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Social Challenges for Families in Teaching of the Latin American Bishops (CELAM)

[Wyzwania społeczne dla rodzin w nauczaniu biskupów latynoamerykańskich (CELAM)]

Streszczenie: Zgodnie z nauczaniem Soboru Watykańskiego II zadaniem Kościoła katolickiego jest obserwowanie procesów zachodzących w życiu ludzi i odczytywanie w nich planów Boga, który przez wydarzenia w świecie apeluje do wierzących o podjęcie określonych działań. Celem analizy dokumentów końcowych konferencji generalnych biskupów latynoamerykańskich (CELAM) obradujących w Medellín (1968), Pueblo (1979), Santo Domingo (1992) i Aparecida (2007) jest ukazanie ich specyficznego, czyli pastoralnoteologicznego podejścia do sytuacji rodzin w krajach Ameryki Południowej i Środkowej. Na podstawie danych socjologicznych można dostrzec, jakie w świetle wiary istnieją szanse, ale też jakie są zagrożenia, przed którymi staje współczesna rodzina. Należy podkreślić, że rodziny katolickie są powołane do aktywnego udziału w kształtowaniu życia społecznego i do służby na rzecz formowania dojrzałych postaw osobowych swoich członków. Ich szczególnym zadaniem jest szerzenie w świecie wartości ewangelicznych, które są równocześnie ogólnoludzkimi, a ich realizacja pozwala ludziom osiągnąć pełnię człowieczeństwa. Biskupi latynoamerykańscy ukazują, w jaki sposób odczytywać znaki czasu i odpowiadać na nie w praktyce życia chrześcijańskiego.

Summary: According to the teaching of the Second Vatican Council, the task of the Catholic Church is to observe the processes taking place in people's lives and to read God's plans in them, and, through events in the world, appeal to believers to take appropriate actions. The purpose of analyzing the final documents of the general conferences of Latin American bishops (CELAM) meeting Medellín (1968), Puebla (1979), Santo Domingo (1992) and Aparecida (2007) is to present their specific, i.e. pastoral theological approach to the situation of families in South and Central American countries. Taking into account sociological data, the Latin American bishops indicate the opportunities and threats which the modern family has to face. They do not forget that Catholic families are called to actively participate in shaping social life and to serve for the formation of mature personal attitudes of their members. Their particu-

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lar task is to spread Gospel values in the world. Their implementation allows people to achieve the fullness of humanity. Thus, Latin American bishops show how to read the signs of the times and respond to them in the practice of Christian life.

Słowa kluczowe: Kościół; Sobór Watykański II; Ameryka Łacińska; ubóstwo; ewangelizacja.

Keywords: Church; Vatican Council II; Latin America; poverty; evangelization.

Reading the final documents of the General Conferences of the Latin American Bishops (CELAM) in Medellín (1968), Puebla (1979), Santo Domingo (1992) and Aparecida (2007), which appeared after the Second Vatican Council, leads to the conclusion that pastors of the Church in that part of the world devote much attention to social issues. It is justified by a difficult socio-economic situation for the people of South and Central America. Globalization, which is visible also in this region of the world, does not always contribute to the improvement of the fate of its inhabitants, what is more – it often brings poverty, marginality and even death (*Querida Amazonia*, No. 14).

The documents of the Latin American bishops' conference give a lot of attention to the family, showing first of all its importance for the Church from the theological and pastoral perspective. However, the authors of the documents do not look at the family only as the addressee of Church teaching, the object of religious formation, or the "domestic church" transmitting the faith from generation to generation and fulfilling religious practices. They do not forget that it is the smallest social unit responsible for the upbringing of children and adolescents and for the shape of social life. It is on its condition and its awareness as to its obligations towards society that the condition and development of entire regions, functioning of society and quality of political decisions depend.

In the light of the results of sociological research, the social situation of Latin American families and the changes they undergo are revealed. Reading the final documents of the CELAM shows that the bishops are closely watching the changes taking place in the world. Thus, they try to get to know the problems bothering families living in South and Central America, at the same time expressing their concern for their material well-being and spiritual development. Bearing in mind the difficulties faced in their daily lives by individuals as well as families and social groups, the pastors of the Church in Latin America show Christian families how to fulfill their mission in the world to contribute to the creation of life's conditions, corresponding to the dignity of man and his needs.

The article, the purpose of which is to present the specificity of the CELAM social teaching about the family, allows us to see how a sociological description of reality differs from recognizing the signs of the times in looking at the situation in the light of the Christian faith. Thus, it shows how the theological approach to reality enriches the view of the situation of families in society and leads to the formulation of practical postulates. All this is in line with the method commonly used in Latin American theology as well as in contemporary pastoral theology: see, judge and act (Scannone 1982, p. 3–4; Mastantuono 1994, p. 526–527).

1. Main problems of Latin American families from the sociological perspective

Sociology draws attention to the social phenomena and economic changes taking place in Latin America which affect the structure and functioning of families. These include the economic growth caused by industrialization and the shift of large groups of people from working in the countryside to working in the city. The entire economic sphere is clearly subject to globalization. The demographic structure is being modified. Urbanization processes accelerate along with an increase in life expectancy, reducing births and a decrease in the size of the family, which are expressed in changes in the age pyramid of the population.

New consumption and labour patterns are spreading in South and Central American societies, as well as changes in work patterns. As the industrial and service sectors of the economy grow, more and more jobs are offered for women, and employment becomes informal and unstable. In addition, there is also massive but differentiated access to social goods and services – education, social security and health, which deepens atomization and social inequalities (Arriagada 2001, p. 12).

Family lives are influenced by social processes such as individualization and secularization. In individualized societies, the individual is responsible for shaping his identity, as he has the right to decide about his own fate, while at the same time exposing himself to the risk that he will have to deal with all problems on his own without the support of the environment (Baumann 2006, p. 59). This also applies to families, which can enjoy their democratic rights, their members' autonomy and greater equality more fully. This situation, however, often raises problems resulting from the tension between the autonomy and freedom of people who, as subjects, have ever greater individual aspirations and the demands placed on individuals by the family (Arriagada 2005, p. 17).

The result of secularization, which consists in the weakening of the influence of religion on social institutions and the life of human individuals (Mariański 1998, p. 129; Knoblauch, Schnettler 2004, p. 7), is the separation between the state and the Church, which is clearly visible in the establishment of laws inconsistent with the principles of Christian ethics. This state of affairs, in turn, affects the attitudes of people who more and more often distance themselves from religion in their behavior, and individual ethics gain autonomy which is manifested especially in the approach to reproductive issues and sexual morality (Arriagada 2001, p. 13). Changes in mentality and collective action, especially in the spheres of politics and economics, have an impact on births rates, and thus on the size of families.

Traditional or “nuclear” families continue to dominate Latin America, in both urban and rural areas. However, alongside traditional family forms, new family configurations have emerged. Patchwork families, i.e. those reconstructed with the participation of family members after the breakup, spread as a result of questioning the indissolubility of marriage (Arriagada 2004, p. 84). These families arise as a result of divorce, annulment of marriage, widowhood or the breakdown of the actual relationship and the establishment of new ties. There is an increasing number of monoparental households – usually managed by women, as well as households without children due to the fact that these have their own families and live in their own homes (Arriagada 2001, p. 18–19; Cienfuegos 2014, p. 19–20). It also happens more and more often that Latin Americans reject marriage, preferring free relationships, the single life, or fatherhood or motherhood without a permanent relationship (Quilodrán 2003, p. 63; Cienfuegos 2014, p. 22).

Family disintegration is a fairly common phenomenon in Latin America. It manifests itself in various forms: households in extreme poverty, headed by women for lack of fathers; children taking up work instead of studying; adolescents living in the streets; increased consumption of drugs and alcohol, and increased domestic violence (Arriagada 2005, p. 16). The emergence of disturbing phenomena of this type is fostered by migration, which in the event of a parent’s departure contributes to the loosening of the mother’s or father’s ties with children and leads to a situation where one and the same family is present in different locations (Cienfuegos 2014, p. 24).

An important element influencing the functioning of families in Latin America is the gradual entry of women into the labour market. In this context, there are also changes in the daily interactions between women and men, and the pressure exerted by women’s organizations on agencies

and public authority contributes to the weakening of the norms regulating family life and relating to the sphere of intimacy and sexuality. The most important factors influencing the life of families include changing the role of women and extending their autonomy, especially on the economic level (Arriagada 2004, p. 90; Cienfuegos 2014, p. 23).

Families in Latin America are still basically shaped by patriarchal patterns, passed down from generation to generation. The family model established since colonization takes into account the traditions of the European Christian family in which power is entrusted to the man (Pinillos Guzmán 2020, p. 278). However, due to the presence of women in the labour market and their striving for autonomy, the patriarchal system is becoming increasingly weakened (Domingues 2016, p. 154).

The question of the functioning of families and their shape is related to the issue of fertility. Latin America has always been an area where large families have been very widespread. However, in recent times, fertility has decreased in most countries. The highest births rate occurs in areas with greater poverty, in social groups with lower education, and in rural areas with a high concentration of indigenous people (Arriagada 2001, p. 17). The Latin American global fertility rate of 5.98 children per woman in 1960 was estimated at 2.15 children per woman in 2010 and is projected to decrease to about 1.97 children per woman in 2025 (Cienfuegos 2014, p. 23).

2. Specificity of CELAM social teaching about the family

Latin American bishops also pay attention to the factors present in the social realities that affect the lives of families, especially poor living conditions, lack of access to culture, low health, and limited purchasing power. In Medellín, the bishops highlighted four basic social phenomena that influence the functioning of families: the transition from rural society to urban society, which entails the weakening of the patriarchal family model; inequality in the distribution of material goods; negative perception of rapid demographic growth; the process of socialization, depriving the family of its previous social significance (Medellín No. 3.I.2).

According to the Church hierarchy in Latin America, these phenomena have certain repercussions in the functioning of Latin American families, leading to the emergence of serious problems. One of them is the marked increase in the number of informal and unstable relationships with all its consequences. Bishops pay attention to the high percentage of extra-marital births, the high and constantly growing rate of family breakdown (which results from the legalization of divorces and the increasingly

widespread acceptance of them), the promotion of hedonism and eroticism in consumer society, the disproportion between salaries and the real material needs of families, serious problems housing caused by ineffective politics; injustice in the distribution of goods such as food, clothing, work, media, leisure, entertainment and culture, the inability to start a family in decent material conditions (Medellín No. 3.I.3).

In the Puebla Final Document, Latin American bishops expressed their concern over the problems that plague modern people such as loneliness, difficulties in family life, poverty and the meaninglessness of human existence (Puebla No. 27). Bearing in mind the elements influencing the situation of the family, they point to sociological (social injustice), cultural (quality of life), political (domination and manipulation), economic (wages, unemployment, earning extra money) and religious (secularization) factors (Puebla No. 572). Factors complicating and destabilizing the life of families also include pornography, alcoholism, drugs, prostitution and trafficking of women, campaigns for sterilization (Puebla No. 577, 610), as well as selfishness, hedonism, isolation, careerism, the ruthless pursuit of prosperity and domination (Puebla No. 94–95).

The Church's hierarchs are concerned with the fate of children – those who are not yet born and those who are exploited, deprived of access to education and the possibility of full development due to poverty and the moral disorganization of the family (Puebla No. 32). Families in Latin America suffer from the economization of life (Puebla No. 37), a lack of a sense of responsibility for the permanence of the home, and the diminution of women's dignity (Puebla No. 57). Bishops also see the negative impact of the mass media in social life, which promotes sex, profit, violence, power, divorce, infidelity and abortion, free love and premarital relationships (Puebla No. 573). They are used by political and economic forces that manipulate society and violate the rights of individuals and families (Puebla No. 1069).

Also in the document from Santo Domingo, the Latin American episcopate takes into account social problems that make families life difficult. Bishops oppose what is life-threatening and violates the dignity of women: induced miscarriage, sterilization, anti-natalist programs, violence in sexual relations (Santo Domingo No. 110). The Church's shepherds are concerned about "demographic terrorism" which exaggerates the danger that population growth can pose to quality of life, and the "anti-culture of death" expressed by abortion, euthanasia, war, kidnapping, terrorism and drug trafficking (Santo Domingo No. 219).

The source of the difficulties affecting Latin Americans and their families is neoliberal politics, which results in mass market deregulation,

disregard for the rights of working people and dismissal of workers, reduction of social spending that protected families from hunger, inhuman living conditions for families and violence (Santo Domingo No. 179). The bishops are concerned about the rise of unemployment and the associated economic and social uncertainty, and thus the unfair distribution of goods (Santo Domingo No. 189). Bishops call for counteracting phenomena contributing to family disintegration, i.e. migration, discrimination, existential insecurity, and moral and religious degradation of migrants (Santo Domingo No. 187).

The Latin American episcopate meeting in Aparecida draws attention to social processes influencing the situation of families in Latin America. According to the bishops, family life is weakened by gender ideology, according to which everyone can choose their sexual orientation without taking into account the differences that derive from the nature of human mankind itself. This results in the modification of legal regulations that seriously violate the dignity of marriage, respect for the right to life and the identity of the family (Aparecida No. 40). The final document also mentions a new cultural colonization which manifests itself in the imposition of artificial customs, disregard for local traditions and the desire to introduce a homogeneous culture in all sectors. In its light, interpersonal references are included in the sphere of consumption, which leads to establishing relationships based on feelings, without readiness for responsible and full commitment (Aparecida No. 46).

Another phenomenon that negatively affects the lives of individuals and families is globalization, the effects of which are felt most by the poorest. It contributes to social exclusion, i.e. to the peripherization of existence of entire populations. Oppression and exploitation are causes of suffering for women that are excluded on the basis of gender, race or socio-economic situation. The same problems affect youth without proper education, without prospects for development and the chance to start a family, as well as poor and starving people, unemployed, migrants, displaced persons, landless peasants and boys and girls in child prostitution and children who are victims of abortions. Exclusion from family and social coexistence is the cause of suffering of people who are addicted to drugs and disabled, carriers and victims of serious diseases, as well as the elderly who are often rejected by families as inconvenient and useless individuals (Aparecida No. 65).

A disturbing phenomenon noticed by the bishops is also modern slavery, which leads to the impoverishment of qualified specialists, scientists and broad peasant masses. Many workers, including refugees, accept exploitation by employers because of their poor financial situation (Apare-

cida No. 73). Moreover, harmonious and peaceful coexistence in social life is threatened by violence, which manifests itself in robberies, assaults, kidnappings and murders, which brings misery and suffering to families and society as a whole. The constantly increasing violence of youth groups and gangs and growing domestic violence are the result of such phenomena as the idolatrous cult of money, the advancement of individualistic and utilitarian ideology, the lack of respect for the dignity of every human being, the degradation of the social fabric, corruption even in law enforcement forces and the lack of a policy based on social justice (Aparecida No. 78).

In their analysis of the situation of families, Latin American bishops do not limit themselves solely to sociological observations. They are also mindful of the changes taking place in human mentality, especially those referring to the hierarchy of values and to the personal patterns, including those relating to family life. They appreciate the openness to others, typical of Latin American societies, the willingness to share with others what they have and compassion for someone else's misfortune, as well as maintaining family ties and friendly relationships (Puebla No. 17). Mutual help in poor families is a great value in the eyes of the Church's leaders because they make a lot of effort to fight for a decent life and, despite suffering, do not lose their joy (Puebla No. 581). They are concerned about the behavior of those young people who are only looking for pleasure or for a lucrative and prestigious position, driven by opportunism and a will to dominate (Puebla No. 95).

Taking into account the four final documents summarizing the deliberations of the Latin American episcopate, it is clear that in their teaching bishops take into account the results of sociological research and refer to them when analyzing the situation of contemporary families. However, they do not stop at the data themselves, but interpret them in the light of faith, which is an essential aspect of perceiving reality. Such an approach is in line with the practical theology's "seeing" of reality, in which the view of faith makes it possible to discover social areas and living conditions that need Christian truth so that their transformation for the good of man can take place (Klein 2005, p. 74). For this reason, their gaze is critical and leads to the disclosure of social threats. This way of perceiving reality leads to the development of a rather pessimistic and anxious but also demanding vision of current social transformations.

Taking into account the chronology of the publication of the final documents of CELAM, one can see an evolution in the view of the family. Initially, it is dominated by a sociological perspective, over which the theological vision gradually becomes dominant (Sánchez, p. 26). This

means that the family is no longer treated only as an organizational structure, but is a space for the realization of God's intentions towards people and a "school of richer humanity" (GS No. 52; Santo Domingo No. 216).

In the final documents summarizing the deliberations of the Latin American episcopate, the critical reflection in the light of faith promoted by liberation theologians, the subject of which is historical practice, is applied (Schweizer 2013, p. 30; Floristán 2002, p. 160–161). It aims to discover a deeper meaning in the events and processes of history, i.e. the intentions and will of God (Gutiérrez 1975, p. 37). Therefore, Latin American bishops do not view the situation of families as a purely social or merely human phenomenon, but as a spiritual challenge (Medellín No. 14,4; Boff 1986, p. 32). It is also in this view that they perceive the challenges faced by Christian families, which should take care of both their development and the more human living conditions in society (Puebla No. 132; Azevedo 1986, p. 166).

3. Tasks of Christian families in the society

In the CELAM final documents, the bishops emphasize the great vocation of the family, which is not only the "domestic church" (Medellín No. 3.III.10; Puebla No. 94) and the first place of Christian formation (Medellín No. 3.II.6), but it also plays an important role in shaping the human person and the promotion of social development (Medellín No. 3.II.4). Latin American bishops therefore focus not only on the religious and spiritual dimensions of the functioning of families, as they also take into account their educational, social and political significance.

The Church hierarchy in Latin America emphasizes that the family is the first and vital cell of society. It is the basic social organism from which youth comes and is educated in it. The way young people function in social life largely depends on the stability of the home, the form of interpersonal relations in the family and the openness of the older generation to youth and the values they profess (Puebla No. 1173). Therefore, it is the duty of parents to create a family atmosphere animated by love for people and honor for God, which favours the integral, personal and social education of their children (GE No. 3; Medellín No. 3.II.5).

The Latin American episcopate refers to the teaching of the Second Vatican Council, which recognizes the importance of the family in forming integral personalities. It is possible when the presence and influence of different and complementary models of father and mother (male and

female), a bond based on mutual feelings, a climate of trust, closeness, respect and freedom, a model of social life with a natural hierarchy – all this makes the family capable of developing strong and balanced personalities, ready to take responsibility for their actions in the public sphere (Medellín No. 3.II.5).

The mission of the Christian family is to promote authentic values in social life. This happens when the family in its action shows respect for values such as intelligence, the will of conscience and fraternity (*Gaudium et Spes* No. 61; Medellín No. 3.II.5). In order to construct a fraternal society that supports the integral development of the human person, the family should educate the children in the spirit of such values as diligence and sharing with others, honesty and simplicity, and the ethical and religious meaning of life (Santo Domingo 200).

According to Latin American bishops, the family is a privileged place to learn true love. Its task is to protect, show and transmit love and life (Santo Domingo No. 214). In the family, man makes the first experience of love that fills him with joy (Aparecida No. 118). Family life reveals the truth about conjugal love, which, in the light of the Christian tradition, is faithful and exclusive until death, as well as fertile, open to the life and education of children (Aparecida No. 117). Sex education is part of the upbringing process, which must be appropriate and integral so that adolescents can discover the beauty of love and the true value of human sexuality (Puebla No. 606).

Christian families are to support social development. Their mission is to be the first schools of social virtue that are needed in the lives of all societies. Children should discover in the life of the family what a healthy community is and learn to be responsible for the functioning of civil society through participation in shaping the home. The family, which is the foundation of society, introduces children to the proper hierarchy of values and allows them – especially through the example of their parents – to become sensitive to the needs of others, both material and spiritual. The family carries out its mission by promoting justice and other good works in the service of all brothers in need (*Apostolicam Actuositatem*, No. 11). Latin American bishops emphasize that the good of the person and human society is closely linked to the prosperity of the marriage and family community, as it is a very important factor in human development (Medellín No. 3.II.7).

In a Christian family fostering a spirit of love and service, four basic personal relationships reach their full potential: parenthood, sonship, brotherhood and marriage. They are at the same time the four faces of human love (Puebla No. 583). When other families see how love fills the

life of a Christian family, a desire is born to imitate it. Then the practice of love, which is the bond that unites families, becomes a sign of the unity of all mankind (Puebla No. 586).

Latin American bishops emphasize that the good functioning of society depends on families properly fulfilling their tasks. The most important of these is the formation of people of conscience, united in a brotherhood and working together for social development. Prayer, work and educational activity of families as basic social units must therefore be directed at changing unjust structures, building unity between people and supporting their participation in public life. Each Christian family is called to commit to transforming the world according to the evangelical ideal. Its duty is to contribute to human progress, to a life of unity and solidarity, to the promotion of distributive justice and the strengthening of peace (Puebla No. 587).

In the light of the teaching of the Latin American episcopate, the family appears as a social value; it is its condition and functioning that determines the shape and quality of life of entire societies (Zaborowska 2012, p. 30). It is there that the human personality is formed and the person acquires competences useful in public life. Christian families, to whom bishops primarily address their teachings, have the task of educating the young generation so that they find the way to full humanity and receive support in their pursuit of it. In this respect, the Church hierarchs refer to the Gospel ideal, which is at the same time a universal model. Behind this belief is the recognition of Christianity as humanism *par excellence*, showing the full truth about man, promoting human solidarity and calling for care for the common good (Zimmermann 2012, p. 38–39).

By showing Latin American Christian families the challenges they face, the pastors of the Catholic Church teach that “the family in its internal structure is the carrier and communicator of the main virtues and individual values. The family, through extensive relationships and interactions, is the most important promoter of universal values such as: love, selflessness, solidarity, justice, good, community, trust, hope” (Zaborowska 2012, p. 31). At a time when people associate the word “love” with feelings or sexuality, it is important to portray it as a willingness to freely give oneself to others. It is then that an environment is created in which a person can grow up to full humanity and derive happiness from living in authentic relationships (Beck, Beck-Gernsheim 1990, p. 233).

Although the CELAM final documents were drafted in an environment in which liberation theology was born, it is evident that Latin American bishops, in assigning social tasks to Christian families, avoid

providing ready-made solutions to overcome economic and political problems. This does not mean, of course, that these issues are absent in their reflection. However, in their teaching they accept the – otherwise right – option not to start social changes with reforming structures, but with educating people to realize values such as love, brotherhood, service or responsibility for multiplying and sharing the common good. It is not new structures and political decisions that can give birth to a “new man”, liberated and capable of using all his possibilities, but a man formed in a family in such a way that he sees in love the most sublime way of realizing human freedom. Then a person who is ready to offer himself as a gift can contribute to building a more human world by his sacrificial service for the good of other people (Vela 1988, p. 108; Trigo 2005, p. 50–52).

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Latin American bishops show a great deal of interest in the situation of families in South and Central America. Bearing in mind the social processes and changes taking place in the world of values, the pastors of the Church pay special attention to such social phenomena as globalization, pauperization or migration, which have a negative impact on the image and life of families and their members. It is especially important for them that Christian families, subjected to the influence of a pluralized and secularized society do not detach themselves from their religious roots and cease to be witnesses of the Gospel in the world and a healthy foundation of public life.

The CELAM final documents show that it is not only pastoral issues that are challenging for the Church. For her concern cannot be limited to the spiritual sphere, but must also bear in mind social, cultural, economic and political problems. The Latin American bishops thus show the whole universal Church how to “read” the social situation in the light of faith in order to discover in it what the Lord wants to say to the Church under certain circumstances. Listening to the voice of God speaking through daily events is a form of Gospel discernment. It consists in observing the action of the Spirit in human history, in which the message of God resounds.

CELAM’s teaching about the role of the Christian family in the modern world reminds the Church of the irreplaceable role of the lay faithful in building the “civilization of love” in the world. They contribute by their testimony – individually and with their whole families – to true development, which must be based on the love of God and neighbor. Through Catholic families, the Church serves society by promoting human dignity,

a fair distribution of goods and a social relationship based on solidarity. In this way, it carries out its saving mission in the world, contributing to the construction of a better world.

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