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The Fear of the COVID-19 Pandemic and Its Relation to Religion

Abstract: It is known that the COVID-19 pandemic can be a cause of fear and anxiety. There exists a deep need to seek refuge from anxiety in a reality that would offer a sense of greater certainty. Within this framework, religion can be assessed in three different ways. Its negative assessment is linked with a pragmatic approach to the world. Alongside the negative assessment of religion, there is also a positive one. However, there is still a third possible approach, that of using religion as a response to the difficulties of the pandemic. Religion can function as a factor in rationalizing the time of the pandemic. Religion can also generate two strategies by which a person can respond to difficult situations. These strategies can be referred to as a kenotic one and a palliative one.

Keywords: COVID-19, fear, religion, ministry, strategy

Introduction

At the present time, our knowledge of the COVID-19 pandemic is about as wide as it is diverse. This issue is one of the topics that have been generating theories that are astonishing in their number but also in their divergence. The author of this article decided to approach the issue through a religious lens, as many other authors have done. The analysis of data for the last two years shows that the virus, widely considered to be responsible for the COVID-19 pandemic, is less harmful than other, similar viruses, but much faster and more efficient in terms of transmission. As early as March 2020, which is when the virus officially first appeared in Poland, there were already more than 830,000 confirmed cases and more than 41,000 deaths worldwide, giving a mortality rate of around 4.9 per

cent. The number of deaths far exceeds the number of cases and deaths reported in the SARS and MERS epidemics in 2003 and 2012 respectively, characterized by higher mortality rates and severity.¹ Thus, the lower mortality rate and milder course of COVID-19 are largely “compensated” by its rapid spread. Also, it should be borne in mind that COVID-19 death rates need to be placed in the context of efforts by the relevant authorities to contain the pandemic and to protect those in high-risk groups. It seems reasonable to believe that the contribution of COVID-19 to mortality would undoubtedly have been higher had the authorities of the individual countries not pursued such a policy.² The essentially similar relationships between most individual-level risk factors and mortality from COVID-19 and non-COVID causes suggest that COVID-19 to a large extent simply amplifies the underlying risk of death. Why, therefore, did the actions taken by individual countries seem to have had apparently no impact on mortality rates? Possible explanations include geographical factors, population demographics and density, genetic factors, and cultural differences along with the organization of healthcare and nursing for the elderly.³ Surprisingly enough, it is at this point that the only positive correlation can be noted, and that is in the economic domain. It is the correlation between the infection rate and the economic support rate. That positive correlation, however, needs to be explained in chronological order: higher economic support does not appear to have resulted in higher COVID-19 mortality rates, but higher mortality rates appeared to have triggered a greater social response, including more economic resources allocated to address the pandemic.⁴ Demographic characteristics, lifestyle factors and comorbidities in general had qualitatively similar associations with the risk of both COVID-19 and non-COVID deaths.⁵ In his article *Globalization and Pandemics: The Case of COVID-19*, Mario Ruiz Estrada notes the emergence of a form of *the new post-modern isolation welfare*

¹ Garima – Sight, “Fatality in COVID 19,” 1190.

² Bhaskaran – Bacon – Evans, “Factors associated with deaths,” 9.

³ Lundberg – Zeberg, “Longitudinal variability,” 3.

⁴ De Laroche Lambert *et al.*, “Covid-19 Mortality,” 7–8.

⁵ Bhaskaran – Bacon – Evans, “Factors associated with deaths,” 10.

state. The author's concluding observations are that COVID spreads quantitatively and qualitatively irrespective of time and place, and of the type of preventive measures that are implemented.⁶

The research method adopted for this article partly draws on the method of interpretation *sub ratione Dei* proposed by Henryk Seweryniak.⁷ It involves two steps. In step one, the researcher identifies the problem. At this stage, the complexity of the investigated interdisciplinary phenomenon, psychological and technical conditions, and other similar factors, must be taken into account. In the second step, the researcher interprets the problem from a theological perspective.⁸ The problem discussed in this article is summarized in the question about the religious methods of coping with the fear generated by the pandemic.

For the purposes of this paper, it should suffice to say that anxiety is defined as a negative emotional reaction to an experienced fear of an impending and previously known event that may involve loss of health or life.⁹ Further, the meaning of fear can be extended to include any emotionally negative agitation that is the result of assessing the severity of the threat caused by a particular situation.¹⁰ Fear may be associated not only with a real threat but also with a number of, so to speak, concomitant factors associated with it, like gender or social status.¹¹ Such factors can undoubtedly include the COVID-19 pandemic.

1. Religion in Negative Terms

There are some indications that religion is an immature way of coping with life challenges in times of stress.¹² Ahmed Abbas refers to such a negative impact in the cases of South Korea and Iran, where medical safety recommendations were widely ignored and religious

⁶ Estrada, "Globalization and Pandemics," 8.

⁷ Seweryniak, "Teologia na 'progu domu,'" 19–20.

⁸ Przywara *et al.*, "Online Live-Stream."

⁹ Van Bavel *et al.*, "Using social," 461.

¹⁰ Witte – Allen, "A meta-analysis of fear," 599.

¹¹ Wang *et al.*, "Fear of COVID-19," 2, 8.

¹² Kumar Kar *et al.*, "Religion and behaviour," 140.

ceremonies were allowed, which could lead to a dramatic increase in the number of infected individuals. For example, the Shincheonji religious group was accused to be one of the main reasons for the spread of the virus in their region.¹³ The Catholic Code of Canon Law states that the proper way to sanctify a holy day is to physically participate in the Holy Mass in the place of its celebration (*CIC* 1248), where the entire congregation is gathered and the Holy Communion is distributed while people's hands or mouths can be touched (cf. *CCC* 1387). The great theologian St. Thomas Aquinas wrote that although such Food also has consequences for the soul, it does not lose its effects for the human body.¹⁴ It follows that there may still be viruses on the Eucharistic bread that can be infected. Similarly, in India, the loss of health is explained on the grounds of a religious belief as a physiological consequence of certain experiences of the affected individuals. Supernatural causation refers to mystical situations, and the causes of illness are, in the opinion of the faithful, linked to spirits, spells, exorcisms, and similar beliefs.¹⁵ The COVID-19 pandemic has also caused concern among Filipino believers. They know that the pandemic is potentially deadly, based on the news and reports they receive. There are also some Filipino Christians who believe in the concept of death due to God's punishment or will.¹⁶ The Polish Episcopate has also warned against treating the pandemic as God's punishment and against teaching in this way. The bishops have evaluated as harmful to refer to private pseudo-revelations and dreams, to nonchalant biblical exegesis taken out of context, to ignore, marginalize or even openly question the contemporary teaching of the Church. The failure to distinguish between the order of nature and grace, the spiritual and material dimensions, which leads to disregarding the safety rules during the liturgy, has also been rightly criticized. It is unacceptable to treat the sacraments and

¹³ Abbas *et al.*, "COVID-19," 1.

¹⁴ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Against the Gentiles*, IV, 66.

¹⁵ John – Mene, "COVID-19 Pandemic", 74.

¹⁶ Tudy, "COVID-19 and Spiritual Needs," 433.

other blessings magically, and that approach was also possible among the believers in the time of pandemic.¹⁷

Religion has been and continues to be seen as a set of beliefs that exists and functions in society and has a non-trivial and negative impact on it, which is why some argue that a more appropriate modern outlook and culture should be involved in the diagnosis and treatment of the worrying phenomenon of religion.¹⁸ All the while, religion in this research has been treated as a set of beliefs that are considered sacred, supernatural or divinely revealed, and are therefore functionally suitable for use in guiding human actions to meet specific biological, social and integrative needs.¹⁹ That way, the religious phenomenon – usually quite intangible in terms of research and difficult to verify objectively – was observed in terms of its function or utility for individuals and societies. To some extent, the traditional question of the reliability of religious beliefs, such as the Christian faith, is expressed more indirectly and practically in terms of the utility or advantages it generates for individuals and groups. If a set of religious beliefs does not pass this test – irrespective of whether those beliefs contribute something practical or solve pressing problems – then they become useless and irrelevant.²⁰ Pope Francis also noted the emotional needs that religion satisfies in difficult times. Calling to mind Lot's wife (Gen 19:1–29) and darkness that covered Mount of Sinai (Exod 34:7) the Pope said that the situation of pandemic has engulfed our lives, filling everything with a deafening silence and a sullen emptiness that paralyzes everything in its path.²¹ Contemporary culture is highly pragmatic; consequently, if religion does not offer any positive service (or if it produces more negative than positive effects), it is believed that it should not play a role in societies, for the reason that religion unnecessarily “consumes” certain social energies that could be channeled much more productively.

¹⁷ Commission for the Doctrine of Faith of the Polish Episcopal Conference, *Against the false prophets*, no. 3.

¹⁸ Schilbrack, “Religious Practices,” 47.

¹⁹ Wibisono – Truna – Rahman, “Turning religion,” 2.

²⁰ Lumbreras – Oviedo, “The pandemic and its influence,” 9.

²¹ Francis, *Urbi et Orbi Blessing*, March 27, 2020.

It is believed that while most professionals around the world are still trying to prevent the further spread of COVID-19, spirituality and prayers can at best reassure people, while religions and their practice mostly do not so much reduce as cause problems during a pandemic.²² Life and physical health are precious goods entrusted to us by God. We are to take reasonable care of them, taking into account the needs of others and the common good (CCC 2288). Even religion itself provides arguments that its incorrect practice is not in accordance with the will of God: “Thou shall not put the Lord thy God to the test” (Deut 6:16; Matt 4:5–7) and allows to object to the decisions of superiors if they are untrue (Gal 2:11–14). According to Damian Ruck, an issue to consider is the resilience of cultural factors, and religion is among such factors, to unprecedented challenges and events. While trust in the institutions of democracy should make it easier for individual governments to act, this value has been declining for decades in many Western countries. The utilitarian values of cosmopolitanism, which predict the economic prosperity and democracy of nations in the long term, can, in short-term crisis events, hinder a strategic, coordinated response of the state. Hence, individual governments should in fact consider the role of cultural values and phenomena in preparing for possible future global crises.²³

2. Religion in Positive Terms

From the Enlightenment through the Positivist period, religion was thought to be negatively correlated with health. Meanwhile, the relationship between these two realities is more complex, and the positive aspects of religion have also come to the fore again in the contemporary era. Rejecting the pessimistic and fatalistic understanding of history, the Christianity regards Christ as the sense of world history and God as absolute future. St. John Paul II wrote that “the spirituality of communion” is the ability to feel a bond with a brother in faith thanks to the unity of the Mystical Body, and therefore to see him as “someone close to ourselves,” which

²² Fardin, “COVID-19 Epidemic,” 2.

²³ Ruck – Borycz – Bentley, “Cultural values,” 74.

makes it possible to share his joys and sufferings and meet his or her needs.²⁴ Francis says that it is good know the names of brothers and sisters in need. Only the condemned man from the Gospel lost his name.²⁵ The pandemic mobilizes faithful people to discover brotherhood and belonging to one human family.²⁶ Research suggests a positive impact of religion on mental health, particularly in terms of happiness and overall satisfaction with one's life. For many, religion remains an unchanging reality in the face of shifting and adverse circumstances.²⁷ Francis said that true worshipping the Lord means giving Him the place that he must have and believing that God truly guides our lives.²⁸ Indeed, research in neurology undertaken by Hans Koenig in 2005 found that religion, especially the practice of prayer, helps to reduce stress and is linked to positive emotions, happiness, hope, giving meaning and purpose, optimism and well-being in general.²⁹ Therefore, the relevance of religion in terms of health is not limited to the coincidental usefulness of sanitary prevention practices (some religions use ablution several times a day, washing hands before eating, and similar rituals), which have been given the status of sacredness.

Indeed, religion can contribute to preparing and organizing society as a whole to cooperate against crises.³⁰ Pope Benedict XVI, who has lately died, says that faithful people are invited to have no fear (Matt 10:26, 28). Fear is a natural dimension of life. Therefore, it must be faced and overcome with human determination and trust in God. However, especially today, there is a deeper form of fear of an existential type. In the face of the broad and diversified panorama of human fears, the Word of God is clear: those who "fear" God "are not afraid."³¹ Those who fear God feel within them the safety

²⁴ John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, no. 43.

²⁵ Francis, Homily *Do not fall prey*.

²⁶ Commission for the Doctrine of Faith of the Polish Episcopate Conference, *Against the false prophets*, no. 4.

²⁷ Kumar Kar *et al.*, "Religion and behaviour," 140.

²⁸ Francis, *Homily in Saint Paul's Basilica*, April 14, 2013, 2.

²⁹ Koenig, *Faith & mental health*, 75–76.

³⁰ Abbas *et al.*, "COVID-19", 1.

³¹ Benedict XVI, *Angelus*, June 22, 2008.

that an infant in his mother's arms feels (Ps 130:2). St. John wrote: "Perfect love casts out fear" (1 John 4:18a).

Last but not least, research also shows that psycho-social attitudes such as xenophobia do not come directly from religion, but from the narrowness of the human mind. Religion actually counteracts xenophobia through its function of "salvation of humankind." Therefore, within the framework of religion, efforts are made in the sphere of communication and missionary activities, which sometimes include the dialogue between the local population and immigrants or foreigners.³² Within the framework of religion, believers are expected to understand that interpersonal interactions are not limited to matters that are attractive or profitable for them, with emphasis placed on universal human dignity and principles established to protect the essence of what makes a human being human.³³ St. John Paul II preached that it is the time to preach it from the rooftops (Luke 12:3b). Let the peoples not be afraid to break out of comfortable and routine modes of living in order to take up the challenge of making Christ known in the modern metropolis.³⁴ Benedict XVI similarly teaches the faithful to not to fear the storms of life, nor any wreckage, for God's plan of love is much more powerful than any storm or any wreckage.³⁵ In addition Pope Francis said that though the life of a person is in a land full of thorns and weeds, there is always a space in which the good seed can grow.³⁶

Of great assistance in maintaining individual mental and intellectual balance is the so-called *journaling* present within religion. It is a spiritual practice of active and regular reading and reflection, combined with writing down personal reflections on God and faith. This type of activation of faith provides brilliant moments of self-awareness and peace of mind for the person concerned and for others who may need a "spiritual anchor" when times are unpredictable.³⁷ Religion, despite all its limitations, still evokes positive emotions.

³² Lumbreras – Oviedo, "The pandemic and its influence," 8.

³³ Wibisono – Truna – Rahman, "Turning religion," 6.

³⁴ John Paul II, *Homily for the Inauguration*, no. 5.

³⁵ Benedict XVI, *General Audience*, April 21, 2010.

³⁶ Francis, *New York Times Interview*.

³⁷ Dixon, *Activating Faith*, 9.

There is no doubt that spirituality and religion can be helpful in grief and in times of crisis. Although epidemiologists have long tried to answer whether spirituality and religion are associated with mortality and health, most internal medicine practitioners are positive about spirituality.³⁸ Pope Benedict XVI observed that Christians can address God with a child's trust, in a filial relationship analogous to that of Jesus. Indeed, Christianity is not a religion of fear but rather of trust and love, towards the Father who loves his children.³⁹

Research has also shown that reading the Bible helps improve the neural pathways in the brain which are also improved by what is known as "positive thinking." A positive outlook has already proven effective in reducing stress and, as Archibald D. Hart stated in his work *The Anxiety Cure*, in restoring our calm, reversing unhappiness and changing anxiety hormones into happiness hormones.⁴⁰ Dixon argues that a useful tool to help an individual's practice of prayer is an attitude that could be referred to using the acronym ACTS (alluding to the concept of acts of kindness and to the title of the biblical book of Acts of the Apostles). A in this acronym, stands for Adoration, or giving praise to God; C for Confession or, in general terms, asking for the forgiveness of sins; T stands for Thanksgiving, understood as remembering God's grace and mercy; and S for Supplication, that is pleading for oneself and for others.⁴¹ Yet another study showed that holding religious beliefs has a positive impact on the level of satisfaction of respondents. Surveys among Polish and Ukrainian young people show that among deeply religious students, as many as 81% declare satisfaction with life. In contrast, among young non-believers, well-being was observed in 55%. It can also be seen that dissatisfaction with life is inversely proportional to the level of religious commitment. The results of the analyses indicate that faith acts as a predictor of happiness. These findings are consistent with those of other studies on happiness. This relationship is explained by the fact that believers are more likely to have social support and

³⁸ Fardin, "COVID-19 Epidemic," 1.

³⁹ Benedict XVI, *Regina Coeli*, May 20, 2012.

⁴⁰ Hart, *The Anxiety Cure*, 217.

⁴¹ Dixon, *Activating Faith*, 8.

be part of a community. Perhaps it is also worth noting that faith provides a sense of meaning in life for the individual and through it, they are protected from existential emptiness.⁴² We can use this difficult time to renew the practice of home and family prayer, for specific works of mercy, especially towards the elderly and lonely people, especially at risk of an epidemic.⁴³

Consequently, it is possible, in the light of the research, to credit religion with a positive role in the psychological and social domain, despite the different attitudes of individuals and worldviews towards religion. Even those with a negative attitude can be reminded that the different value systems represented by religious and non-religious people do not compete, but rather work together, even if somewhat fragmentarily. They also change depending on the moment or situation in life. Religious faith, however, mostly retains its own space and functionality in the present context. Therefore, an important function of religion in times of stress is to help people cope in a broad sense. Psalm 111(110) is sealed by contemplation of the divine face. The Lord is a person, so the Psalmist invites every member of the faithful to cultivate “fear of the Lord” (Ps 111[110]:10), the beginning of true wisdom. It is not fear and terror that are suggested by this word, but serious and sincere respect which is the fruit of love, a genuine and active attachment to God.⁴⁴

For several decades, the role of religion in coping with difficult situations has been explored from many perspectives. It appears that religious coping becomes more valuable in times of danger and anguish, crisis (on a personal or social level) and in illness or imminence of death. Pope Benedict XVI said that we don't have the answer for the question of suffering, but we do know that Jesus suffered being innocent. One must be aware that one day one will understand that this suffering was not in vain, but behind it was a plan of love. Although those who suffer sometimes do not understand

⁴² Długosz – Kryvachuk – Shyyan, *Praktyki społeczne*, 22–23.

⁴³ Commission for the Doctrine of Faith of the Polish Episcopate Conference, *Against the false prophets*, no. 4.

⁴⁴ Benedict XVI, *General Audience*, June 8, 2005.

the details or the words, but they feel the presence of love.⁴⁵ Religious faith can function even in a secular society as a value system coexisting with other value systems derived from different social sources. Values encompass a wide variety of categories, inter alia moral values. For example, it can be argued that physical beauty, fitness or novelty are emphasized by the media, that professional success, wealth and their display are emphasized by capitalism, while honesty or compassion are emphasized by moral systems such as those provided by religion.⁴⁶

3. Religion as a Response

In the fight against COVID-19, circumstances such as the high risk of infection, overwork, frustration, discrimination, isolation, lack of contact with families and fatigue can cause mental health problems such as stress, anxiety, depressive symptoms, insomnia, denial, anger and fear. It seems that religion had no clue how to resolve this problem of pandemic. During the first week of March 2020, a positive case was identified in Vatican City, so the Pontifical Basilicas and Vatican Museums were all closed. But soon, which means on March 20, the gift of special Indulgence (cf. CCC 1471) is granted to the faithful suffering from COVID-19 disease, as well as to health care workers, family members and all those who in any capacity, including through prayer, care for them.⁴⁷ The Pope created the Vatican COVID-19 Commission under the direction of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development.⁴⁸ The pandemic made it necessary to plan specific instructions and directions for pastoral work, such as mobilizing Catholic education, fighting poverty, reinforcing liturgy, encouraging spirituality or addressing the implications related to the quarantine that was applied as a priority measure to avoid the pandemic from spreading in countries.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Benedict XVI, *Homily*, February 11, 2010.

⁴⁶ Lumbreras – Oviedo, “The pandemic and its influence,” 9–10.

⁴⁷ Holy See, *Decree of the Apostolic Penitentiary*.

⁴⁸ Holy See, *Press Office Communiqué*, March 08, 2020.

⁴⁹ Pérez-Martínez, “The message of Pope Francis,” 215.

Multiple studies aim to show how religion helps individuals to visualize or rationalize the pandemic situation, overcome fear and other negative emotions, and cope personally with the situation. Above all, this study has provided findings on what emotions individuals experienced, what cognitive patterns they developed, what attitudes and situations they were in during the COVID-19 pandemic and how all these attitudes and situations can be explained in terms of religion. Encouragement has always been a topic of Church leader's preaching. Starting from John Paul II, who told to have no fear of moving into the unknown. Simply step out fearlessly knowing that God is with us, therefore no harm can befall us, and Pope Francis said that God is the light that illuminates the darkness, even if it does not dissolve it, and a spark of divine light is within each of us.⁵⁰ Research in Turkey has shown that the pandemic situation is compared to certain cultural archetypes. These comparisons represent three main directions, referred to as respectively: "anxiety," "risk" and "faith."⁵¹ Clear religious references are present in one of them. There were two main types of reactions as far as the group of people associating COVID-19 with "anxiety" is concerned. On the one hand, anxiety is transformed into a call for new ways of thinking, learning, educating, deciding and practical implementation of measures to promote the safety of all for the common good.⁵² On the other hand, anxiety is triggered by feelings of concern, as was the case among the Turkish women surveyed, or by restrictions as was more commonly observed among the men surveyed, perhaps because the aggressive and powerful behaviors attributed to the male gender role have not been sufficiently attended to during this pandemic. Behind the motif of "risk" is the fear of what is potentially deadly and exposes to struggle.⁵³ Among those who associate COVID-19 primarily with risk, there is a tendency to personify the coronavirus in the form of "others." According to researchers such as Wibisono, Truna and Rachman, this phenomenon represents the inability

⁵⁰ Francis, *Homily*, March 14, 2013.

⁵¹ Gök – Kara, "Individuals' conceptions," 7.

⁵² Stefanatou *et al.*, "Fear of COVID-19," 176.

⁵³ Gök – Kara, "Individuals' conceptions," 3, 8.

of some individuals to directly define or imagine COVID-19 risks. They need a specific “medium” in the shape of another person to help them define the pandemic as their real enemy. This has resulted in the emergence of mutual suspicion, distrust and hostility among the members of individual communities.⁵⁴

Images and perceptions of pandemics that fall into the “risk” category are generally constructed by people with coexisting chronic diseases. The terms that appeared in this category were often “chaos” and “disaster.” They involved many areas of human life.⁵⁵ Pope Francis sent his message at the beginning of pandemic. He claimed it as a difficult time for everyone. The Pope wanted to tell everyone about his closeness and his affection. Francis encouraged faithful to make the best use of this time: to be generous, to help those in need, to look out for the loneliest people, to pray to the Lord for those who are in difficulty. Even being isolated, thought and spirit can go far with the creativity of love.⁵⁶

According to the 2020 projections of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, global economic growth will fall as a result of the pandemic by 7.6%. Moreover, it is estimated that this global health crisis could drive millions of people worldwide into extreme poverty.⁵⁷ Given the actual reality of our country, the vast majority of respondents also believe that coronavirus poses a serious threat to the public. The data show that even students have an awareness of the risk to human lives. The distribution of responses is slightly different when respondents are asked to assess the level of coronavirus risk they themselves are exposed to. The data shows that only one in four young people surveyed believes that the pandemic could pose a threat to their life and health.⁵⁸ This is a phenomenon well-known in psychology, called unrealistic optimism. The phenomenon is that most people have a strong belief that it is others rather than themselves who will be the victims of unfavorable

⁵⁴ Wibisono – Truna – Rahman, “Turning religion,” 6.

⁵⁵ Gök – Kara, “Individuals’ conceptions,” 8.

⁵⁶ Francis, *Video Message*, April 3, 2020.

⁵⁷ Fahed – Saliba, “Faith and COVID-19,” 715.

⁵⁸ Długosz – Kryvachuk – Shyyan, *Praktyki społeczne*, 14.

circumstances.⁵⁹ The Church proposes much more real solution. In case of serious necessity, a dispensation may be granted from Christian obligations (*CIC* 1248 § 2; *CCC* 2181). The guidelines of the Apostolic Penitentiary of March 19, 2020 state that in individual places at risk of a pandemic, there is a state of such serious necessity.⁶⁰ Even before, Benedict XVI emphasized that God's service is not and cannot be incorporeal, and therefore involves all the consequences of this corporeality, and therefore should be a rational service – *logikē latreia* (Rom 12:1).⁶¹

The third theme, that of “faith,” is represented by categories related to all supernatural matters. Individuals who hold religious beliefs compare limit situations, including the COVID-19 pandemic, with a “sign of the apocalypse.”⁶² There are different apocalyptic scenarios of the various religions, all following their theological structures. As can be seen, the COVID-19 pandemic can lead believers of various faiths to think that the end of the world is imminent and, therefore, to place their lives and the entire situation in a religious context. Strategies for coping with feelings of anxiety do not automatically involve religion. As research in Poland has shown, many individuals engage in a variety of hobbies or read books. Others engage on social media to distract attention from the thought of imminent danger. Another popular method of avoiding anxiety is rationalization which involves looking for positive aspects and focusing on the good things in one's life. Thus, those who are fearful but non-religious adopt the so-called “sweet lemon attitude,” persuading themselves that the situation is “not so bad after all.” Some young people seek support from others, but more than a third of those surveyed turn to God for help. They entrust themselves to divine providence or simply seek social support within the framework of religion.⁶³ One of the possible religious strategies is to follow the words: “whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for

⁵⁹ Długosz, *Raport z badań*, 16.

⁶⁰ Holy See, *Norms of the Apostolic Penitentiary*.

⁶¹ Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, no. 70.

⁶² Gök – Kara, “Individuals' conceptions,” 9.

⁶³ Długosz, *Raport z badań*, 27.

me will find it” (Matt 16:25; 10:39; Mark 8:35). On the other hand, God’s infinite and merciful love is still present, despite all suffering such as that caused by the global pandemic (Rom 2:4–9; Jas 5:11; 2 Pet 3:9–15). It allows the sinner time to return to Him, and in the worst experiences, sufferings and temptations, God’s grace is always sufficient to help the sinner. Pope Benedict said that with this hope one is able to wade through the quicksand of sickness and death and stand firm on the immovable rock of God’s love. It is human weakness that is the source from which God’s power flows. This is the paradox of the Gospel. For this reason, God, instead of dwelling on the causes of suffering, preferred to invite every human being to imitate him, saying: “Take up your cross and follow me” (cf. Mark 8:34).⁶⁴

In today’s world, it can be seen that the power of this world has been, as it were, “sneered at” by the pandemic.⁶⁵ According to Dixon, it would make more sense in this case to apply the comforting words of the Bible: “do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own” (Matt 6:34).⁶⁶ However, despite the opening of churches and sanctuaries and the positive impact of religion, believers were in fact undecided, as evidenced by the low attendance at the Mass and services, even on Sundays. As the philosopher Lucretius said, the fear of death can lead to irrational beliefs and actions that can harm society, and this is what is happening in religious communities during this pandemic.⁶⁷ Pope Francis called to mind Jesus’ Cross, where, in the abyss of solitude, for the first time Jesus “in a loud voice” asks the question “why?” These words are in fact those of a Psalm (Ps 22:2); they say that Jesus brought the experience of extreme desolation to his prayer. But the fact remains that he himself experienced that desolation. It was done for our sake. So that when we have our back to the wall, when we find ourselves at a dead end, with no light and no way of escape, when it seems that God himself is not responding, we should remember that

⁶⁴ Benedict XVI, *Blessing of the Sick*, May 13, 2010.

⁶⁵ Isidiho – Obioma, „Human Suffering,” 1206.

⁶⁶ Dixon, *Activating Faith*, 8.

⁶⁷ Tudy, “COVID-19 and Spiritual Needs,” 442.

we are not alone.⁶⁸ Therefore, one of the possible responses to this overwhelming paradox of the pandemic is to adopt a kenotic attitude, that is, one that makes it possible to accept the situation as a daily cross,⁶⁹ while the other possible attitude could be called palliative. It would involve making every effort to eliminate suffering completely, or as much as possible. The first step of this strategy is entirely surrendering oneself to constraints and rules and abandoning religious values for the sake of well-being. Pope Francis said that a fundamental right that can never be taken away from us: *the right to hope*. It is a new and living hope that comes from God. It is not mere optimism; it is not a pat on the back or an empty word of encouragement, uttered with an empty smile. It is a gift from heaven, which we could not have earned on our own. Over these weeks, we have kept repeating, “All will be well,” clinging to the beauty of our humanity and allowing words of encouragement to rise up from our hearts. But as the days go by and fears grow, even the boldest hope can dissipate. Jesus’ hope is different. He plants in our hearts the conviction that God is able to make everything work unto good because even from the grave he brings life.⁷⁰

Also, the principles on which Catholic Social Teaching is based can inspire actions that can help save the world and contribute to making it through the current crises. In fact, the first principle of CST, respect for human dignity, calls for the principles of physical distance and the protection of workers’ rights. Solidarity, in turn, inspires actions such as praying together, stopping the spread of fake news and helping vulnerable and marginalized communities. The principle of subsidiarity calls for strengthening local communities and private initiatives to support those in need.⁷¹ Benedict XVI said that every little one is precious for God. So precious that he himself became man in order to be able to suffer with man in a real way, in flesh and blood, as the account of Jesus’ Passion shows.⁷² Hence, into every

⁶⁸ Francis, *Homily for Palm Sunday*, April 5, 2020.

⁶⁹ John Paul II, *Salvifici Doloris*, no. 17.

⁷⁰ Francis, *Homily for Paschal Vigil*, April 11, 2020.

⁷¹ Fahed – Saliba, “Faith and COVID-19,” 716.

⁷² Benedict XVI, *Blessing of the Sick*, May 13, 2010.

human suffering *con-solatio* is present, the consolation of God's compassionate love, and thus the star of hope rises.⁷³

The social teaching of the Catholic Church thus supports traditional religious beliefs and practices and facilitates the formation of a more responsible attitude towards others at a time when such an attitude is particularly needed, but not everyone seems to be convinced of such social responsibilities.⁷⁴ These two dimensions of love arising from and practiced within religion, namely the kenotic and palliative dimension, overlap to some extent. This was noted in a study conducted in the Philippines. It is well known that in the Catholic Church the most important form of worship and prayer is the Holy Mass. Respondents, however, were not entirely enthusiastic about participating in this celebration through the media. The explanation for this lies in the essence of this sacrament. The thread number one has been emphasized by Pope Francis, who has called it "viralization" or "virtualization" of the Catholic Liturgy. It is better to attend Mass at a church because this is where it is possible to confess one's sins, hear the Word of God and the homily, receive Communion and join in the singing of hymns.⁷⁵ This is all very different from individual prayer or reflection. Secondly, a shared celebration is not just a simple Christian social gathering. It is a *koinonia* in which the faithful participate as members of the Body of Christ.⁷⁶ Perhaps as a consolation, there is also the discovery that attending church assemblies not directly but via broadcasts has awakened a new understanding of faith in many of the faithful. More important than the church as a physical building and a place of gathering was the community of believers, that is missing during the pandemic. In the Bible, "the Church" is a term that refers to the people and not the place (1 Tim 5:15–16). The Church is a body made up of believers who practice the love of God in their words and actions. Thus, the community of the Church works best where people gathering indoors take the good news of Jesus to the outside world and then

⁷³ Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, no. 39.

⁷⁴ Lumbreras – Oviedo, "The pandemic and its influence," 11.

⁷⁵ Szczepaniak, "Wiralizacja i wirtualizacja liturgii," 144–145.

⁷⁶ Tudy, "COVID-19 and Spiritual Needs," 441–442.

serve those they meet.⁷⁷ Especially in the time of pandemic Pope tells faithful to make a choice. It is not the time of God's judgment, but of our judgment: the time to choose what matters and what passes, to separate what is necessary from what is not. It is time to change the course of life towards Lord, and towards others.⁷⁸

The pandemic increased the level of risk and uncertainty, which had a devastating impact on public health and economies and which was reflected in an increase in mental disorders. All this made the religious dimension more necessary and urgent. The current situation encourages us to overcome more reductive formulas in the treatment of religion and to move beyond models of secularization that have been developed from a paradigm of commensurability between religious communities and political, educational or other institutions. Rather, the idea of post-secularization implies achieving a satisfactory level of constructive integration and cooperation between these social systems, each with its own functions and services. This activity has been called horizontal subsidiarity. Horizontal subsidiarity implies a society that is in the service of the individual. The purpose of this principle is to support each person, and it derives theologically from the duty we owe each other in justice as created beings.⁷⁹ Pope Francis warns that those who always look for disciplinarian solutions and long for a 'security,' they have a static and inward-directed view of things. In this way, faith could become an ideology among other ideologies.⁸⁰ Faith is something more. Consequently, perceptions arising from the current health emergency encourage religious faith to better integrate into the social fabric and other social systems that are attempting to address the current crisis.⁸¹ This is an issue that Pope Francis has pointed out: "no one is saved alone; we can only be saved together" because we are "all in the same boat."⁸² Indeed, these Catholic social initiatives have been at the forefront of COVID-19 efforts in some

⁷⁷ Dixon, *Activating Faith*, 8.

⁷⁸ Francis, *Urbi et Orbi Blessing*, April 12, 2020.

⁷⁹ Fahed – Saliba, "Faith and COVID-19," 724.

⁸⁰ Francis, *The New York Times Interview*.

⁸¹ Lumbreras – Oviedo, "The pandemic and its influence," 13.

⁸² Francis, *Fratelli tutti*, no. 32.

parts of the world and are working with people for people to stop the spread of the virus and support the most vulnerable.

Conclusions

In recent times, we have all been receiving a regular series of daily reports on various scientific findings, which, after some time, turned out to be wrong or unfounded. Hence, it is important to note the existence of a deep need to seek relief from anxiety in a reality that would offer a sense of greater stability and certainty. Also, the results of a survey among young people show that respondents look for permanent solutions much more than ad hoc ones, and it is also noted that they look towards religion for solutions to the situation.⁸³ A variety of psychological mechanisms or methods are used to cope with stress in difficult situations on a permanent basis in opposition to an ad hoc approach. Religious coping is one of the many permanent approaches mentioned in this context.

Within this framework, religion can be assessed in three different ways. Negative assessment is the quickest to spread. It is connected with a pragmatic approach to the world, in which the phenomenon of religion plays at most a psychological or social role. In this context, religious gatherings only contribute to the spread of the virus, and religious beliefs themselves lead to the popularization of “superstitions” in the style of accepting the pandemic as God’s punishment and seeking a solution to the situation in religious faith and certain practices that are not in keeping with science. Religion, according to its opponents, narrows the horizons and can lead to isolation and stigmatization of certain social groups. Alongside the negative assessment of religion, there is also the positive one. It is considered to have a good impact on the psyche and emotions, and therefore on overall well-being. Religion can offer hope and a sense of permanence in a changing world. Religion opens a person to a sense of brotherhood and solidarity with the sick and to respect for others and their health. Finally, religion makes it possible to withstand times of illness and isolation, encouraging a belief that periods of suffering

⁸³ Długosz – Kryvachuk – Shyyan, *Praktyki społeczne*, 6.

and loneliness are valuable. However, there is still a third possible approach, namely the pragmatic use of religion as a response to the difficulties of the pandemic. Religion combined with the right approach can serve as a factor in rationalizing the time of the pandemic, that is, making sense of it. This rationalization leads to an openness to new ways of thinking and fosters an attitude of caring for others. It can also manifest itself through the use of religious factors as a so-called medium, which the human psyche invariably needs in order to confront a phenomenon it cannot cope with on its own. This medium can be “positive,” so to speak, as a “sign from God,” or “negative” as an apocalyptic vision. Such media generate strategies through which people can respond to difficult situations. Within religion, these strategies have a dual direction of possible development. One of the directions could be called the kenotic direction. It seeks a deeper understanding of negative phenomena in the spirit of a religion’s theology. Accepting an unpleasant reality can have, according to this understanding, a supernatural and redemptive dimension. The second direction of the strategy, a more popular one in contemporary times, could be called the palliative direction. It relies on a lack of inquiry into the causes and meaning of unpleasant realities combined with mobilizing one’s efforts to make this time more bearable for oneself and others.

Lęk przed pandemią COVID-19 i jego związek z religią

Abstrakt: Wiemy, że pandemia COVID-19 może być przyczyną lęku i poczucia zagrożenia. Istnieje głęboka potrzeba poszukiwania ucieczki od lęku i znajdowania jej w rzeczywistości, która daje większe poczucie pewności. W ramach tego poszukiwania religia może być potraktowana na trzy sposoby. Jej ujęcie negatywne połączone jest z pragmatycznym podejściem do świata. Obok negatywnego spotkać się można z pozytywnym podejściem do religii. Istnieje jeszcze trzecie podejście, w którym ma się do czynienia z traktowaniem religii jako odpowiedzi na trudności pandemii. Religia może służyć wówczas jako czynnik racjonalizujący czas pandemii. W tym ujęciu religia daje możliwość stworzenia dwóch strategii, dzięki którym człowiek może reagować na trudne sytuacje. Można by je nazwać kenotyczną i paliatywną.

Słowa kluczowe: COVID-19, lęk, religia, duszpasterstwo, strategia

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