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CHRISTIAN FORMATION OF LAY PEOPLE IN THE LIGHT OF THE POST-SYNODAL APOSTOLIC EXHORTA- TION *CHRISTIFIDELES LAICI* BY JOHN PAUL II¹

1. Introduction

The laity is the measure of the quality of the Church's life. Therefore, during the Second Vatican Council, attention was given to changing the way ecclesiology was practised. Consequently, the perception of the role and mission of the lay faithful in the Church also changed. The laity, who had hitherto played a secondary role to those participating in the hierarchical priesthood in carrying out the

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1. The article has been published in Polish: J. Młodecki, *Formacja chrześcijańska świeckich w świetle posynodalnej adhortacji apostolskiej Christifideles laici Jana Pawła II*, w: *Wybrane aspekty formacji chrześcijańskiej*, red. D. Kielb, M. Powęska, Rzeszów 2022, s. 267-278.

apostolic mission of the Church, were valued by the Council and invited to take responsibility for the Mystical Body of Christ².

A very important step towards changing the face of the Church to be more relevant to modern people has been the appreciation and development of the pastoral fields of theology and the use of the heritage of the human sciences as indicated by the research: "Modern pastoral theology is characterised by great dynamism related to the rapidly shifting conditions of pastoral theology in numerous countries. The subject of this discipline's research concerns the existence and redemptive activity of the Church in its current conditionality, which the practical theology desires to capture, critically evaluate, and systematically express while taking into account current conditionality, in which the universal Church or particular Church materialises itself in the world. The broader approach of pastoral theology defines it as «critical, theological reflection on the practices of the Church as they interact with the practices of the world, with a view to ensuring and enabling faithful participation in God's redemptive practices in, to, and for the world». 3 The analyses conducted in pastoral theology have their source in normative indications contained, first of all, in the Sacred Scriptures and the teaching of the Church. However, in the context of modern cultural transformations, theoretical considerations are insufficient and therefore it is necessary to conduct sociological research or refer to more extensive social studies to determine the conditionality of pastoral activity, as well as evaluate the effectiveness of created and performed pastoral strategies. This research then becomes a basis for conclusions that should be taken into account when creating new pastoral directives, principles, and models.⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote about the strong relationship between theology and sociology and even equated these disciplines in his doctoral thesis in 1927"³.

The aforementioned transformation, however, is not something entirely new in the Church, but rather a renewal and reminder of the way in which its original communities functioned. Christians, writes the author of the second-century *Letter to Diognet*, "do not differ from other people either in their place of residence, language or dress. (...) They live each in their own homeland, but like strangers. They take on all responsibilities as citizens and bear all burdens as foreigners. Every foreign land is their homeland and every homeland a foreign land (...). They are in the flesh, but live not according to the flesh. They abide on earth, but are citizens of heaven. They obey the established laws, and with their own lives they

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2. Por. J. Życiński, *Wprowadzenie do Dekretu o apostołstwie świeckich*, w: *Sobór Watykański II. Konstytucje. Dekrety. Deklaracje*, red. M. Przybył, Poznań 2012, s. 367.
 3. D. Kielb, *Sociological research in pastoral theology. Objectives and execution*, „Roczniki Teologiczne”, 70 (2023), z. 3, s. 9-10.

overcome the laws. They love death, and gain life. They are poor, and enrich the many. They do not get everything, but they abound in everything (...). In a word: what the soul is in the body, that is what Christians are in the world”⁴.

The Council Fathers wanted a renewal of the Church. They undertook its reform, drawing on the experience of the early Christian communities. They understood that this had to be done through the renewal of societies in which Christians were to become like the soul animating the body. In order for the aforementioned transformation to become a reality, it was necessary to put the laity on a path of spiritual formation referring to the lifestyle of the original communities of the Church. The *Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity* (*Apostolicam actuositatem*) was the fruit of these efforts. Twenty years later, John Paul II, wishing to deepen the thought of the Council Fathers, influenced by the indications of the Synod of Bishops held in Rome from 1 to 30 October 1987⁵ wrote the apostolic exhortation *Christifideles laici*. This document “undertakes a wide-ranging reflection on the vocation and mission of the laity in the Church”⁶, including a reflection on the ongoing formation of lay Catholics.

The question of why and how to form the lay faithful is still relevant today. It requires a presentation of the Christian vision of the human person and the problems facing our society. A continuation and development of the conciliar thought presented by Pope John Paul II in his 1988 document may be of help - at least in part - in finding a solution to these questions. The post-synodal exhortation *Christifideles laici* will largely be the source of these reflections.

2. Basic concepts

Before characterising the formation of lay Catholics in the light of the exhortation *Christifideles laici*, it is necessary to clarify the terms most important for this work, namely: *lay faithful* and *formation*.

The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium* defines what *the laity* is. The Council Fathers define this part of the Mystical Body of Christ as “all faithful Christians who are not members of the priestly and religious orders legally established in the Church, namely faithful Christians who, being incorporated by baptism into Christ, established as the People of God and made in their own

4. *List do Diogneta*, <https://brewiarz.pl/indeksy/pokaz.php3?id=6&nr=115> [dostęp: 14.02.2022 r.].

5. Jan Paweł II, *Posynodalna adhortacja apostolska Christifideles laici. O powołaniu i misji świeckich w Kościele i w świecie dwadzieścia lat po Soborze Watykańskim II*, Watykan 1988, nr 2 [dalej: ChL].

6. Tamże.

way participants in the priestly, prophetic and kingly office of Christ, for their part exercise the mission proper to the whole Christian people in the Church and in the world”⁷. Despite such a seemingly precise characterisation of the term *lay faithful*, distinct views have emerged in post-conciliar theological discourse on the subject. Among other things, it has been postulated that a negative theology - apophatic - should be applied to the laity, analogous to what is done when speaking of God⁸. The reason for this is the richness of the community of the Church manifested in its diversity and looking at the same reality from many perspectives. It is important to note that this approach to the place of the laity in the Church does not contradict the words of the Constitution *Lumen Gentium* quoted above, but has a positive impact on the development of the theology of the laity. An illustration of the current debate in the Church on the apostolate of the lay faithful can be found in three documents signed by John Paul II. These are: *Catechesi tradendae*, *Familiaris consortio* and *Christifideles laici*. *Catechesi tradendae* (1979) specifies the possibilities for the laity to become involved in the fulfilment of the Church’s prophetic mission. *Familiaris consortio* (1981) points to marriage between a man and a woman as the basis of family life, which is the place of sanctification of its members⁹. *Christifideles laici* (1988), on the other hand, draws attention to the need for systematic catechesis¹⁰. This formation, the Pope writes, should be adapted “to the age and the different life situations”¹¹. It should also introduce a more emphatic Christian promotion of “culture as a response to the perennial questions troubling man and contemporary society”¹².

The conceptual scope of the term *formation* partly coincides with the term *education*. The term is derived from the Latin word *forma*, which means shape or appearance. The verb derived from this term, on the other hand, means to give a certain shape, form or simply to put into form¹³. Formation, therefore, means the action of an individual (a person or group of persons) exerting an influence on the personality of another in order to shape his mind and will¹⁴. Meanwhile,

7. Sobór Watykański II, *Konstytucja dogmatyczna o Kościele Lumen gentium*, w: *Sobór Watykański II*, nr 31.

8. J. Życiński, *Wprowadzenie do Dekretu o apostołstwie świeckich*, w: *Sobór Watykański II*, s. 371.

9. Tamże, s. 372

10. D. Kielb, *Pojęcie formacji chrześcijańskiej*, w: *Wybrane aspekty formacji chrześcijańskiej*, red. D. Kielb, M. Powęska, Rzeszów 2022, s. 15-27.

11. ChL, nr 60.

12. Tamże.

13. S. Haręzga, *Jezus i Jego uczniowie. Model chrześcijańskiej formacji według św. Marka*, Lublin 2006, s. 31

14. M. Fijałkowski, *Formacja katolików świeckich*, „Roczniki Pastoralno-Katechetyczne”, 56 (2009), t. 1, s. 36.

Scripture portrays formation not only as upbringing or teaching, but also as the creation of Adam, who is fashioned by God from the dust of the ground (see Genesis 2:7)¹⁵. Man, having received life from his Father, was formed in His image and likeness. Thus, God destined man to develop this image in himself, which was most fully revealed in Jesus Christ. It can therefore be said that formation in its biblical aspect is the imitation of God's Son¹⁶. John Paul II in his exhortation *Christifideles laici* defines the concept explained here in a similar way. Referring to the indications of the synodal fathers, he defines "Christian formation as a continuous process of personal maturation and conformation to Christ, according to the will of the Father, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit"¹⁷.

3. A Christian vision of man

Man does not exist only for himself. He was created by God to be fulfilled above all in his relationship with his Father. This fact is accurately formulated by the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*¹⁸: *For God created us to know Him, to serve Him, to love Him, and in this way to reach Paradise*¹⁹. Man is therefore oriented towards God, towards the reality of immortality and infinity, and therefore strives in his relatively short life on earth to find the highest values of Truth, Goodness and Love²⁰. This aspiration of man to the One who transcends our world was expressed by John Paul in his homily during the Mass at Zwycięstwa Square in Warsaw in 1979. These are today's well-known words showing who man is: *For man cannot be fully understood without Christ. Or rather: man cannot fully understand himself without Christ. He cannot understand either who he is or what his proper dignity is or what his vocation and ultimate destiny is. He cannot understand all this without Christ*²¹.

The Christian vision of man emphasises his dignity, vocation and ultimate destiny. However, despite man's experience of transcending the created world,

15. S. Harężga, *Jezus i Jego uczniowie*, s. 31.

16. M. Fijałkowski, *Formacja katolików świeckich*, s. 36.

17. ChL, nr 57.

18. *Katechizm Kościoła Katolickiego*, Poznań 2002.

19. Tamże, nr 1721.

20. Por. K. Trojan, *Potrzeby psychiczne i wartości oraz ich implikacje religijne*, Kraków 2007, s. 37.

21. Jan Paweł II, *Homilia w czasie Mszy Św. odprawionej na placu Zwycięstwa*, 2.06.1979 r., <https://www.ekai.pl/dokumenty/homilia-jana-pawla-ii-wygloszona-podczas-mszy-sw-na-placu-zwyciestwa> [dostęp: 14.02.2022 r.].

Christian anthropology recognises that he also experiences his own weakness²². There is, therefore, a certain split in man: he desires the good, but often does evil, thus distancing himself from his ultimate vocation, which is to be conformed to the Creator. The realisation of this truth is a difficult experience and mission for man. For he knows that *his task is to direct properly the forces which he himself has aroused, and which can crush him or serve him*²³. This is why human life is very often compared to a constant struggle between good and evil. Man cannot prevail in it by his own strength. This drama and inner dichotomy leads him to Christ, who came that we may have life and have it in abundance²⁴. Thus, the way to live life to the full and to mature properly in becoming more like God is to enter into a process of formation.

4. Characteristics of the formation of the lay faithful

The process of human formation is effective if it uses the right tools and pursues a clearly defined direction. John Paul II points out that the “fundamental aim of the formation of lay Catholics is for them to discover ever more fully their own vocation and to be ever more ready to live it in the fulfilment of their own mission”²⁵. It is of the utmost importance that *it is God who calls me*²⁶ to be involved in the building up of the Church. Each person should therefore strive to hear this divine voice and undertake the mission commissioned by the Creator. This mission, however, is not shown by God in its entirety at a single moment in life, but - as has been pointed out several times in this work - successively. It is therefore necessary to systematically and patiently strain the spiritual sense of hearing God’s voice. Man can hear God above all in prayer, by reading and meditating on Sacred Scripture, by studying the teaching of the Magisterium of the Church, as well as by making use of spiritual direction and by recognising the

22. „...in man himself, many opposing tendencies fight each other. For while, on the one hand, as a creature he experiences frequent limitation, on the other he is unlimited in his desires and feels called to a higher life. (...) being weak and sinful, he often does what he does not want to do and does not do what he would like to do. Hence he experiences in himself the rift from which so many serious misunderstandings also arise in society”. Sobór Watykański II, *Konstytucja duszpasterska o Kościele w świecie współczesnym Gaudium et spes*, w: *Sobór Watykański II*, nr 10 [dalej: KDK].

23. KDK, nr 9.

24. Por. J 10, 10.

25. ChL, nr 58.

26. Tamże.

signs of the times²⁷. Recognising God's voice, however, is only part of the formation process. Its essential aim is the human response, that is, to act according to the will of the Lord, recognised with God's help. Man is never alone in this mission, for God, who calls him, also gives him adequate help to fulfil the commissioned task. This help is effective divine grace requiring human cooperation²⁸.

Christifideles laici points to four aspects of formation. In the approach presented here, spiritual formation is distinguished, which is "life in the deepest union with Christ in the Church"²⁹. It is fostered especially through the communal experience of the sacred liturgy. Participation in such prayer leads to entering into a process of integral formation. Integral, that is, characterised in man by the coherence of his life of faith and existence in the world³⁰. For, as the Council teaches, among many people there is a "disjunction between the faith they profess and their daily life... [such conduct] is to be counted among the more serious anomalies of our time"³¹. The deepening of spiritual formation should take place together with doctrinal formation. This development is somewhat natural, since spiritual progress is usually accompanied by an increased desire for intellectual growth. Catechesis with elements of doctrinal formation is also necessary because of the presence of the lay faithful in a secularised world and one divided by numerous and often complex problems. Every Christian who has to face such a difficult reality for the deepening of faith should learn to justify that faith in order not to lose the hope he or she possesses³².

The involvement of Christians in social and political life requires them to be familiar with Catholic social teaching. The pope, following the synodal fathers, emphasises that the social teaching of the Church "provides the principles of reflection, criteria of evaluation and guidelines for action"³³ necessary to spread human and Christian values in the world and to respect them³⁴. However, it is particularly important to educate Christians themselves to recognise these values in everyday life. For the laity should value above all education, respect for family life, patriotism, as well as the virtues pertaining to "social life, i.e. honesty, the spirit of justice, honesty, gentleness, strength of spirit, without which there can be no true Christian life"³⁵.

27. Tamże.

28. Tamże.

29. ChL, nr 60.

30. Tamże, nr 59.

31. KDK, nr 43.

32. ChL, nr 60

33. Tamże.

34. Tamże.

35. Sobór Watykański II, *Dekret o apostołstwie świeckich Apostolicam actuositatem*, w: *Sobór Watykański II*, nr 4.

John Paul II identifies the places and persons responsible for conducting the formation of the laity. The first plane responsible for the education of the lay faithful is the Church-Mother, where God plays the role of father. In Him, after all, is the source of caring³⁶ and the source of wisdom. Jesus Christ, on the other hand, is the best educator, who reaches out to human hearts through the Holy Spirit working in them. This formation takes place through the symbiotic openness to each other of all the members of the Mystical Body of Christ, from the Pope to the bishops at the head of the particular Churches to the clergy who preach the word of God and the laity who participate in the life of the parish. A particular support for the formation and education of the laity living in areas where there is a shortage of priests is provided by “small ecclesial communities, through which the awareness and experience of ecclesial communion and mission reach all corners”³⁷.

There are also other formative environments. Above all, the domestic Church, the Christian family, is such a place of formation. The newlyweds, who vow to love each other before God, receive a spiritual gift from Him. This grace enables them to build up their family and to bring up their children in a Christian way, who receive their first experience of the Church from their parents. “The greater the awareness of the Christian spouses and parents that their domestic Church shares in the life and mission of the universal Church, the more a sense of the Church develops in their children and a sense of what a beautiful thing it is to put their energies at the service of the Kingdom of God”³⁸.

Another space for education mentioned in *Christifideles laici* are places of education, such as schools, universities and centres for spiritual renewal. The use of knowledge from scientific disciplines other than theology can be very helpful in carrying out this mission, as various contributions attest: “In modern scientific discourse, analyses have a more interdisciplinary nature. This results from the fact that, since more research problems are sufficiently multidimensional and complex, it is difficult to solve them using the achievements of only one discipline. Pope Francis postulated so in the 2017 Apostolic Constitution *Veritatis Gaudium* on Ecclesiastical Universities and Faculties: Today’s discovery of the principle of interdisciplinarity is undoubtedly positive and promising: not so much in its form of «weak» mere multidisciplinary as an approach that fosters a better understanding of a subject of study from several points of view; but more in its form of «strong» transdisciplinarity, as the place and development of all knowledge within the space of Light and Life offered by the Wisdom that emanates from the

36. Por. Pwt 32, 10–12.

37. ChL, nr 61.

38. Tamże, nr 62.

Revelation of God. Similarly, Pope John Paul II directly points to the importance of theological and pastoral research with the use of sociology. In the exhortation *Familiaris consortio* he wrote: The Church appreciates sociological and statistical research as long as it proves useful for grasping the historical context in which it is to develop pastoral activity and for better understanding of the truth; however, these studies cannot be regarded as an expression of the sense of faith. (...) Interdisciplinary research can also be used as a tool that assesses pastoral activities by examining pastoral structures or practices, identifying issues related to new forms of communication and evangelization on the Internet, communicativeness of language, i.e., whether it is preaching or communication in the Church as a community and institution. This allows noticing the stereotypes functioning in the minds of the faithful or clergy but also opens up new areas of research questions³⁹. The current social situation requires the Church's faithful to take care of the education of the younger generation of Christians. To this end, educational groups made up of those who care about the proper formation of children and young people should be set up: parents, teachers, priests⁴⁰ etc. Care must also be taken to ensure that they are properly educated in the latest human knowledge. However, irrespective of the structures and qualifications of the educators, it is necessary that in all centres of education those responsible set an example of a life based on Christian values. For formation is not only a privilege for a select few, but a right and duty for all⁴¹.

5. Conclusion

The above reflections aim to answer the questions: what is formation and why should there be ongoing formation of the lay faithful in the Church? John Paul II, in the exhortation under examination, defines formation as a never-ending process of maturing a person into a relationship with God. The Holy Spirit working in the Church helps all the faithful to conform themselves to the only and most perfect model - Jesus Christ. The fundamental aim of the Christian education of the laity, therefore, is to discover one's own vocation and to pursue it willingly. It is particularly important to acquire the awareness that with the reception of Holy Baptism, one becomes a beloved child of the Father, a member of the body of His Son and a living temple of the Holy Spirit⁴². Thus, every Christian, by following

39. D. Kielb, *Sociological research in pastoral theology*, s. 25-26.

40. Tamże.

41. Por. ChL, nr 63.

42. Por. tamże, nr 64.

the path assigned to him by God, shares in the building up of the Mystical Body of Christ. This Mystical Body is the “coexistence of multiple vocations and states, mysteries, charisms and tasks which, although different, are complementary to one another. This diversity and complementarity means that each lay person remains in relation to the whole body and makes his own contribution to it”⁴³. However, this does not happen on its own, but is the culmination of the strenuous effort of all Christians together and each person. Although God, and He alone, confirms the Church by His efficacious grace, all people should strive to fulfil their vocation according to the will of the Creator. And the constant integral formation of the laity is to be a help in realising and realising this truth.

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43. Por. tamże, nr 20.

Sobór Watykański II, *Konstytucja duszpasterska o Kościele w świecie współczesnym Gaudium et spes*, w: *Sobór Watykański II. Konstytucje. Dekrety. Deklaracje*, red. M. Przybył, Poznań 2012, s. 526-606.

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Summary

The formation of the lay faithful is one of the most important issues of pastoral action in many dioceses in Poland and around the world. The Second Vatican Council gave a particular impetus to the development of this sphere of the Church's life. The post-synodal exhortation *Christifideles laici*, written twenty years after the Council, is also the part of the renewal dynamic thus initiated. The purpose of this article is to present John Paul II's position on the formation of the laity in the Church contained in the document under review. First, however, the Christian vision of man is introduced and basic concepts such as formation and the lay faithful are explained. The core of the article is a characterisation of post-conciliar thought on the laity and their formation. The analysis of the text of the title document presented gives an answer to the question of how and why the Church should organise the ongoing formation of the laity.

Keywords: the lay faithful, formation, the laity, the Christian vision of the person.

FORMACJA CHRZEŚCIJAŃSKA ŚWIECKICH W ŚWIETLE POSYNODALNEJ ADHORTACJI APOSTOLSKIEJ *CHRISTIFIDELES LAICI* JANA PAWŁA II

Streszczenie

Formacja wiernych świeckich jest jedną z najbardziej istotnych kwestii działania pastoralnego wielu diecezji w Polsce i na świecie. Szczególny impuls do rozwoju tej sfery funkcjonowania życia Kościoła dał Sobór Watykański II. W rozpoczętą w ten sposób dynamikę odnowy wpisuje się również powstała dwadzieścia lat po Soborze posynodalna adhortacja *Christifideles laici*. Celem niniejszego artykułu jest zaprezentowanie stanowiska Jana Pawła II zawartego w analizowanym do-

kumencie na temat formacji świeckich w Kościele. Najpierw jednak przybliżono chrześcijańską wizję człowieka i wyjaśniono podstawowe pojęcia, takie jak: formacja i wierny świecki. Sedno artykułu stanowi jednak charakterystyka posoborowej myśli na temat laikatu i jego formacji. Przedstawiona analiza tekstu tytułowego dokumentu daje odpowiedź na pytanie o to, w jaki sposób i dlaczego Kościół powinien organizować stałą formację laikatu.

Słowa kluczowe: wierny świecki, formacja, laikat, chrześcijańska wizja osoby.