his filial vocation to be conformed to Christ: “You have made us for yourself (...) as directed towards You. And our hearts are restless until they rest in You”. When God reaches out to man, he is called to respond to this call with the obedience of faith and to cling to Him, with the full consent of reason and will, freely receiving “the gospel of the grace of God” (Acts 20:24). This is how the believer “finds what he has always sought, and finds it in a way that exceeds his expectations. Faith responds to this “expectation”, often unconscious and still limited, of knowing the truth about God, man and the destiny that awaits him”.

*3.3. Ingenuity*

Ingenuity is the clever inventiveness of coming up with solutions using the tools at hand, often in a situation where the latter is in short supply. This approach ensures innovation and sees possibilities when others only see a lack of them, so instead of being stuck in a rut, even in the face of failure, they learn to adapt to a new environment to move on. Therefore, they are resilient. The most resilient were the saints.

From the earliest centuries, the example of the Virgin Mary and the lives of saints and martyrs have been an integral and effective component of catechesis, from Acta martyrum to passiones, from frescoes in churches and icons to edifying stories for children and the illiterate. The testimonies of life and death for Christ given by the saints and martyrs were authentic Sequentia Sancti Evangelii, gospel passages proclaiming Christ and rekindling and revitalising faith in him (99).

An example of good practice can be found in the story told by Saint John Bosco. This example is commonly used by religious teachers working in schools in Lublin, which is why we mention it here.

**The dream of the two columns**

It was May 30, 1862, penultimate day of the Month of Our Lady. After night prayers, before hundreds of boys went to bed, Don Bosco started like this:

“I want to recount to you a dream. It is true that he who dreams does not reason. In spite of that, I, who would recount to you even my sins if I were not afraid of making all of you run away and making the house collapse, will narrate it to you for your spiritual benefit. I had this dream a few days ago.

Imagine you are with me on the on a cliff overlooking a vast expanse of sea with no other land in sight except that which is under your feet. In the middle of the endless sea, soaring to the sky, are two solid, stout columns a short distance apart from each other. One is surmounted by a statue of the Blessed Virgin Immaculate, at whose feet hangs a large placard with the inscription: *Auxilium Christianorum* [Help of Christians]. The other column, far loftier and sturdier, supports a Host of proportionate size, and underneath it is another placard with the inscription: *Salus Credentium* [Salvation of believers]. From these two columns hang many chains with hooks and anchors in every direction to which ships can be attached.

The water is covered with a countless multitude of battling ships. The prow of each is fitted with beaks of iron that are like spears or arrows stabbing and piercing everything they hit. These ships are heavily armed with cannons, firearms, and incendiary bombs of every kind, even books, and all of them are thronging and chasing after a mighty ship, bigger and taller than any of them. The enemy ships try to ram this stately vessel, to set it on fire, and to damage it in every possible way while an escort fleet shields it. All the efforts of the Pope who captains the great ship are bent to steer it between those two columns against winds and waves that favor the enemy. The commanding general of the flagship, the Roman Pontiff, seeing the enemy’s fury and his auxiliary ships’ grave predicament, summons his captains. All the pilots gather around the captain and hold a conference, but the storm grows steadily more ferocious, and they are sent back to command their own ships lest they founder. When it again grows a little calmer, the captain summons his pilots for a second time as the flagship sticks to its course. The enemy ships keep trying in every way to block, damage and sink the great ship. They bombard it with everything they have: firearms, cannons and incendiary bombs, the beaks of their prows, and with fire from books and journals which they try to hurl into the big ship. The storm becomes dreadful and smashes the ships of the Pope so badly that the enemies let out shouts of victory. The Pope strains every muscle continuing to steer his ship between the two columns as fierce combat ensues and all the enemy ships move in and violently ram his ship again and again. Yet all the efforts of that multitude of ships are useless as their weapons shatter, their guns and cannons sinking into the sea. In a blind fury the enemy forces take to combating the big ship with their hands, fists, books, blasphemies, and curses. Unscathed and undaunted, the flagship keeps on its course.

It is true that at times a formidable ram splinters a gaping hole or wound into the hull of the great ship but immediately, a favourable wind breezes from the two columns and instantly heals the gash and the ship continues on its way. One blow gravely injures the Pope, who suddenly falls down. Those around him immediately help him to get up, but he is struck by a second blow, falls again, and dies. Another shout of victory goes up among the remaining enemies and indescribable rejoicing is seen on their ships. But no sooner is the Pope dead than another takes his place. The assembled pilots elected another captain so quickly that the news of the preceding captain arrives with the news of the election of his successor. The enemy loses courage as the new Pope overcomes every obstacle and routs all the tottering ships with his. Breaking through all resistance, the new Pope steers his ship safely between the two columns. Once in between them, he attaches the prow to an anchor hanging from the column with the Host. With another anchor he attaches the other side of the ship to the column with the Blessed Virgin Immaculate.

Then total disorder breaks out over the whole surface of the sea. All the ships that so far had been battling the Pope’s ship scatter, fleeing and colliding with one another, some foundering and trying to sink the others. Then many of the small ships scurry to the columns and attach themselves to those hooks. Some ships, which had gallantly fought alongside the great ship, are the first to tie up at the two columns. Many others, which had fearfully kept far away from the fight, stand still, cautiously waiting until the wrecked enemy ships vanish under the waves. Then they too head for the two columns, tie up at the swinging hooks, and remain there all safe and secure with the main ship and the Pope. A great perfect calm now covers the sea.

At this point Don Bosco asked Fr Rua, “What do you think of this story?” Fr Rua replied: “It seems to me that the ship of the Pope is the Church, whose head he is; the other ships are men; the sea is this world. Those who defend the huge ship are good people who love the Holy See; the others are her enemies who, with all sorts of arms, make attempts to annihilate her. The two pillars of salvation seem to be devotion to Mary Immaculate and the Most Holy Sacrament of the Eucharist.” Fr Rua did not mention the Pope who fell dead, so Don Bosco was also silent on this point. He only added: “You have said well. Only one expression must be corrected: the enemies' ships are the persecutions; they prepare very serious troubles for the Church. What has taken place so far is almost nothing compared with what will occur. Her enemies are the ships which make an attempt to sink the flag ship, if they can. There remain only two means to save ourselves in the midst of so much danger and confusion. Devotion to Mary Immaculate, frequent Confession and Communion. It is necessary to use every means and try our best to practice them and have them practised everywhere and by all. Good night!”

Dialogue with students with ASD about what they heard? Analysis of images related to this. Making their own in imitation. Conversation about who and what the characters were afraid of. What are we afraid of today. Demonstrating the message of John Bosco. Creating a climate for correct communication and overcoming fear. Showing that there will be crises in our lives too and who protects us is the beginning of building resilience.

Telling John Bosco’s dream and showing the beauty of the images to students with ASD can be understood as one of the stages of building a “resilience” strategy that:

* helps people to understand their personality better;
* encourages people to express themselves;
* teaches people to act without the pressure of judgement;
* supports people in the process of self-discovery and self-healing;
* triggers joy that supports team building;
* boosts self-esteem and self-confidence;
* stimulates creativity;
* teaches relaxation techniques.

**Summary**

The study takes into account the so-called turning points in the life of a student with ASD. These considerations were based on the extensive work of Michael Rutter, which was important and close to the topic (Rutter 1987). This article is the result of creating individual educational and therapeutic programs for Catholic religion teachers who work with students with ASD and practice inclusive education in Lublin. The aim of the activities was holistic activation that counteracts the social exclusion of students with ASD. The activities included classes based on narrative biography, stories related to Christian culture, biblical stories, and the testimonies of the lives of Catholic saint teachers included in the so-called path of beauty (*via pulchritudinis*). The starting point was issues related to key existential moments of students with ASD who change schools or environments or express fear of the COVID-19 epidemic or war in Ukraine.

Picasso once said: “Art washes away from the soul the dust of everyday life.”