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COMMON-SENSE COGNITION IN THE PRACTICE OF ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH¹

Abstract

From the point of view of environmental protection issues, the subject of common-sense cognition appears to be an important source of knowledge. Such cognition facilitates a proper and distortion-free assessment of the current condition of the societal and natural environment, and consequently orientates man to take preventive and protective measures in the areas that require such undertakings.

This paper presents a holistic approach to the issues related to the urgent need to cover the societal and natural space with protective measures, which are reflected in the practice of the educational mission of the Catholic Church together with her associations and charitable organisations. The aforementioned mission is related to the humanistic reflection on the environmental crisis and constitutes a practical and educational platform. Both activities of Christian communities use data taken from common-sense cognition, which is a valuable tool in obtaining and determining reliable information.

Keywords: environmental education, cognition, common sense, educational practice

ZDROWOROZSĄDKOWE POZNANIE W PRAKTYCE EDUKACJI EKOLOGICZNEJ KOŚCIOŁA KATOLICKIEGO

Abstrakt

Z punktu widzenia problematyki ochrony środowiska kwestia poznania zdroworozsądkowego stanowi ważne źródło wiedzy. Takie poznanie pozwala na właściwą, pozbawioną zafałszowania ocenę bieżącego stanu środowiska społeczno-przyrodniczego, a w konsekwencji orientuje człowieka na podjęcie działań prewencyjnych i ochronnych w tych sferach, które wymagają takich przedsięwzięć.

Artykuł prezentuje holistycznie ujęte zagadnienia związane z pilną potrzebą objęcia działaniami ochronnymi przestrzeni społeczno-przyrodniczej, które mają swoje odzwierciedlenie w praktyce

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misji edukacyjnej Kościoła katolickiego wraz z ich stowarzyszeniami i organizacjami charytatywnymi. Wspomniana misja wiąże się z humanistyczną refleksją nad kryzysem środowiskowym oraz stanowi płaszczyznę praktyczno-edukacyjną. Obie aktywności środowisk chrześcijańskich sięgają do danych zaczerpniętych z poznania zdroworozsądkowego, będącego cennym narzędziem w pozyskiwaniu i ustalaniu rzetelnych informacji.

Słowa kluczowe: edukacja ekologiczna, poznanie, zdrowy rozsądek, praktyka edukacyjna

Introduction

The societal and natural environment is a space for multidimensional human activity. Any manifestation of human activity in this environment is a consequence of a previously chosen course of action. This is the case both in the education of the youngest age groups and adults. Humanistic reflection on the place of a human being in nature and their interaction with the nature allows us to derive the conclusion that common-sense cognition orientates man to take up appropriate decision-making acts and, consequently, choices and actions. The required condition is to have a properly categorised catalogue of values. What it will be depends, among other things, on the educational processes. As a social being, man necessarily manages in a certain societal and natural environment, and this forces the adoption and consideration of the rules prevailing in it (Kaniewska and Klimski 2017, 286-291).

Nowadays, what matters to an average person are mainly the profits they can get for themselves from various sources, including the societal and natural environment. In this regard, it is necessary for various institutions to implement education for the societal and natural environment in the broadest sense, commonly referred to as ecological education. These include such institutions that undertake formal education, i.e. schools and universities, but also informal ones that support the universal education system. In this case, a large role is played by the family, which is the cradle of the first and necessary information that parents pass on to their children. From an early age, a child should learn about the natural environment, the processes that occur in it, and learn to respect its components appropriately. Simple as it seems, this prescription for undertaking environmental education in order to care for the societal and natural world is not always able to break through in today's civilisation of indifference.

From the perspective of environmental issues, common-sense cognition is an important source of knowledge. Based on proper representation, such cognition makes it possible to correctly assess the current state of the societal and natural environment and, consequently, orientate people to take preventive and protective measures in those spheres that require such undertakings. Thus, the issue of common-sense cognition should find its application in environmental education since such cognition helps people form their consciousness; consequently, a person's attitude towards environmental problems will no longer be passive. In

addition, understanding environmental risks based on this cognition helps reject any premise bearing the name of *fake news*.

Holistically framed issues related to the urgent need to cover the societal and natural space with protective measures are also reflected in the educational mission of the Catholic Church, including her organisations described herein. The aforementioned mission involves humanistic reflection on the environmental crisis and provides a practical and educational platform. Both activities of Christian circles reach for data drawn from common-sense cognition, which is a valuable tool in obtaining and establishing reliable information.

1. The voice of the Catholic Church on the need to protect the societal and natural environment

The importance of the societal and environmental issues to the Church's educational mission was recognised by Pope Paul VI. In his speeches, he emphasised that every person has a moral responsibility to use the environment in such a way as to leave it for future generations. It seems that the impetus for the Holy Father's exploration of further moral and societal issues was the report by United Nations Secretary-General Sithu U Tant of 26 May 1969 entitled, The problems of the Human Environment (U Thant 1969), which gained worldwide publicity at the time. The Church's voice on environmental issues was also present at the United Nations Conference. The event took place in Stockholm between 5 and 17 June 1972. The Vatican submitted two documents at the time: the first titled, A Hospitable Earth for Future Generations, addressed to Maurice Strong, the Secretary-General of the conference, and the second, being an expression of the Pope's views taken and prepared by a group of experts, the title of which was, Message of His Holiness Paul VI to Mr. Maurice F. Strong, Secretary-General of the Conference on the Environment (Paul VI 1972). Analysing the document, several important conclusions that illuminate the educational dimension of the Church's consideration of environment can be discerned.

The first conclusion of the cited report is that man and the environment are one. Consequently, the environment must serve to further holistic human development; thus, it cannot be indifferent either to human conscience or to the culture. The second conclusion leads to the assertion that all goods derived from the environment are shared by all people, which imposes an obligation to dispose of them fairly, also in the global aspect. These moral demands were also taken up in the document addressed to Maurice Strong.

The cited principles proclaimed by the Holy See point to the anthropocentric orientation of environmental issues since all moral imperatives and the educational demands derived from them are directed to man. In his *Message of the Holy Father Paul VI for the Fifth World-Wide Day of Environment*, Pope Paul VI called for the rational – worthy of modern man – use of the environment. He also requested that

every effort should be made within the activities carried out in order to ensure that current and future generations would develop under ecological conditions of the environment (Ślipko and Zwoliński 1999, 22-27). Following the Pope's recommendations, common-sense cognition undeniably will allow a person to make appropriate choices, rational, and free of fallacies.

Pope John Paul II was concerned about environmental issues, too. This is evidenced by the environmental content of his encyclicals and speeches addressed to participants in numerous meetings. In his encyclical, *Centesimus annus*, Pope John Paul II reminds us that among the various duties of states, there is also the one of safeguarding the collective goods of the natural and human environment. From the perspective of the time that has passed since the publication of this encyclical, the Pope's message is still relevant and requires constant reminding (John Paul II 1991).

The encyclical, Sollicitudo rei socialis, in turn, instructs on the pernicious phenomenon of progress, which cannot be understood as a process that proceeds, yielding unlimited consumer goods. Pope John Paul II points out that the unrestrained desire to acquire all material goods leads directly to losing oneself in a indefinitely permanent desire to possess: "unless one is shielded from the flood of publicity and the ceaseless and tempting offers of products – that the more one possesses the more one wants, while deeper aspirations remain unsatisfied and perhaps even stifled" (John Paul II 1987). An important message of the Holy Father projecting the issue of environmental protection, which began to take on global interest with great force, was the Message of His Holiness Pope John Paul II for the Celebration of the World Day of Peace, falling on 1 January 1990. The document was holistically aimed at sensitising people to environmental issues. The Pope appealed that "the entire human community – individuals, States and international bodies – take seriously the responsibility that is theirs" (John Paul II 2005, 15). In addition, the Pope pointed out that beside the threats to peace, such as local armed conflicts, the continuous improvement of armed forces, the unjust use of wealth or social indifference, there should also be mentioned disrespect for the components of nature, the irrational use of its resources, and the deteriorating quality of human life. Furthermore, any effects that are brought about by environmental degradation as a result of anthropogenic conduct, in the context of the Church's teachings, are considered wicked of human nature and incompatible with the Creator's plan. The existing state, therefore, must be considered in the context of an ethical and thus moral change in the attitude of human existence. The issues of the need to protect the societal and natural environment should also find their place in the educational perspective as it is through education that it becomes possible to sensitise people to the meaning and duty of putting all the efforts of a single individual into the mission of taking care of the place of temporal existence.

In addition, the Holy See gives several demands by means of which the impending societal and environmental crisis can be slowed down. Emphasis is placed on creating an international system that manages environmental resources,

allowing them to be used evenly. Attention is also paid to including the right to live in safe environmental conditions in the Declaration of Human Rights. The fight against poverty in the Third World countries, being the consequence of the depletion of vast tracts of land, also became a demand in the Message. The document discusses issues oscillating around military research, particularly any attempt to produce biological and bacteriological weapons. In order to cope with all these aspects that in any way affect the various components of the societal and natural environment, it becomes necessary to break with the consumerist lifestyle often underpinned by hedonistic considerations. The Holy Father called for "new all-human solidarity" to repair the effects of industrialisation and to make an effort to ensure that the ecological crisis does not proceed at such a rapid pace (Tyburski 1993, 9-11).

The pontificate of John Paul II, by virtue of its length, made it possible to address the environmental consequences of the improperly implemented actions of modern people. Pope John Paul II was close to societal and environmental issues, which he often included in his encyclicals. In addition, he recommended a moral transformation, which would materialise in actions that incline people to protect the natural world (Tyburski 1993, 28-39).

The reasons for the deteriorating state of the environment cited above, which are merely a signalling of the problem, have led, in a way, to various measures aimed at curbing these negative consequences. The need for societal activism of a theoretical and practical nature has become a key challenge for integral ecology, which Pope Francis cites in his encyclical, *Laudato si'*. He outlines possible courses of corrective actions, precisely for the sake of the common home. Due to the broad research matter of integral ecology, many issues can be analysed and discussed in the humanities (especially philosophy and, within it, ethics), social sciences, pedagogical sciences, and those strictly related to the protection of the societal and natural environment, such as sozology (Dołęga 2006, 58-59)².

2. Common sense in man's cognition of natural reality

The coming into existence of a human on Earth forced them to take certain actions necessary for survival and existence. Human being, as a separate entity in the structure of the natural environment, was left to their own resources from the very first moments of their earthly journey. They had to face the constraints exerted by the environment, which involved the skilful management of the environment, the constitution of societal life, and, in later stages, the development of the scientific and religious spheres. One might be tempted to say that a human being was the least suited to the natural environment of all the entities that constitute it. This

² The term was popularised by Walery Goetel in the second half of the 20^{th} century. Sozology indicates a science whose object is the protection of nature, and consequently the care of man's natural οἶκος. In view of the rich scientific output in the field of holistic environmental protection, the term 'sozology' has been expanded in content and scope.

manifested itself in the sensitivity to external stimuli coming at them in the form of an unfriendly environment, and internal stimuli causing illnesses. All of the above made human beings gradually strengthen their position in reality by acting in accordance with their own natural and improvised cognition. They experienced their surroundings and analysed everything to the extent that was allowed by their simple cognition. All this also translated into a slow probing of one's self and a seamless blending of collected experience, which is still expressed today in the form of culture. Thus, cognition was and is fundamental to human life (Krapiec 1999, 342). That cognition, which was not yet methodologically legitimised, was guided by a rationally chosen goal that man pursued on the path of their adaptation to the environment. It can be said that that was common-sense cognition based on human wisdom. Common sense should, therefore, be understood as a cognitive attitude (Krapiec 1999, 342).

The areas of human cognitive life intertwine and complement one another, giving a picture of a common-sense understanding of reality. Fundamental moral duties are also widely understood and are not subject to social discussion. The same is true of man's ethical relation to the societal and natural environment, which should be considered a common good based on their common-sense cognition. Common-sense cognition constitutes a source and a basis for all people to act upon. Furthermore, it does not constitute calls for activity based on overly abstract theories, often inaccessible to common man, incomprehensible and undermining the validity of the common-sense cognitive order. This pre-scientific source of action is the foundation of a normal and, above all, rational existence for every human being, whether in an individual relationship with another human being, the environment, or in a societal relationship. It also happens that a common-sense source of cognitive information can provide a person with erroneous or inconsistent premises about the object being learned. Such situations occur when we are given distorted data from sensory cognition. However, this is not a significant consequence for a human as such events occur sporadically and are verified in retrospect with information from common-sense cognition (Krapiec 1999, 342-343). Of course, human cognition makes it possible to diagnose the surrounding natural reality. It is a process that is given only to man, and it is this process that, among other things, sets man apart from all the components of the environment. Man explores reality by means of the natural process of cognition and does not react negatively to it. All cognitive stimuli come in from the environment and are consequently analysed. They constitute a cognitive mediation, based on which man appropriately experiences reality given in cognition and, if necessary, instrumentalises it. Such transformation of the natural world is carried out because of human needs.

Among other things, humans learn about nature by being in relationship with it. Human corporeality imposes a kind of necessity on man. These are the needs that arise from the psychophysical nature of man, which include living surrounded by nature and processing it for continued existence. Also here a certain imbalance

in the human-nature relationship can be observed. For a long time, before first humans appeared, the natural world could have existed without them, which indicates the nature's independence from man. However, its riches, which are manifested in the various resources acquired by man, provide man with the means they need for their existence. Significant needs of existential nature that humans have are all the time satisfied by the reservoir of natural potentials. All of this points to the expediency of nature, i.e. the adequacy of its internal structure for humans. Thus, natural reality is in a supportive relationship with respect to man, and this is due to its peculiar reference that is an essential existential status (Ślipko and Zwoliński 1999, 133-134). It is indisputable that nature must be coordinated by man in the world. With this also comes the need to add nature to whatever laws are in place in this human reality.

The natural area represents a variety of different, and undoubtedly necessary, values for human beings to enable their existence. It allows its multifaceted formation of needs, which in each case should be reasonably formed. It can be assumed that natural reality is a means for activating the perfection inflicted on man, and thus participates in man's due moral dignity. In such a description, it can be understood that nature gains a new dimension, which manifests itself in the humanistic aspect of its relationship to man (Ślipko 1994, 38). The subservient character of nature, along with the moral nature of each person, shapes the moral relationship between the two. The result of this bond is a criterion that constitutes the subordination of natural reality to the human realm, but only to the extent that is necessary for the fulfilment of any moral predestination of the person. The anthropological plane indicates that the perception of man, as more perfect in the hierarchical order of the components of the environment, becomes possible because man's structure contains a substantial spiritual element of existence and development. Through this element, human being is a personal subject aware of their dignity. Thanks to that, they can also undertake designated life ventures (Ślipko 1994, 39).

Common-sense cognition provides humans with the ability to take appropriate actions to prevent the devastation of the societal and natural environment as effectively as possible. They are equipped with cognitive abilities that, after appropriate analysis, allow them to relate to the given reality in terms of, *inter alia*, moral aspects. Understanding the laws, by which nature is governed holistically, along with humans and their relationships often taking on the dimension of an ethic of protecting people (Andrzejuk 2014, 40), also helps to adopt appropriate attitudes that nowadays are called pro-environmental.

3. CATHOLIC CHURCH IN THE SERVICE OF ECOLOGY - EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE

The problems outlined in the first part of the paper that were considered by the Catholic Church's superiors are nowadays reflected in the educational practice.

A noteworthy educational endeavour arising from the Church's response to the increasingly externalised societal and environmental crisis is the Global Catholic Climate Movement (GCCM), instituted in 2015 (Catholic climate movement 2021). The initiators of the Movement emphasise that the reason and the basis for their practical and educational mission on environmental issues were two events. The first was the Holy See's publication of Pope Francis' encyclical entitled, Laudato si'. Indeed, the document represents a kind of novelty in the context of the form of encyclicals published so far. A distinctive feature of the encyclical is the message contained in it, which reaches almost everyone who studies it. The second reason for the Global Catholic Climate Movement to take practical action was the Paris COP 21 Climate Agreement. Both of these events, as the initiators of the Movement point out, took place in 2015 and symbolised the Greek καιρός, occurring in the Gospel, translated as "the right moment" (Catholic climate movement 2021). It has become a priority task for the Movement to undertake educational and practical initiatives related to the existence of climate justice globally. In addition, subsequent activities were focused on the transformation issues Pope Francis calls for in the encyclical. This change is activities that raise awareness of the environmental problems currently facing humanity globally. To this end, members of the Movement have organised various training courses to help achieve even greater educational effectiveness oriented towards the issues of care for our common home. The year 2020, due to pandemic constraints, forced members of the Global Catholic Climate Movement to reorganise their previous forms of work and resulted in the organisation of numerous webinars in the online space. Currently, the Movement's activities are setting the stage for further climate justice activism (Catholic climate movement 2021).

The second initiative related to the implementation of the practical and educational messages contained in Pope Francis' encyclical is the project, "Integral ecology of the encyclical Laudato si' in the operation of Caritas communities and local communities" (Laudato si caritas 2021). The main idea contained in the project, executed between 2019 and 2021, was to popularise integral ecology, as emphasised by Pope Francis. As the project's authors point out, "it was created as a response to Pope Francis' call to care for our common home - the Earth, translating the Church's social teaching on integral ecology into concrete practical actions" (Laudato si caritas 2021). The project underwent two levels of implementation. The first was a societal and educational perspective focused on local Caritas communities from twelve dioceses of Poland. This part of the project involved the appointment of animators from each diocese to organise grant competitions related to the initiative of societal ecological projects. Projects were supposed to address issues in the areas of integral ecology, water conservation, air, food, climate, new economy, biodiversity, and local campaigns. The societal and educational perspective implemented in this part of the project also included conducting workshops for local leaders and volunteers addressing environmental

challenges. It is worth noting that the project covered the whole of Poland. The second level of the project was the practical organisation of cross-media campaigns in various media. That made it possible to introduce the problems of integral ecology through interviews, speeches, and discussions with a wide range of experts (Laudato si caritas 2021).

The examples of educational-practical activities cited above indicate that a proper correlation is possible between the demands and recommendations issued by the Church's superiors and their educational and practical implementation carried out by Catholic associations or charitable institutions, such as Caritas Poland. It seems to be a good educational practice that helps reinforce the conventional education taking place at school. Any activity in the educational sphere that translates into social practice is needed because of the degradation of the living space that is the societal and natural environment.

Conclusion

The need to include common sense in learning about the societal and natural environment and using common sense to properly understand the problems connected with the societal and natural environment seems to be a current challenge for the implementation of environmental education for the public. Nowadays, the importance of the problems occurring in the society and environment is recognised in many circles. They are the subject of concern not only of state policymakers, politicians, economists, lawyers, scientists, but also representatives of the Catholic Church circles. This is evidenced by the various projects undertaken, many of which are aimed at an educational dimension. In this case, education is not just a matter of formally implementing the issues specified in the core curriculum of a particular subject. Given the need to draw attention to the issue of societal and environmental protection, the non-formal aspects of environmental education is worth emphasising. They are an effective form of reaching a larger audience with information containing a specific problem. The times in which modern people live are forcing an even greater need to implement such activities. Pluralistic understanding of problems occurring in the environment not infrequently prompts reflection on them based on data from the common-sense cognition. When considering the need to integrate environmental education with education implemented at all its stages and all its forms, the necessity to pay more attention to the issue of common-sense cognition becomes apparent. This is undoubtedly an anthropological argument signalling to take all possible care of the societal and natural environment, among other things, for the sake of human welfare (Gogacz 1993, 137-146). The key anthropological argument is the recognition that only human beings have properties, such as reason, freedom, and responsibility. Through them, we can determine a particular ontic and moral status. This distinguished position defines man's responsibility for nature, but most importantly for another human being. Any duties can be held only towards

other people, while non-human components of the environment are assigned values when they are in relation to humans. Understood in this way, the relationship becomes the subject of everyone's rights and duties. Conversely, the condition of the natural environment, and therefore its welfare and survival, depends on human values (Wróblewski 2010, 73).

It is worth noting at this point that in the discussion of man's place in nature, some attempts to refute the above argumentation are evident. Its opponents rely on the justification that this is a philosophical and at the same time cultural context of the reasoning carried out, and, additionally, built on the thesis of man's domination over nature or the idea of man's dominion over the components of nature. Among the objections are also comments on the rationalist nature of culture, technocracy, and economism. With regard to this critical assessment, it should be noted that man's dominion over nature does not only mean their plundering and reckless exploitation of environmental resources and management of technical power. It also means the morality and rationality that is possessed only by man, and the basis on which man can function appropriately in the environment. On the side of this rationale, however, is the educational dimension of addressing problems in the societal and natural field as it is through this domain that there is a stimulation to protect the environment, and no one else but man. This is evidenced by the presented activities of Catholic organisations whose mission is to care for the common home recalled in the encyclical Laudato si'. This concern, translated into practical and educational actions, should come from a common-sense understanding of the specific problem.

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