



Special Issue Reprint

The Role of Religion in Marriage and Family Life

Edited by
Urszula Dudziak

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The Role of Religion in Marriage and Family Life

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Urszula Dudziak



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About the Editor

Urszula Dudziak

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Editorial

Introduction to the Special Issue “The Role of Religion in Marriage and Family Life”

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Every human being functions and has the ability to establish relationships with others on four levels: somatic, psychological, spiritual, and social. This truth is particularly highlighted by humanistic psychology (Maslow 1954), logotherapy (Frankl 1959) and the philosophy of personalism (Mounier 1936; Wojtyła 1969). Research conducted by doctors, psychologists, theologians, and sociologists allows us to delve into the realms of the human body, psyche, spirit, and social bonds. The most difficult to explore is the spiritual realm. For this reason, the opening of a section titled “The Role of Religion in Marriage and Family Life” in the journal *Religions* is especially valuable. The articles contained in this section enabled the publication of this book. The authors of the respective sections are specialists from various fields and different denominations. All of them, in various ways, demonstrate how valuable and useful a person’s spiritual life and the religion they embrace are for them, and how precious and necessary these are in all interpersonal relationships. The role of religion is to shape appropriate relationships with God, but also to highlight fundamental goals, aspirations, principles of conduct, and specific actions in various situations for both young and older people. Religion aids in moral education, motivates personal development, encourages mutual expressions of love, and fosters responsibility towards God, others, and oneself.

The first three chapters of this book: “Preparations for Marriage in the Jewish and Catholic Traditions,” by Walter Homolka and Andrzej Pryba; “Support for Engaged Couples in Preparation for a Catholic Marriage,” by Urszula Dudziak; and “Volunteering as an Instrument for Preparing Young People for Christian Marriage and Family Life,” by Wiesław Przygoda, present the need, usefulness, methods, and forms of assistance provided by the religious community in preparing engaged couples for marriage.

The authors of the fourth chapter, Atila Kartal, Kemal Şimşek, Emine Atmaca, and Haktan Kaplan, describe the rituals of “bride retrieval” in Anatolian weddings.

The fifth chapter, written by Elżbieta Osewska and Józef Stala, highlights the promotion of peace through Christian upbringing within the family.

The sixth chapter, authored by Marcin Skladanowski, Andrzej Szabaciuk, Agnieszka Lukasiak-Turecka, and Cezary Smuniewski, discusses marriage and family in Putin’s Russia, focusing on the state ideology and the discourse of the Russian Orthodox Church along with it.

The role of the virtue of religiosity in preparation for marriage and in the engagement and marital bond is presented in the seventh chapter by Tomasz Goździewicz. One expression of religiosity is the consequential parameter. Therefore, it is worth acquainting oneself with the description of religious and moral attitudes of the contemporary young generation presented in the eighth chapter by Grzegorz Polak and Adam Szromek.

The authors of the ninth chapter, Banu Güzelderer, Ünsal Yılmaz Yeşildal, and Fatih Düzgün, analyze the factors influencing the choice of a child’s name. They examine the relationship of this choice with the religiosity of interfaith marriages, taking into account spouses of Orthodox Christian and Muslim faiths.



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Among the issues of family life, one should mention the experienced illnesses, accidents, injuries, and the resulting disabilities of some family members. Conversations with these individuals allowed Krzysztof Mikołajczuk and Katarzyna Zielińska-Król to present the role of religion in the lives of disabled people in the tenth chapter. The authors noted that faith and religious practices give disabled individuals a sense of life's purpose, help them overcome weaknesses, and motivate them to accept their lives. Moreover, they provide the remaining family members with the strength to care for and show love to the sick. Old age is a challenging stage in human life. Mirosław Brzeziński, the author of the 11th chapter, points out its value in the teachings of Pope Francis. This teaching is a sign and a form of assistance provided to seniors and their families.

Religious aspects can also be observed in the experience of the death of a loved one. Aleksandra Kłos-Skrzypczak writes about the situation of women and families experiencing the miscarriage of a child. The author emphasizes the role of faith and religious life as factors offering support in mourning. Bogdan Kulik also deals with the topic of mourning and the role of faith in its experience by individual family members. In the last chapter of the book, the author draws attention to theories of annihilation, reincarnation, and spiritism, which contradict the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church. By quoting mourners, he presents the stages of grief and the role of faith in Jesus Christ in this experience.

Throughout different periods of life, from preparation for marriage, through the wedding ritual, naming children in the family, daily life in a specific society, to experiencing difficult situations such as disability and the death of a family member, the authors of this book present the role of religion in the experiences of its followers. This multi-author work may interest specialists from various fields: psychologists, theologians, sociologists, and employees and students of medical and nursing faculties, health sciences, and family studies, as well as engaged couples, spouses, parents, and grandparents. Encouraging you to read, I wish the readers of this book the usefulness of the acquired knowledge in their professional and private lives.

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Article

Preparations for Marriage in the Jewish and Catholic Traditions

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Abstract: In many churches nowadays, there has been a standardized approach to premarital counseling for couples involving social, pastoral, and psychological perspectives. In contrast, many rabbis and other Jewish officials still concentrate on legal aspects alone. The need for resolving important issues on the verge of wedlock is too often left to secular experts in law, psychology, or counseling. However, in recent years, this lack of formal training for marriage preparation has also been acknowledged by the Jewish clergy in order to incorporate it in the preparatory period before the bond is tied. This case study focuses on Jewish and Roman Catholic conceptions of marriage, past and present. We intend to do a comparative analysis of the prerequisites of religious marriage based on the assumption that both Judaism and the Roman Catholic Church have a distinct legal framework to assess marriage preparation.

Keywords: counselling; intermarriage; Jewish law; kiddushin; marriage preparations; nissuin; shidduchin; wedding; sacrament of marriage

1. Introduction

In Judaism, marriage is a religious institution subject to divine statutes. Jewish law has the task of providing a framework for these religious and ethical ideals. Accordingly, during its development, it shows a tendency to elevate marriage from the realm of private contract law to an ethical issue and to emphasize its moral character. Marriage, built on such moral principles, even forms for the prophets a parable of God's close union with Israel. For this reason, Judaism has always regarded marriage as good and desirable, as well as divinely sanctioned, and, with few exceptions, has never seen celibacy as a higher status. The preparation for marriage is an interesting topic, especially since it, in contrast to the Christian approach, aims to examine all possible impediments to marriage. This may seem legalistic, but it serves to avoid damaging the sanctity of married life.

The Roman Catholic Church has developed comprehensive and systematic premarital education programs. In fact, clergy of this faith may not perform marriages unless the bride and groom demonstrate that they have undergone adequate preparation. The programs include components of religious education as well as training in the pragmatics of marriage and family life.

Some of the topics that couples usually address in premarital counseling are: How do we communicate about sensitive or difficult issues? What would we do if either of us felt that our marriage was in crisis? Would we agree to go to couples counseling in the future if either of us felt it was important? What do we think about parenting and raising children? What values would we like to instill in our children, and what religious choices would we like to make in raising them? Infertility and adoption are also aspects that can be brought up. If one of the couples already has children, one question is how to raise them together. In addition, learn how to deal with problems related to finances, sex, or cleanliness in the home. What are our goals in life? Where do they overlap, and where might there be tension? How do we deal with our respective families? In short, premarital counseling is about empowerment and developing competence for marriage and family life.



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In 2000, rabbinic leaders such as the Rabbinical Council of America advocated that synagogue congregations consider a similar policy. The idea was to ensure that all couples receive a minimum amount of premarital education before they reach the *chuppah*, the wedding canopy, and perhaps even regularly during the early stages of marriage (Weinreb 2000). Apparently, the appeal did not receive much response in terms of pastoral considerations. In his essay “A Marital Agreement to Mediate”, David Joseph Mescheloff stresses that “much effort has gone into searching for a ‘halakhically and legally valid’ marital agreement that will help alleviate the contemporary *aguna* problem, which is caused by a live spouse who refuses to cooperate in the delivery of a *get*”, a document of divorce (Mescheloff 2010, pp. 29–30). In 2012, the Orthodox Union published “Six Conversations About Marriage: A Guide”, which “identifies six stages during the dating and marriage process in which preparation and thought can make a significant difference” (Hauer 2012, p. 2). The guiding thread, however, is not counseling but *taharat ha-mishpacha*, “family purity”.

Jewish marriage is not a sacrament in the Catholic sense; it is a *mitzvah*, the fulfillment of a religious commandment. And it is a *brit*, a sacred covenant that entails sacred duties. The spouses have an obligation to each other, to the community, and to God to be faithful in their relationship and in love and mutual respect and to make their home a “little sanctuary” filled with the beauty of the holy.

Three goals can be formulated for marriage: First, it serves human procreation. God wants the earth to be inhabited, and he has a plan for man’s activity in history. Furthermore, marriage serves life in happy companionship because “It is not good for the Human to be alone” (Gen 2:18). Family life can be considered the third goal of marriage. Marriage and family are regarded as the foundation of society: “Hence a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife” (Gen 2:24).

2. Prerequisites for Marriage in the Jewish Tradition

2.1. Three Successive Legal Acts Lead to Marriage

Since Talmudic times, marriage under Jewish law has consisted of three successive legal acts: *shidduchin* (betrothal), *kiddushin* (courtship), and *nissuin* (the actual marriage and bringing home of the bride) (cf. Shetreet and Homolka 2021). Thus, in a sense, betrothal (*shidduchin*) is the first stage of the three-stage process of marriage. This act is also called *tena'im*, which in turn is short for *tena'e shidduchin* (“terms of betrothal”). In biblical times, the betrothal probably occurred orally, and the details of the agreement were negotiated between the two fathers. In Talmudic times, on the other hand, we find an explicit contractual arrangement between the two parties, which was often also recorded in writing. In this contract, the young woman and the young man express their agreement that they will be married to each other at a future date. By *shidduchin*, then, we refer to the formal act of betrothal (Homolka 2009, pp. 61–63).

Mistakenly, in colloquial language, this first moment of marriage, according to Jewish law, is often called *erussin* (correctly: “marriage”). The mistake of this everyday way of speaking is that the *erussin* is rather to be equated with the *kiddushin*, the marriage rite, thus denoting the second legal act in Jewish marriage: the transition of the betrothed man to the status of the *erus*, the engaged groom, and of the betrothed woman to the status of the *erusa*, the engaged bride.

Finally, the third moment of the marital legal bond is the legal act called *nissuin*, which is clearly distinguishable from *kiddushin*. In it, the actual marriage takes place as the sealing of the entire process of marriage. Nowadays, as has been the case for several centuries, *kiddushin* and *nissuin* are performed as part of a single wedding ceremony, but from a legal point of view, they are still two completely different processes (Homolka 2009, pp. 69–71).

Of course, the *shidduchin* is also subject to historical change and has undergone various modifications over the centuries. It gained its greatest importance in the Middle Ages (especially since the 11th and 12th centuries), when there were major changes in

the legal and ritual procedures of marriage. The ceremonial unification of kiddushin and nissuin that took place at that time led to the fact that the form of the preceding agreements also found new interest. In the process initiated by this, the form of the Jewish betrothal that is still valid today was developed (Bloch 1980, p. 27).

A number of attempts were also made to strengthen the legal validity of the shidduchim. They were now uniformly recorded in a written document (*shetar shidduchin*, i.e., notarization of the engagement). In this document, the compensation to be paid in the event of the withdrawal of one of the parties is fixed in advance. Even though it was considered inappropriate to have a marriage without a prior engagement, it had little legal force. And insofar as it was based on a merely oral agreement—against the trend toward written fixation—it could be broken with impunity, although such a “broken promise” was morally condemned with the formula: “He who punished the generation of the flood and the generation of the Tower of Babel will also punish him who does not stand by his word” (M BM 4:2).

2.2. Marriage Requirements

According to Jewish law, anyone wishing to enter a marriage must meet certain requirements. First and foremost, this includes legal capacity, i.e., the legal ability to enter a valid contract under private law. Deaf mutes, persons of unsound mind, and minors (*cherech, shoteh ve'katan*) cannot, in principle, enter a valid marriage. According to the Talmud, the woman must consent to the marriage; however, silence was taken as consent. Since marriages were often arranged by the parents and the marriage was traditionally unilateral, that is, initiated by the man, the daughter bowed to their choice, especially since in Talmudic times, girls were often given in marriage at the age of twelve or even younger. By the marriage contract, she passed from her father’s care to that of her husband. Although a minor could not enter marriage himself, before the introduction of civil marriage, the father of a minor daughter could, in extreme cases, give her into marriage without her knowledge or consent. However, this “early marriage” is already rejected in Talmudic times (bT Qid 41a; ShA, EH 37:8); also, the minor can object to the marriage upon reaching the full legal age.

Furthermore, the qualification to marry, nubility, is tied to certain physical conditions: A known inability to procreate because of castration, for example, is an absolute impediment to marriage. There are also prohibitions on marriage: between relatives or with *mamzerim* (bastards) or Karaites. *Kohanim* (members of the former priestly caste) observe special rules in choosing partners. Another group of marriage prohibitions has the purpose of promoting morality. For example, a man may not remarry the wife he divorced if she has since entered another marriage, which was then dissolved again by the death of or divorce from the second husband. Furthermore, as mentioned above, a woman who has been convicted of adultery may neither continue her previous marriage nor marry the adulterer (Klein 1979, p. 385). Similarly, a man is prohibited from marrying a woman for whom he has acted as a representative in a divorce or even as an individual witness in the determination of the death of her husband (ShA, HM 33–35, ShA, EH 12:1). The rule that a woman who has already been widowed twice under unexplained circumstances should not enter another marriage also belongs in this context (bT Yevt 64b). However, this rule has not been enforced since the early Middle Ages.

2.3. Reasons for the Prohibition of Marriages

A problem that occurs much more frequently in practice than the cases discussed last is the problem of intermarriage, that is, marriage between Jews and Gentiles. Obviously, the underlying reason for this is the sanctity of the Jewish family and home, as well as the Jewish status of the children. Under Mosaic law, marriage to all Canaanite peoples was forbidden. This prohibition was then extended to almost all foreign peoples and is the basis for the general prohibition of marriage to non-Jews unless the potential spouse converts to Judaism (Homolka 2009, pp. 33–59). With emancipation and the possibility

of civil marriage, intermarriage between Jews and Christians became more common, and there were certainly some attempts to change the official attitude toward this problem. For example, the Grand Sanhédrin, convened by Napoleon in 1807, declared that marriages between Jews and non-Jews were valid under civil law. And although these marriages were not permissible from a religious point of view, they were not to entail a “ban curse” in the future (Mielziner 1901, p. 47; Philipson 1931, p. 20). Accordingly, the Brunswick Rabbinical Conference of Reform Rabbis decided in 1844: “[...]The marriage of a Jew with a Christian, marriage with adherents of monotheistic religions generally, is not prohibited, provided that the laws of the state permit parents to raise the children of such a union also in the Jewish faith” (Meyer 1995, p. 133). Conservative Judaism, however, recognizes only marriage between two Jews as *kiddushin*.

Today’s progressive Judaism, like Orthodox and Conservative, discourages intermarriage because intermarriage might weaken the Jewish community. Progressive Jews recognize, however, that in an open society, such marriages do occur. In such cases, the Jewish partner should be encouraged and supported to maintain his or her connection to the Jewish community and to raise his or her children as Jews. Whether the religious blessing of intermarriages should nevertheless be permitted is a topic of debate, especially in North America. Individual members of the liberal Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR) are willing to officiate at such weddings. However, the conference as a whole has repeatedly spoken out against such a practice (Central Conference of American Rabbis 1983). Progressive Jewish communities in the rest of the world take a similar view.

2.3.1. The Minimum Age

Each legal system sets a minimum age for marriage. This age has varied and still varies in different historical periods and in different countries. In general, the age that was considered a prerequisite for marriageability has steadily increased over the centuries. In traditional Jewish law, there is a difference between boys and girls regarding the minimum age for marriage. A boy is a minor, a *katan*, until the age of 13 (MT Ishut 2:10). During this time, he cannot enter a valid marriage; a marriage entered by him would be void (MT Ishut 4:7; ShA, EH 43:1). After that, at the age of 13 years and one day, he becomes a “son of duty” (*bar mitzvah*) and thus religiously mature, a *gadol*. The boy now has all the rights and duties of an adult, including the right to marry. Nevertheless, it does not seem to have been customary for boys to enter marriage immediately upon reaching adulthood. The Mishnah recommends the age of 18 for this purpose (M Abot 5:21); the Talmud mentions the period “from 16 to 22” (bT Qid 30a), “from 18 to 24” (bT Qid 30a), or “under 20” (bT Qid 29b) as the ideal age for marriage (bT Qid 30a). The Shulchan Aruch, the halachic vademecum by Joseph Caro, published in Venice in 1565, says that a young man should marry at the age of 18, preferably even earlier, but certainly at the age of 20 (ShA, EH 1:3). Of course, such recommendations are obsolete in our time.

2.3.2. Health Aspects

Deficiencies in physical health do not generally prevent the validity of a marriage. If the man is known to be incapable of procreation from birth or through illness, this is not an obstacle to marriage (ShA, EH 5:10). A person who is mentally ill is generally considered incapable of giving consent in a legally valid manner; he is considered to be someone “without personality” in the legal sense. Therefore, she may not enter marriage. However, persons suffering from a merely temporary mental illness may marry in lucid moments (MT Ishut 4:9; ShA, EH 44:1–2). Deaf-mutes posed a special problem in ancient times. But the Talmud allowed them to marry with reservations, relying on their ability to communicate by sign language (bT Jeb 112b; MT Ishut 4:9; ShA, EH 44:1). Finally, drunkenness beyond a certain level also limits the ability to freely consent (MT Ishut 4:18); the degree of drunkenness that precludes free consent is referred to (following Gen 19:30–36) as the “drunkenness of Lot”. A marriage entered into in this condition is, therefore, invalid. These rules are based on the general principle that marriage requires the voluntary consent

of both partners. For the same reason, marriage is also invalid if the woman's consent has been coerced (MT Ishut 4:1; ShA, EH 42:1). If the man's consent was based on coercion, however, some authorities consider the marriage valid but require that it be dissolved. The provisions of traditional Jewish law mentioned here, however, are severely limited in their significance by the fact that they generally compete with existing state laws.

2.3.3. Temporary Impediments to Marriage

In addition to the basic prohibitions on marriage, there are also several temporary impediments to marriage. These include the rule that a widow or divorced woman may not enter a new marriage within 90 days of her husband's death or receipt of the divorce decree to avoid ambiguity about paternity in the event of pregnancy (ShA, EH 13:1). A nursing widow or divorced wife may not remarry until 24 months after the birth of her child. This (long) period was the usual breastfeeding period for newborns (bT Yeb 42a; ShA, EH 13:11–14). However, this prohibition was often overridden in the responsa literature. If the wife dies, the husband is not to remarry during the mourning period of 30 days and, in addition, is to wait for the next three pilgrimage festivals (Passover, Shavuot, and Sukkot) before entering a new marriage (ShA, YD 392:2). However, this rule does not apply if there are young children who need to be cared for.

2.4. *The Betrothal (Shidduchin) and Its Contractual Status in Jewish Law*

The central content of the shidduchin is the mutual agreement of a man and a woman to enter marriage with each other, although traditionally, a matchmaker, the shadchan, may also establish the relationship. . . . The shidduchin also involves the families of both parties. Strictly speaking, then, the term in Jewish law encompasses two different types of promises:

1. The promise of the man to marry the woman at a certain time or at a time to be determined.
2. The promise of the parents or other relatives of the parties, by which they agree to their future marriage, including dowry and wedding expenses.

For an overview, see Zacharias Frankel's outlines of the Mosaic-Talmudic marriage law (Frankel 1860). The shidduchin is regarded in Judaism as the obligatory first stage in the process of marriage: In Jewish law, it is traditionally considered immoral to enter marriage with a woman unless the status of shidduchin has first been passed. Nevertheless, today, the formal shidduchin is often omitted for practical reasons. Instead, the future spouses become engaged according to secular custom. In this case, the respective rules of civil law apply.

Jewish law recognizes the action for breach of betrothal as a special case of the action for breach of contract. The promise of marriage, however, has the special feature that there is no claim for fulfillment here. However, the party who has broken the promise may be obliged to pay damages (Homolka 2009, pp. 63–67).

2.5. *The Meaningful Symbolic Power of Marriage*

All these are primarily legalistic aspects. Today, of course, in most countries except for the state of Israel, marriage and the family are regulated by a comprehensive system of state norms. The liberal Rabbi Leo Baeck (1873–1956) puts it very precisely: "Just as we no longer have a civil law of our own, strictly speaking, we also no longer have a marriage law. We have only a marriage right but no marriage law. What is consummated is not a copulatio but only a benedictio. It is no longer a legal act that is consummated, but almost only a homiletic act, with us and with the Orthodox" (Baeck 2005, p. 505). And yet, for Baeck, marriage also has an inherent mystery: "Where mystery is involved, we cannot abdicate in favor of the state. The hidden, the sacred reaches so deeply into the marital that we cannot abandon this realm to the profane. Secondly, for us, an essential is the community factor. There is no Judaism without Jewish community, and the cell of community is the family

and, through it, marriage. For the sake of community, we must hold on to Jewish marriage, we must therefore hold on to tradition” (Baeck 2005, p. 505).

Even if the legal commitment for citizens of the Jewish faith is already given by civil marriage today, Jewish marriage retains meaningful symbolic power, and thus, religious family law still has great significance in Judaism today.

Five Symbolic Steps towards Nissuin, the Wedding

Although there is no proper marriage preparation in the form of seminars and reflective education by the rabbi, Jewish tradition contains several spiritually meaningful prewedding customs to support and honor the bride and groom before their Big Day. Five rituals help the couple to celebrate, relax, and prepare before the chuppah is raised: Separation, *aufruf*, *mikvah*, fasting, and *badecken*, the veiling of the bride.

Traditionally, Jewish couples separate for a period before the wedding. This split used to last an entire week, but today, many couples spend only a couple of days apart. It is an opportunity for the bride and groom to have time alone or be with close family and friends.

Jewish to-be-weds are publicly honored with an *aufruf*, Yiddish, for “calling up”. On the Shabbat before the wedding (or the Shabbat after the wedding for Sephardi Jews), the groom recites the blessings before and after the first Torah reading. In egalitarian congregations, the bride and groom may say the blessings together. When they are done, there is an obligatory shower of candies and nuts, wishing for a sweet marriage. The *aufruf* is usually followed by a celebratory meal (Klein 1979, p. 399).

Immersing in the *mikvah*, or ritual bath, prior to a wedding allows the bride and/or groom to quietly mark the transition from being single to being married. It can also create an island of peace, contemplation, and perspective amid the public ceremonies and celebrations that surround the big event. According to traditional Jewish practice, a bride visits the *mikvah* within four days of her wedding, seven days after the end of her period. This joyous occasion is followed by a small party for women, friends, and family. Sephardic Jews celebrate with a ritual called *noche de bano*, or “night of the bath”, where the bride is presented with scented soaps and perfumes. Some grooms also go to a *mikvah* to prepare for their weddings. They may be accompanied by a group of friends and have men-only parties afterwards.

In most Jewish communities, both bride and groom fast, beginning at sundown the night before the wedding. Before the wedding ceremony, two separate receptions are held (usually in adjacent rooms), one for the bride and another for the groom, who has not broken their fast yet. It is customary for a groom to deliver (or attempt to deliver) a learned discourse at the *tisch* (“table”). But traditionally, he is interrupted by his friends shortly after beginning, with lively singing and rhythmic clapping in which all present join to prevent him from continuing. This custom is not intended as an affront or as an act of disrespect to the groom but is designed to protect the groom, who may be less than scholarly, lest he be shamed on what should be his most joyous day. They will meet again only at the *badecken*, the veiling ceremony that follows the reception (cf. Wiener 2013, p. 69).

The bride sits on a distinctive, ornate throne-like chair. Her friends and family approach, wish *mazal tov*, and offer their heartfelt wishes and words of encouragement. At the groom’s reception, songs are sung, and words of Torah are often delivered. In many communities, this occasion is used to complete and sign two of the wedding documents: the *tenai’m* (“engagement” contract) and the *ketubah* (marriage contract or prenuptial agreement). At the conclusion of the reading of the *tenai’m*, the mothers of the bride and groom break a china or glass plate to the joyous shouts of *mazal tov!*

After the *kabbalat panim* receptions comes the *badecken*, the veiling ceremony. A procession headed by the groom goes to the bridal reception room, where the groom covers the bride’s face with a veil. The custom originated with the matriarch Rebecca, who covered her face when meeting her groom, Isaac. The veil symbolizes the idea of modesty and conveys the message that no matter how attractive physical appearances may be, the soul and character are paramount. After the groom veils the bride, the parents of the bride and

groom approach the bride and bless her (Klein 1979, p. 401). The groom's entourage then retreats from the room. The bride and groom proceed with their chuppah preparations, and everyone else continues to the site of the chuppah, the wedding canopy. The couple's fast is broken with the first glass of wine under the chuppah. Like Yom Kippur, marriage fasting is a way to purify oneself, enabling the bride and groom to enter the chuppah and their new life together with a clean slate.

3. Main Elements of Marriage in the Catholic Tradition

For the Roman Catholic Church, marriage is a religious reality. God is the Creator of man and the Creator of marriage. He has a specific plan for him. Knowing this plan is essential for a man to find his true identity.

When analyzing the issues of God's plan for marriage and family, we must first take into account two realities: the mystery of creation and the mystery of salvation. At the same time, it should be emphasized that, for God, the creation of the world and its salvation are one eternal plan. Creation is shown in the Holy Scriptures as the first act that begins the path of salvation (Filipiak 1972, pp. 145–55). The creative and salvific orders are united here through the Person of Jesus Christ, who is "the firstborn of every creature" (Col 1:15). God, creating the world to be a dwelling place for man, wanted to conclude a covenant with him, basing it on relationships of love, faithfulness, and trust, and he expected their reciprocation from man. This covenant also concerned, from the very beginning, marriage. "God's saving intervention reaches to the very core of marriage, uplifting and transforming what is natural. In the history of salvation, marriage has never been just a "secular thing". From the very beginning, it was a reflection and image of God's infinite love, which is the ultimate foundation of all events related to the covenant" (Grzeškowiak 2010, p. 65). Marriage is the image of God and is also a certain anthropological phenomenon based on the human genesis contained in the pages of the Bible.

The Second Vatican Council recalled this important truth in the following words: "For God Himself is the author of matrimony, endowed as it is with various benefits and purposes. (1) All of these have a very decisive bearing on the continuation of the human race, on the personal development and eternal destiny of the individual members of a family, and on the dignity, stability, peace, and prosperity of the family itself and of human society as a whole" (GS 48).

3.1. *Marriage Is a Covenant*

Marriage, which is the foundation of the family, has become a sign of the covenant with redeemed humanity. Christ sanctified it with his sacrifice on the Cross, making it a sacramental sign of his love for the Church. According to Jerzy Grzeškowiak, "marriage was designed by God not only as an image of God but also as a type of saving covenant that God concluded with people. In marriage, in the order of salvation, the fact becomes even more clearly and radically visible that marriage is not fulfilled only for itself but that it has an important function to fulfill in God's saving action towards all humanity and its history (Grzeškowiak 1985, p. 37). The essence of the marital covenant mentioned here is not only the relationship between a man and a woman but also the relationship between the Creator and marriage. Marriage and family belong to the order of creation. Moreover, as Edward Ozorowski emphasized in his book, marriage and family "are the original reality and have their own inviolable rules determined by God" (Ozorowski 2009, p. 11).

By creating man as male and female, God has already hidden the mystery of the covenant of Christ and the Church. Based on the analysis of biblical texts, Grzeškowiak stated that "marriage, as an institution belonging to the economy of creation, was established as a natural model announcing Christ's love for the Church and, at the same time, it was already determined in its meaning and structure by the same love of Christ for the Church. [...] God created marriage "in the beginning" according to a certain archetype inherent in His plan, which was the spousal bond of Christ with the Church [...] His Bride and Body. This is the specificity of "marriage in the Lord" (1 Cor 7:39), i.e., the essence of

what the modern Church understands by the “sacramentality of marriage” (Grzeškowiak 2010, pp. 134–35).

3.2. *Unity and Indissolubility of Marriage*

God, the Creator, is Love. Out of love, He brought man into existence in order for him to love. Therefore, the Creator inscribed in the humanity of men and women a vocation to love, which is the natural foundation of the marital relationship, which is one of the forms of implementing God’s plan of love.

Love is, therefore, a matter of the highest importance, the main principle of the entire marital life, an impulse for constant development. Of course, love is understood here as a communion of persons consisting of a mutual and free gift of self. The choices people make should be made out of love and freedom. This is necessary when you want to promise another person undying love and fidelity, putting yourself at the other person’s complete disposal. “In such an act of free choice, a person realizes himself and, at the same time, grows beyond himself, entering the dimension of transcendence. Because every act of choice and decision to remain faithful to someone forever is, in a way, a victory over time and its transience. At the same time, it is something creative because in it, a person becomes more himself, and by sovereignly disposing of his freedom, he possesses himself even more” (Grzeškowiak 2010, p. 161). Love, which so fascinates, makes happy, and unites a man and a woman, naturally leads them to an irrevocable and radical bond in marriage. This love between the two of them becomes marital love. And it is she, “established by the Creator”, that, in turn, demands unity and indissolubility, which are the attributes of marriage.

Judaism allows divorce but makes it legally very difficult. For the Catholic church, marital indissolubility is a gift. John Paul II emphasizes this truth in his teaching: “Christ renews the first plan that the Creator inscribed in the hearts of man and woman, and in the celebration of the sacrament of matrimony offers a “new heart”: thus the couples are not only able to overcome “hardness of heart” (Mt 19, 1), but also and above all they are able to share the full and definitive love of Christ, the new and eternal Covenant made flesh. Just as the Lord Jesus is the “faithful witness” (Rev 3:14), the “yes” of the promises of God (cf. 2 Cor 1:20), and thus the supreme realization of the unconditional faithfulness with which God loves His people, so Christian couples are called to participate truly in the irrevocable indissolubility that binds Christ to the Church His bride, loved by Him to the end (cf. Jn 13:1)” (FC, no. 20). Marital fidelity is achieved by those spouses who cooperate with the grace of the sacrament of marriage, that is, by those who overcome their egoism through everyday efforts aimed at true love in the spirit of *communio personarum*.

3.3. *Giving Birth and Raising Offspring*

Marital love, which is spousal love, is, by its nature, fertile love. The Second Vatican Council teaches on this matter as follows: “Marriage and conjugal love are by their nature ordained toward the begetting and educating of children. Children are really the supreme gift of marriage and contribute very substantially to the welfare of their parents” (GS, no. 50). Authentic love always bears fruit. True marital love, therefore, aims at opening to a new life and cooperation with God the Creator. Tadeusz Styczen claimed that spouses should go beyond marital communion towards the Creator as the Giver of the special gift that is a child for them, which means at the same time going beyond marital communion towards family communion (Styczen 1993, pp. 187–88).

The quality of upbringing depends largely on the personal relationship between parents and children. Rocco Buttiglione claims that parents’ love is extremely important for a child. It does not matter what character or level of love they represent. After all, they can love them with a fully personal love, strengthened by supernatural grace; they can love with a love that is in some sense personal but without a supernatural dimension; they can “love” by “satisfying the parental instinct”; they can “love” by using violence. The child understands spiritually that he owes his origins to his parents and also recognizes the nature

of the beginning of his existence based on the quality of this love. According to Buttiglione, only in the first case, where love is a fully personal and strengthened supernatural grace, will the child experience his or her own existence in the world as endowed with meaning, fully justified, justifying the sense of self-worth (Buttiglione 1991, p. 191).

Education for love is education through love. Such upbringing leads to the formation of the mature personality of a responsible person; this is achieved through self-education. However, much of this matter depends on the educational environment. Man “recognizes love through the love of other people while opening himself to the love of God himself. A person more easily recognizes his or her vocation to love, the essence of this love, and the ways of its implementation when he or she lives in an environment “marked” by love” (Nagórny 1993, p. 24).

4. Preparation for the Sacrament of Marriage

Preparation for the sacrament of marriage is essential for the good of those who are preparing, as well as for the good of the Church and society (Pontifical Council for the Family 1996, no. 1).

The period before marriage is a special time for engaged couples. This is a time to discern one’s vocation to married life. This time should be used for special evangelization. After all, the issue of faith in the case of a sacramental marriage is a key one. The document of the Pontifical Council for the Family suggests that engaged couples are “(…) called to understand what it means to be responsible and mature love, lived in that community of life and love that will be their family—a true domestic Church that will contribute to the enrichment of the whole Church” (Pontifical Council for the Family 1996, no. 1).

People who serve young people in preparing them for sacramental marriage want their relationships to be successful. However, it is worth realizing that the fulfillment of such a desire depends on many factors. The first of them is related to the development of a person’s personality in the family home, the second with the period of engagement, the third with the motivation for choosing a spouse, and the fourth with the decision to get married. The circumstances mentioned here should be taken into account in the process of preparing two people for the sacrament of marriage (Dzierżanowski 2000, p. 129).

The effectiveness of this process depends on evangelization, which shapes the maturation and deepening of faith. More and more often, we are faced with faith that is so weak that, to stimulate it, we often have to start with elementary truths. The apostolic exhortation “*Familiaris consortio*” advises in such cases to do it “through a path of faith analogous to the catechumenate” (FC, no. 66). Pope Francis wants to continue this idea in his pastoral activities, as he stated during his speech to the Tribunal of the Roman Rota: “It is therefore necessary (..) for programs of preparation for the sacrament of marriage to be more and more effective, not only for human growth but above all for the faith of the engaged couple. The main goal of the meetings is to help engage couples in real, gradual inclusion in the mystery of Christ, in the Church, and with the Church. This involves a gradual maturation in faith by proclaiming the Word of God, clinging to Christ, and following Him generously” (Franciszek 2017). Therefore, it is about making a journey together with engaged couples who prepare for the sacrament of marriage. This path is supposed to lead to an encounter with Christ and then to deepening this relationship and making an authentic discernment of the marital vocation.

4.1. Further Preparation

The paths of catechumenal initiation are preceded by further preparation, which includes children and youth. This happens, above all, in the family. A healthy, faithful family in which there is an ambience of mutual trust will best introduce a child to the world of love between people and God. After all, it is the family that creates such spiritual values as parental love, children’s love and respect for their parents, and family solidarity. It is in this reality that the ground is being prepared, as it were, in which the vocation to married life will have a chance to sprout.

Raising children begins before they are born—in an environment where new life is expected and welcomed. This process takes place mainly through a loving dialogue between the mother and the human being who is to be born. It should be continued after the baby is born. We must always bear in mind the truth that upbringing is “primarily the giving of humanity and a two-sided gift to the newborn person” (John Paul II 1994, no. 16). The best example of marital love will be, above all, parents (Majdański 1983, pp. 124–29).

John Paul II, in his apostolic exhortation “*Familiaris consortio*”, pointed out that further preparation “begins in early childhood, in that wise family training that leads children to discover themselves as being endowed with a rich and complex psychology and with a particular personality with its own strengths and weaknesses. It is the period when esteem for all authentic human values is instilled, both in interpersonal and social relationships, with all that this signifies for the formation of character, for the control and right use of one’s inclinations, for the manner of regarding and meeting people of the opposite sex, and so on. Also necessary, especially for Christians, is a solid spiritual and catechetical formation that will show that marriage is a true vocation and mission” (FC no. 66; Pontifical Council for the Family 1996, no. 22).

There is no doubt, therefore, that the family is a special and privileged place for preparing young people for marriage. It is here that young people should be “aptly and seasonably instructed in the dignity, duty, and work of married love. Trained thus in the cultivation of chastity, they will be able at a suitable age to enter a marriage of their own after an honorable courtship” (GS, no. 49). Therefore, further preparation for marriage consists in presenting family life as a calling from God, which must first be read and then undertaken and fulfilled (Pryba 2002, p. 134).

Parents should educate their children to love responsibly and sacrificially. They should instill in them, from an early age, respect for every healthy human value, both in interpersonal and social relationships. They should properly shape their character, teaching them to control and properly use their own inclinations and to perceive and treat people of the opposite sex. Spiritual and catechetical formation is also indispensable here (John Paul II 1981, no. 66). An extremely important task is also education in love, understood as a gift to oneself. It is worth noting here that the vocation to marital love is also a vocation to make a gift of oneself in marriage. Therefore, in order to actually be able to offer yourself to your spouse, you must first possess yourself.

Outside the family, preparation for marriage takes place at school and in formation groups that support the family (Mierziński 1980, pp. 192–93). These environments can be valuable allies for the family. What is more, they should be. Pope Francis draws attention to this and suggests that an educational path for further preparation for marriage should be included in the pastoral plans and choices of each parish. In particular, it should appear in youth pastoral care and should be proposed as an appropriate time to begin the maturing of the vocation to marriage (Francis 2019, no. 242). Moreover, it would also be appropriate to cooperate with lay associations and movements (Francis 2019, no. 206).

4.2. Closer Preparation

Proximal preparation is called premarital catechesis. Its purpose is to supplement family upbringing and, if necessary, correct it. This stage of preparation should take into account another important challenge, which is learning interpersonal communication and dialogue.

The Church’s guidelines list three specific tasks for premarital catechesis:

- deepening the Catholic teaching on marriage and family, with particular emphasis on the currently widespread views and theories;
- preparing young people for social life in a family community and cooperation with grace by shaping moral and religious-social virtues and attitudes of young people;
- introduction to deeper cultural life, that is, to common prayer and sacramental life (Konferencja Episkopatu Polski 1986, no. 5).

Closer preparation should consist of listening to the Word of God in order to better understand faith and bear witness to it in concrete life. The document of the Dicastery for Laity, Family, and Life proposes a catechumenate at this stage of preparation for marriage. It is addressed to specific couples. It gives an opportunity to proclaim the kerygma to them already at the stage of admission of individual couples. Therefore, a form of proximate preparation is the catechumenate, which also lasts at the stage of immediate preparation and in the initial phase of marriage.

According to the document of the Pontifical Council for the Family, teaching those preparing for marriage should take place in the community of faith—among families who will engage in this work and cooperate in accordance with their own charisms and their own role in the formation of young people, extending their influence to other social groups (Pontifical Council for the Family 1996, no. 34).

The specific goal of this stage of preparation is to lead individual couples to the end of the process of discernment regarding their marriage vocation. This process may lead their participants to make a free and responsible decision to get married or to end the relationship and not get married. During this preparation process, the idea is for the bride and groom to understand the difference between preparing for the wedding and preparing for married life (Dicastery of Laity 2022, no. 55).

At the end of this stage of preparation, after deep discernment, and as a sign of entering the next stage of preparation, an engagement rite may take place. This rite, with the blessing of the fiancée and engagement rings, takes on a special meaning when it is lived with faith. This event becomes a special opportunity to pray for the graces needed to grow in love and worthy preparation for the sacrament of marriage (Dicastery of Laity 2022, no. 59).

4.3. Direct Preparation

In the months preceding the celebration of the sacrament of marriage, direct preparation for the wedding day takes place. This preparation can be called prewedding catechesis, which aims to make engaged couples aware of the essential purposes of the sacrament of marriage. Its tasks include, in particular, reminding the family of the obligation of religious life (this applies in particular to the religious upbringing of children), discussing the principles of marital ethics, mainly in the field of responsible parenthood, and convincing parents to apply these principles in their lives, as well as preparing them for the liturgy of the sacrament of marriage.

With a view to celebrating the wedding, it is a good idea to involve the future spouses in choosing the Mass readings, songs, and prayer forms of the faithful. An important aspect that should be particularly emphasized in direct preparation is to make them aware of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit during the ceremony of the sacrament of marriage. This special gift of the Holy Spirit is part of the dynamics of grace initiated in Holy Baptism (Dicastery of Laity 2022, no. 69).

In order for future spouses to experience their wedding as deeply as possible, it is recommended that they undergo a retreat a few days before the wedding. It is also important to go through a prewedding confession at this time.

To sum up, the purpose of immediate preparation is to recall the doctrinal, moral, and spiritual aspects of the wedding. It is also important to clarify the content of the canonically prescribed prenuptial protocol. Moreover, the focus is on the spiritual experience of meeting the Lord and preparation for conscious and fruitful participation in the wedding liturgy (Pontifical Council for the Family 1996, no. 50–58).

5. Conclusions

While the *messader*, the rabbi or cantor who officiates at the chuppah, might not be trained or capable of serving as a counselor to the couple, the traditional seven sanctifications within this ceremony, the *sheva brachot*, speak for themselves. The first blessing is recited over the wine, and the following three praise God, who has created all things for his glory, formed humankind, and created male and female in his image. The fifth blessing

refers to the joy of the restoration of Zion, and the sixth evokes the joy of the first couple in Paradise. The seventh blessing gives thanks to God for having created “joy and gladness, bride and bridegroom” and concludes, “Blessed. . . who makes the bridegroom rejoice with the bride”. To quote an anonymous medieval Jewish scholar of the 13th century: “Know that this union is a holy and pure thing when it is properly conducted in the proper time and with the proper intention. . . God has created everything according to His wisdom and has not created things to be ugly or shameful. . . He created man and woman and created each and every organ and their functions, and there is nothing degrading in this” (Iggeret Ha-Kodesh, Chapter 2, traditionally attributed to Nahmanides; Cohen 1993).

We have seen that Judaism considers marriage to be a holy union. Considerable preconditions and restrictions can be found in the context of the preparation for matrimony to assure its purity. Besides legal prerequisites, Maimonides has underlined the proper intention as a priority when stepping into wedlock. This approach stands in contradiction to the lack of rabbis and Jewish officiants in modern techniques of premarital counseling. It seems conclusive to many rabbis of all denominations to widen the horizons of marriage preparation and add contemporary forms of counseling to alert couples to problems and issues before they are confronted with them after the wedding. However, we must bear in mind that pastoral care only became part of rabbinical training curricula in the 1930s (Homolka 2012, pp. 39–40) and that the significance of this topic varies in the different Jewish denominations.

[Roman Catholic Church]

Marriage in the Jewish and Catholic traditions is a religious reality. It has references to the Bible. It is in it, as well as in the traditions of individual religions, that its essence and meaning are read. The article on prerequisites and preparation for marriage shows some common elements and differences. It provides a chance for better mutual understanding and thus contributes to interreligious dialogue. Michael L. Satlow stresses that “understanding marriage within the context of Jewish–Christian relations today must also take account of a third player, that of secularization with the options that it opens for religious life outside the traditional institutions (Satlow 2020). In 2008, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, the Orthodox Union, and the Rabbinical Council of America published “Created in the Divine Image: Orthodox Jewish–Catholic Statement on Marriage” (Consultation 2008). The shared concern was the rejection of same-sex marriage, which is fully accepted by Reform Jews and many Protestant churches as equal in all ways to heterosexual marriage. However, instead of a joint negative attitude toward a minority group, we need to build alliances to develop positive and inclusive approaches to meeting life’s challenges at large. Familiarizing oneself with the best practice experiences of other faith communities can help ensure that religious life cycle events such as marriage remain meaningful and societally relevant.

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Abbreviations

bt Quid	Babylonian Talmud, Quiddushin
bT Yeb	Babylonian Talmud, Yebamot
FC	Apostolic Exhortation <i>Familiaris consortio</i> of Pope John Paul II
GS	(Second Vatican Council 1965), Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the modern World <i>Gaudium et spes</i>
M Abot	Mishnah, Abot
M BT	Mishnah, Baba Metzia
MT Ishut	Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Ishut
ShA, EH	Shulchan Aruch, Even Ha-Ezer
ShA, YD	Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh De'ah

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Article

Support for Engaged Couples in Preparation for a Catholic Marriage

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Abstract: Marriage can be solemnised in a non-religious setting, through a declaration given before a civil servant. Alternatively, it may incorporate a religious dimension and take place in a church, with an accompanying prayer, the presence of a priest, and a blessing. Quoting from the Old and New Testaments, the author highlights the fundamental aspects of marriage within the Catholic Church. The author also explores the tasks and characteristics of marriage, comparing the declaration made at the Registry Office for secular marriages with the vows exchanged during a church wedding. The article also draws attention to the premarital counselling offered by the Catholic Church, provided by priests and family life counsellors. This counselling is a valuable and necessary resource for engaged couples as they prepare for marriage and parenthood. It can help couples with two important tasks: expressing love and transmitting life.

Keywords: God; love; marriage; Catholic religion; support for fiancés

1. Introduction

One of the greatest human accomplishments is to discern one's own vocation and select a path in life. This can take the form of entering the priesthood or a religious congregation, or pursuing solitude in order to better serve the many. However, the prevalent choice is to get married, start a family, and take care of one's own children (Dudziak 2022c, p. 119).

Both civil and ecclesiastical law provide regulations for the conduct of marriage. The civil law regulations are discussed using Poland as an example. They may be of interest to people in other countries who may wish to make comparisons and evaluate what is the same and what is different from the regulations in their own countries. Religious principles based on Scripture and Church documents apply to Catholics all over the world. Researchers of different faiths may identify similarities and differences between the teachings on marriage in the Catholic religion and the references to marriage in other religious denominations. The topic addressed is thus heuristic, indicating the need for further research to expand knowledge on the issue.

This article presents a comprehensive guide to preparing for marriage, drawing on documents from the Polish Episcopate, premarital course materials from various countries, and the author's experience conducting conferences for fiancés and meetings in a family life counselling centre. The aim is to encourage readers interested in this issue to explore the programmes for marriage preparation implemented in other countries and religious communities.

The purpose of this article is to outline the support available to engaged couples in preparation for Catholic marriage. It provides an explanation of the concept of marriage according to both secular law and the Catholic religion. The article also explores the wedding ceremony, spoken vows, moral obligations, and goals of marriage, as well as the role of the Church in preparing Catholic spouses to implement these in their lives. The efficacy of this preparation is assessed in the subsequent years of married and family life.



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2. Material and Methods

The article's content is drawn from legal and ecclesiastical documents, as well as from previous publications on marriage and family and author's own involvement in courses preparing fiancés for marriage. The study of the collected material was conducted by employing methods such as analysis and synthesis, as well as observation, introspection, deduction, and induction (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English 2001; Oxford English Dictionary 2010). These are valuable research methods useful both in assessing the effectiveness of premarital preparation courses and in reflecting on the audience's response to content related to love, procreation, and family life. The application of these methods proved successful in describing the pastoral support of spouses in speeches given by Pope John Paul II during His pilgrimages to Poland. Based on this, an earlier article was published in *Religions* in an issue dedicated to pilgrimages and religious mobilization in Europe (Dudziak 2022b). Drawing from this experience, it can be presumed that utilizing these methods will also be valuable in highlighting the role of religion in preparing for marriage and family life.

The documents analysed included: Acts from The Family and Guardianship Code (Ustawa [Act] 1964), Prawo o aktach stanu cywilnego The Law on Civil Status Records (Prawo o aktach stanu cywilnego 2023), The Documents of the Vatican Council II (1963, 1964, 1965), Charter of the Rights of the Family (1983), The Code of Canon Law (*Codex Iuris Canonici* 1983), *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1993), John Paul II's exhortation *Familiaris Consortio* (John Paul II 1981) and Letter to Families (John Paul II 1994), The Instructions on Preparation for Marriage issued by The Polish Episcopal Conference in 1969, 1975, and 1989, and The Directory for the Pastoral Care of the Family (The Polish Episcopal Conference 2003), as well as many others.

The observation of prenuptial couples attending a family life counselling centre as part of the mandatory premarital course, the conversations with them, lectures, and meetings dedicated to determining fertile and infertile days in the menstrual cycle, provided further insights for the analysis of the presented topic. Pre-marital course programmes from the United States, the United Kingdom, Ireland, and Australia also proved to be valuable in terms of both content and methodology.

Experience shows that premarital courses are not required before civil weddings. However, they are required and conducted in the Catholic Church. This constitutes a specific contribution of the religious community to the preparation for married and family life. The diversity of content and forms of premarital courses conducted by priests and lay family life counselors in various countries can facilitate the adoption of what is most useful for future spouses.

3. Results

As planned, the analysis of the documents permitted this section to present the concepts of the two types of marriage (i.e., Church marriage and civil marriage). It also allowed for the revealing of the foundations of marriage, its tasks, and the vows and commitments made.

These issues may be important, not only for engaged couples, but also for married couples and parents raising children. They may also be helpful for family life counsellors who offer professional support to engaged couples and families.

3.1. Marriage and Its Types

According to sociologists, "marriage is considered one of the oldest social institutions that founds the family and exists in all known societies, evolving alongside their historical development. The structure and nature of marriage are shaped by the culture, the legal and religious standards that regulate it, and the economic progress of a given society" (Małżeństwo. [Marriage] 1997, p. 483).

In accordance with Polish law, Article 1, paragraph 1 of The Family and Guardianship Code specifies that "Marriage is contracted when a man and a woman both make a decla-

ration before the head of the Registry Office, stating that they are entering into marriage with one another” (Kodeks Rodzinny i Opiekuńczy [The Family and Guardianship Code]—hereinafter referred to as KRO), Ustawa [Act] 1964, Article 1(1)). It is important for those about to enter into marriage to understand that “Spouses have equal rights and obligations in marriage. They have a responsibility to cohabit, aid each other, uphold fidelity, and collaborate for the betterment of the domestic unit established through their bond” (Ustawa [Act] 1964, Article 23).

The Central Statistical Office of Poland, on the basis of The Family and Guardianship Code Act of 25 February 1964 (*Journal of Laws* 2017, item 682, as amended) and The Law on Civil Status Records Act of 28 November 2014 (*Journal of Laws* 2021, item 709, as amended), defines marriage as “a legal partnership between two individuals of the opposite gender, subject to certain mutual rights and obligations as established by customary practices and the law” (Małżeństwo. [Marriage] 2023). Concluded on 28 July 1993, the Concordat between the Holy See and the Republic of Poland (*Journal of Laws* 1998 No. 51, item 318) facilitates “the registration of marriages subject to the internal law of a church or religious association, which are conducted in the presence of a clergyman, in Civil Registry Offices. A marriage conducted in this manner is subject to Polish legislation and carries identical legal implications as a marriage conducted before the head of a Civil Registry Office” (Małżeństwo. [Marriage] 2023). Therefore, Catholics who desire a church wedding are no longer required to have both civil and church weddings, since the church ceremony is already recognized as legally binding.

Catholic marriage extends beyond a mere legal or social agreement. According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, which quotes the Code of Canon Law, marriage is “the matrimonial covenant, by which a man and a woman establish between themselves a partnership of the whole of life, [and] is by its nature ordered toward the good of the spouses and the procreation and education of offspring” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1993, no. 1601; *Codex Iuris Canonici* 1983, can. 1055). Matrimony is a sacrament which is a perceptible sign of divine grace which helps to fulfil the conjugal vocation. It is granted by Christ through the mediation of the Church (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1993, no. 1084). The words of the oath spoken by the couple and audible to those in attendance in the church. Additional prominent symbols include the binding of hands with a stole and the exchange of rings. The 48th paragraph of the Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, one of the Second Vatican Council’s documents essential to the Catholic Church worldwide, defines marriage as “the intimate partnership of married life and love [that] has been established by the Creator and qualified by His laws” (Vatican Council II 1965, *Gaudium et Spes* no. 48). “The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World” underscores that God is the Creator of marriage (Vatican Council II 1965, *Gaudium et Spes* 48). In numerous religions, marriage is considered as the relationship between a man and a woman who commit to building a long-lasting physical and spiritual partnership (Małżeństwo. [Marriage] 1997, p. 483). The Code of Canon Law mandates priests and the congregation to offer informative support to the faithful to sustain their Christian faith and enhance the matrimonial union. This should be achieved through preaching; providing age-appropriate catechesis, broadcasts, and publications; preparing nuptial candidates for marriage, “a fruitful liturgical celebration of marriage which is to show that the spouses signify and share in the mystery of the unity and fruitful love between Christ and the Church”, as well as offering help “to those who are married, so that [by] faithfully preserving and protecting the conjugal covenant, they daily come to lead holier and fuller lives in their family” (*Codex Iuris Canonici* 1983, can. 1063).

3.2. Marriage in the Catholic Religion

The foundation of marriage in the Catholic religion is to be found in the Bible (Bible n.d.) also called the Holy Scripture (*Pismo Święte Starego i Nowego Testamentu* 1980)¹. Described in the first book of the Old Testament, the creation of man in the image and likeness of God and the submission of all that has been created to the dominion of man, shows the dignity of the human being as the culmination of the work of creation.

The likeness between man and his Creator leads to reflection on who the Creator is and in what respects man resembles God. Saint John offers an unequivocal response to the question “Who is God?” in his letter, being one of the books of the New Testament, stating that “God is love” (1 Jn 4:8). Since God, who is love, created humans in His own image and likeness, it means that at the moment of creation, humans were endowed with both the capacity and the vocation to love. The grandeur of humanity is evident in the way in which human love is realised in one’s own life. This applies to the love for God, for fellow human beings, and for the entire world, which man is expected to manage skilfully and responsibly. A duty incumbent upon all human beings is to love their neighbour unconditionally. Marital love concerns spouses and is even greater than love of one’s neighbour; it involves the spouses and their bodies, through which it is expressed. The complementary nature of man and woman enables them to correspondingly help each other. Their love bears life. The Book of recounts God’s blessing of the first human couple and their entrusted mission to transmit life:

“And God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it’ (Genesis 1:28). Thus, the two primary tasks of married couples, which represent the ultimate aims of sexual intercourse, are the manifestation of conjugal love and the transmission of life.

The archetype of the communion that marriage ought to form is the communion of God the Father, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. John Paul II noted in his *Letter to Families* that “the ‘communion’ of persons is drawn in a certain sense from the mystery of the Trinitarian ‘We’, and therefore ‘conjugal communion’ also refers to this mystery” (John Paul II 1994, p. 19). The spousal relationship between God and his people is reflected in the relationship between a husband and a wife, which foreshadows the new and everlasting Covenant (Vatican Council II 1965, *Gaudium et Spes* no. 22). This concept also pertains to the relationship between Christ and the Church. Marriage is a communion in which a man and a woman work towards a shared objective, undertake common actions, and “supplement and serve one another” (Gębka 2003, pp. 19–20). In the Epistle to the Ephesians, St Paul teaches “Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us” (Eph 5:1–2a). The sacramental love of the spouses justifies their sexual intercourse. Husband and wife, when they give themselves to one another, become “co-subjects of love and not subjects of use” (Gębka 2003, p. 23). “In marriage the physical intimacy of the spouses becomes a sign and pledge of spiritual communion” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1993, no. 2360). This unique matrimonial bond leads to the starting of a new family. Saint Paul calls it the Great Mystery to point to and draw on the example of the bond between Christ and the Church: “‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.’ This is a great mystery, and I mean in reference to Christ and the church” (Eph 5:31–32).

Examining the Catholic Church’s teaching on marriage, sociologist Mikołaj Gębka draws attention to the plethora of terms used to describe it. Marriage is characterised as a vocation, sacrament, covenant, domestic church, communion of life and love (Gębka 2003, p. 15). The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* underlines that “The vocation to marriage is written in the very nature of man and woman as they came from the hand of the Creator” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1993, no. 1603). The love shared between a husband and wife “becomes an image of the absolute and unfailing love with which God loves man” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1993, no. 1604). “The marriage covenant, by which a man and a woman form with each other an intimate communion of life and love, has been founded and endowed with its own special laws by the Creator. By its very nature it is ordered to the good of the couple, as well as to the generation and education of children. Christ the Lord raised marriage between the baptized to the dignity of a sacrament” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1993, no. 1660). “The sacrament of marriage signifies the union of Christ and the Church. It gives spouses the grace to love each other with the love with which Christ has loved his Church; the grace of the sacrament thus

perfects the human love of the spouses, strengthens their indissoluble unity, and sanctifies them on the way to eternal life" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1993, no. 1661). "The Christian home is the place where children receive the first proclamation of the faith. For this reason the family home is rightly called 'the domestic church', a community of grace and prayer, a school of human virtues and of Christian charity" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1993, no. 1666). "The fecundity of conjugal love cannot be reduced solely to the procreation of children, but must extend to their moral education and their spiritual formation" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1993, no. 2221). Like the priesthood, marriage is "directed towards the salvation of others; if they contribute as well to personal salvation, it is through service to others that they do so. They confer a particular mission in the Church and serve to build up the People of God" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1993, no. 1534).

The fundamental tenets, and at the same time, the moral obligations of marriage are marital fidelity, the indissolubility of marriage, and responsible parenthood. These principles are derived from Scripture, The Catechism of the Catholic Church, The Constitution of the Second Vatican Council *Gaudium et Spes*, and Paul VI's encyclical *Humanae vitae*. " (Vatican Council II 1965; Paul VI 1968). Let marriage be held in honour among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled; for God will judge the immoral and adulterous" (Heb 13:4); "What therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder" (Mat 19:6); "By its very nature conjugal love requires the inviolable fidelity of the spouses. This is the consequence of the gift of themselves which they make to each other. Love seeks to be definitive; it cannot be an arrangement 'until further notice'" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1993, no. 1646). "Through this union they experience the meaning of their oneness and attain to it with growing perfection day by day. As a mutual gift of two persons, this intimate union and the good of the children impose total fidelity on the spouses and argue for an unbreakable oneness between them" (*Gaudium et Spes* no. 48); "Responsible parenthood is exercised by those who prudently and generously decide to have more children, and by those who, for serious reasons and with due respect to moral precepts, decide not to have additional children for either a certain or an indefinite period of time" (Paul VI 1968, *Humanae vitae* 10).

Sexual intercourse is regarded as the ultimate expression of sacramental conjugal love. Therefore The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches: "Those who are engaged to marry are called to live chastity in continence. (...) They should reserve for marriage the expressions of affection that belong to married love. They will help each other grow in chastity" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1993, no. 2350); "The sexual act must take place exclusively within marriage. Outside of marriage it always constitutes a grave sin and excludes one from sacramental communion (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1993, no. 2390); The married couple "give themselves definitively and totally to one another" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1993, no. 2364); "Fidelity expresses constancy in keeping one's given word" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1993, no. 2365); Adultery, which is marital infidelity, is an injustice and a failure to honour commitments made and a violation of the welfare of children who need their parents' stable union (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1993, nos. 2380–2381).

A marriage solemnised in the Catholic Church is considered indissoluble. It is not within the power of any priest, bishop, episcopal court, or even the Pope to dissolve a validly contracted marriage. "From a valid marriage there arises between the spouses a bond which by its nature is perpetual and exclusive. Moreover, a special sacrament strengthens and, as it were, consecrates the spouses in a Christian marriage for the duties and dignity of their state" (*Codex Iuris Canonici* 1983, can. 1134). The Code of Canon Law stipulates that "A marriage that is ratum et consummatum can be dissolved by no human power and by no cause, except death" (*Codex Iuris Canonici* 1983, can. 1141). Due to the significant number of divorces being processed through civil courts, The Catechism of the Catholic Church recognises divorce as an undesirable practice and a societal plague. The spouses are cautioned that divorce causes grave harm to the deserted spouse and to children traumatized by the separation of their parents (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*

1993, no. 2385). Civil remarriage by divorcees is described as public, permanent adultery (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1993, no. 2384).

The principles that are applicable to Catholic spouses also extend to responsible parenthood. According to Pope Paul VI's encyclical *Humanae vitae*, family planning is moral and recommended, provided that fertility recognition, rather than fertility elimination methods, are employed (*Humanae vitae* 12 and 16). The Catechism of the Catholic Church (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1993, no. 2399) states that using contraceptives to prevent conception is morally impermissible. The ban on abortion is even more comprehensible, unequivocal, and unambiguous. The two books of Scripture, Exodus and Deuteronomy, outline God's Ten Commandments and refer to the fifth one as, "You shall not kill" (Ex 20:13; Deuteronomy 5:17). This is also specified by Pius XII, the Instruction of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on Respect for Human Life in Its Origin and on the Dignity of Procreation, known as *Donum vitae*, as well as the Catechism of the Catholic Church in the sentence "no one can, in any circumstance, claim for himself the right to destroy directly an innocent human being" (Pius XII 1944; Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 1987; *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1993, no. 2258).

It is inherent in the marital vocation not only to give birth to a child but also to provide a child with physical, mental, and spiritual development through appropriate education. This represents a fundamental right and obligation of both parents. The Code of Canon Law outlines that "the physical, social, cultural, moral, and religious education" (*Codex Iuris Canonici* 1983, can. 1135–1136) are the responsibility of the parents.

Through their mutual love and the pursuit of their chosen vocation, the spouses seek to perfect and sanctify one another during their time on earth and strive for eternal life in the house of God the Father in heaven (according to Jesus' declaration, "In my Father's house there are many dwelling places" John 14:2).

3.3. Marriage Vows in the Office and in the Church

Introduced in 1945, after World War II, and lasting until 1989, the socialist system in Poland unequivocally separated a civil marriage, concluded in the Registry Office (USC), from a church marriage. The words of the oath were also different. Marriage in the Registry Office is regulated by the Law on Civil Status Records (*Prawo o aktach stanu cywilnego* 2023), which is still in force today. The so-called civil marriage, which is a declaration of entering into marriage, is made by the bride and groom before the head of the Registry Office. The solemn form of this statement requires all present to adopt a standing posture, and the head of the Registry Office at the time of accepting declarations has a chain around his neck, featuring an eagle from the Polish coat of arms. It is also required that the declaration of marriage be made public, that is, in the presence of two adult witnesses. "A man and a woman are asked by the head of the Registry Office whether they intend to marry each other. When both parties confirm this, the head of the Registry Office requests them to submit declarations of marriage and declarations of the surnames of the spouses and their children" (Matela-Marszałek 2022). In accordance with Article 7(3) of The Family and Guardianship Code (*Ustawa [Act] 1964*), the head requests that each individual repeats after him or her, the contents of the declaration:

"Being aware of the rights and obligations arising from marriage, I solemnly declare that I am entering into matrimony with [first name and surname of the other person to the marriage], and I swear that I will do everything to ensure our marriage is harmonious, happy and lasting." (*Ustawa [Act] 1964*, article 7 (3))

A civil wedding ceremony includes a formal statement and declaration in which a man and a woman pledge to undertake action that will result in a long-lasting and happy union, based on mutual consent. However, the civil contract does not include a vow of love to each other. From a Catholic perspective, this contract cannot be considered an equivalent alternative to the sacrament of marriage (Dziewiecki 2023, p. 31). In his book for fiancés and spouses, the psychologist and theologian Marek Dziewiecki notes that "although civil marriage contracts are permitted by law, there are no criminal sanctions for breaking this

contract” (Dziewiecki 2023, p. 32). It is paradoxical that breaching a commercial contract can result in punishment, including imprisonment, while breaching a marriage contract, which can lead to the dissolution of the marriage and affect not only the betrayed spouse but also the children born of the relationship, is not penalised. Dziewiecki argues that “the state permits individuals who are at fault for a divorce to enter into subsequent civil marriages with others” (Dziewiecki 2023, p. 31).

The question then arises as to the differences between the vows made in the office and the vows made in the Church. According to the author of the book *Złączeni*, the sacrament of marriage “is not one of the citizens’ rights but a gift from God”. Entering into such a marriage is a privilege for God’s friends” (Dziewiecki 2023, p. 17). A church wedding and life in marriage hold significance for Catholics beyond their individual, communal, psychological, social, or institutional aspects. These two also hold religious, moral, and spiritual significance. The sacrament of marriage is a solemn celebration. As The Catechism of the Catholic Church states

“the celebration of marriage between two Catholic faithful normally takes place during Holy Mass, because of the connection of all the sacraments with the Paschal mystery of Christ (Cf. SC 61). In the Eucharist the memorial of the New Covenant is realized, the New Covenant in which Christ has united himself forever to the Church, his beloved bride for whom he gave himself up (Cf. LG 6). It is therefore fitting that the spouses should seal their consent to give themselves to each other through the offering of their own lives by uniting it to the offering of Christ for his Church made present in the Eucharistic sacrifice, and by receiving the Eucharist so that, communicating in the same Body and the same Blood of Christ, they may form but ‘one body’ in Christ (Cor 10:17).” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1993, no. 1621)

Individuals who receive the sacrament of marriage should realise that the bond between husband and wife, initiated in the Church, is intended to mirror the loving, devoted, mutually respectful and reverential connection between Christ and the Church. The spousal relationship ought to mirror that of Christ to the Church and the Church to Christ.

Scripture and the Decalogue therein oblige every Christian to love God and neighbour. It is, as Jesus explained, the most important commandment (Mat 22:36–40). In accordance with St. Paul’s interpretation of the commandment of love, the entirety of the law is encapsulated in love (Rom 13:8–10). For spouses, the commandment of love takes on a new and deeper meaning (Jn 13:34–35).

In his apostolic exhortation *Familiaris Consortio*, John Paul II stated that “the celebration of marriage-inserted into the liturgy, which is the summit of the Church’s action and the source of her sanctifying power (. . .) must be per se valid, worthy and fruitful” (John Paul II 1981, *Familiaris consortio* no. 67). Hence, before participating in the wedding Eucharist, individuals must first receive the sacrament of penance and reconciliation (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1993, no. 1622). Having a pure heart and a living faith will allow for a deeper experience of prayer and a committed and authentic participation in building a lifelong relationship.

Marriage is a covenant made between a baptised man and woman that is free from coercion and impediments under natural or ecclesiastical law, as explained by *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1993, no. 1625, including considerations such as whether the man and woman are too young or already married to another living person. The essential element that establishes a marriage is the mutual consent of the bride and groom through the exchange of publicly spoken vows (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1993, no. 1626; *Codex Iuris Canonici* 1983, can. 1057). The Catechism of the Catholic Church points out that “the Church normally requires that the faithful contract marriage according to the ecclesiastical form” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1993, no. 1631). “Several reasons converge to explain this requirement:

- Sacramental marriage is a liturgical act. It is therefore appropriate that it should be celebrated in the public liturgy of the Church;
- Marriage introduces one into an ecclesial order, and creates rights and duties in the Church between the spouses and towards their children;
- Since marriage is a state of life in the Church, certainty about it is necessary (hence the obligation to have witnesses);
- The public character of the consent protects the ‘I do’ once given and helps the spouses remain faithful to it” (ibid.).

“Since marriage establishes the couple in a public state of life in the Church, it is fitting that its celebration be public, in the framework of a liturgical celebration, before the priest (or a witness authorized by the Church), the witnesses, and the assembly of the faithful” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1993, no. 1663).

The exchange of vows marks the moment of marriage. This takes place after the congregation has listened to selected Scripture readings and a sermon from the celebrant during the Mass.

The celebrant addresses the bride and groom by their names, saying: “[the name of the groom] and [the name of the bride], you have just heard the word of God which has reminded you of the dignity of human love and marriage. And so, in the presence of the Church, I ask you to state your intentions”. After that, he asks then three questions:

- “[the name of the groom] and [the name of the bride], have you come here freely and without reservation to give yourselves to each other in marriage?
- Do you intend to stay in this bond in sickness and in health, in good times and in bad, until death parts you?
- Will you accept children lovingly from God, and bring them up according to the law of Christ and his Church?” (The Rite of the Marriage 2013).

A positive response to all three questions above entitles the prospective spouses to take the oath. This is a particularly significant moment in the sacrament of marriage, as the decision made by both partners impacts their entire future life. As such, the Church community, the immediate families of the bride and groom, and the invited guests offer their prayers to support the couple. During this solemn moment, everyone stands to sing the anthem “Veni Creator”, invoking the presence and guidance of the Holy Spirit. The prayer addressed to the Holy Spirit seeks to sanctify the relationship between the couple and grant them the grace of perseverance. The priest and the faithful pray that the love, fortified by God, may serve as a symbol of the love between Christ and the Church. The hymn text includes prayers for clarity of mind, holy love, strengthening of the body, peace, expulsion of evil spirits, divine guidance, rejection of temptations, better knowledge of God, and professing Him (ibid.).

Supported by the prayers of their loved ones and the power of the Holy Spirit, couples wishing to enter into marriage face each other, join their right hands, which the priest binds with a stole, and recite the words of the vows after him. The groom takes the vow first, stating:

“I (the name of the groom), take you (the name of the bride), to be my wife* and I vow to you* love, fidelity*, marital honesty* and that I shall not leave you* till death do us part.* So help me Almighty God and all the Saints.” (The Rite of the Marriage 2013)

Then the bride makes her vows by inserting the name of the groom in the appropriate place of the vow and in the sentence “I take you for. . .” exchanging the word “wife” for the word “husband”.

The use of “I” in the vow emphasises the personal and individual nature of the sacrament. The phrase “I take you”, which appears in both statements, denotes mutual acceptance of each other’s gift and the act of offering oneself as a gift. The gift of self is the ultimate expression of love, beyond any material possession. Love is promised at the outset, along with fidelity, honesty, and a commitment to being constantly present

throughout life. The part of the vow “I shall not leave you till death do us part” applies to all stages of life, including well-being and illness, as well as prosperity and adversity. This fosters mutual trust and gives a sense of security, to both spouses, as well as to their future children. The bride and the groom are aware that their vow is “for better” or “for worse”, and that temptations, difficulties, worries, and their own weaknesses and sins may arise. Therefore, they do not rely solely on their own strength to keep their oaths. Instead, they turn to God in deep faith, hope, and trust for help with His grace. A plea for assistance, mediation, and backing is also extended to all the saints. This entreaty fortifies, empowers, instills a sense of security, and inspires hope.

The confirmation of marriage is expressed by the words of the priest: “What therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder” (Mt 19:6). On behalf of the Catholic Church I confirm this marriage which you have contracted between yourselves and I bless it in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (ibid.). As a symbol of their marriage, the spouses also exchange wedding rings, which are blessed by the priest. First, the groom places the wedding ring on the bride’s finger, saying: “(the bride’s name) take this ring as a sign of my love and fidelity. In the name of the Father, and of the name of Son, and of the Holy Spirit” (ibid.). Then, the bride reciprocates the gesture by repeating the same words. The rings, as stated in the ceremony booklet, “will henceforth be an eloquent proof and reminder of the vows, they will accompany the days they share, they will be silent witnesses to all that happens” (The Rite of the Marriage 2013).

Further parts of the ceremony continue with The Universal Prayer and The Liturgy of the Eucharist. The bride and groom are eligible to receive the Holy Communion in forms of bread and wine. A solemn blessing concludes the wedding ceremony.

The religious support of spouses extends beyond the wedding ceremony. In the years to come, it is useful to participate in retreats offered by the Church and in meetings with other Catholic couples; to pray together; and to celebrate Mass, the sacraments, and wedding anniversaries. For the strengthening of vows and the perfecting of the bond of conjugal love, the establishment of spouses in communities and movements of Christian renewal is valuable. In order to properly fulfill the vocation of marriage, it is not only necessary to have the good will of both spouses and the support of other families, but also to participate in well-structured and well-attended premarital preparation courses.

4. Discussion: The Role of Religion in Preparation for Marriage

In his exhortation *Familiaris consortio*, John Paul II stated that “marriage and the family constitute one of the most precious of human values” (John Paul II 1981, FC 1). The Church is cognisant of this and seeks to convey her teachings and aid those in different life situations. This includes those “who are already aware of the value of marriage and the family and seek to live it faithfully, to those who are uncertain and anxious and searching for the truth, and to those who are unjustly impeded from living freely their family lives. Supporting the first, illuminating the second and assisting the others, the Church offers her services to every person who wonders about the destiny of marriage and the family. In a particular way the Church addresses the young, who are beginning their journey towards marriage and family life, for the purpose of presenting them with new horizons, helping them to discover the beauty and grandeur of the vocation to love and the service of life” (ibid.)

4.1. Preparation for Marriage in Poland

The Polish Episcopate developed several guidelines that detail the preparation for marriage (The Polish Episcopal Conference 1969, 1975, 1989). Additionally, The Directory for the Pastoral Care of the Family was compiled by The Polish Episcopal Conference (2003), and it includes comprehensive information on this topic. Work on marriage and the family is conducted in the basic structural unit of the Church, which is the community of the faithful under the leadership of the parish priest, called the parish. The service offered to families in the parish is a permanent form of ordinary pastoral care.

This work involves not only priests, but also lay people, family life counsellors, catechists, spouses in movements for the renewal of the Church, and all those whose witness of life and service with their talents can contribute to the religious formation of children, youth and adults. “In the pastoral programme of the parish, permanent activities will include meetings for young married couples, catechesis for parents, cooperation with parents of children prior to First Holy Communion and young people prior to Confirmation, and preparation of young people and engaged couples for marriage” (The Polish Episcopal Conference 2003, no. 6).

Preparation for marriage is divided into further, proximate, and direct preparation (The Polish Episcopal Conference 2003, nos. 18–33). A crucial aspect of further preparation for marriage is the proper education of children within the family, as well as the demonstration of religiousness and love by the parents through their good example and authentic life of faith. The educational influence of the parents on the children is complemented and confirmed by their involvement in the life of the Church, by the teachings given in the homilies and sermons at Mass, and by religious services, retreats, and catechesis in schools. The responsibility of the older generation for the younger generation necessitates the acquisition of the ability to differentiate between *education for family life*, in line with moral standards, and permissive and depraved *sexualisation*. It is essential to shield children and young people from influences which, under the guise of education, demoralise young people. Love, chastity, adherence to standards, and respect for the personal dignity of the human person (of others and of oneself) are essential values for marriage and family life, and should therefore be promoted with great commitment in education. The Charter of the Rights of the Family, prepared by the Holy See, asserts that “parents (. . .) must be acknowledged as the first and foremost educators of their children” (Charter of the Rights of the Family 1983, Introduction 5). Therefore, it is important to emphasise that the function of institutions should be to aid the parental education process while honouring the beliefs and conscience of individual family members, rather than to undermine, disturb or supplant it.

Direct preparation for marriage involves engaged couples and requires their active participation. This involves: (1) “a talk with a priest in which the engaged couple express their views on marriage, its sacramental nature and indissolubility, on love, fidelity, fertility and respect for the conceived child, on the presence of Christ in their lives and in the lives of their children, on education, etc.” (Polish Episcopal Conference no. 29); (2) the so-called canonical examination, which is essential for assessing the validity of the marriage (that is, the absence of obstacles to its conclusion); (3) lectures given by a priest and a lay family life counsellor; (4) meetings held at a family life counselling centre; (5) a day of recollection; (6) a pre-wedding confession that cleanses and unites the couple with God and people. Another important element of the preparation for marriage should be the analysis of the words of the marriage vows, also through individual reading of publications devoted to it (Dziewiecki 2023, pp. 51–195). This is because it is fundamental for a person who is to keep his or her word to know what he or she is vowing. This comprehension can assist in building a strong marital and family bond, taking responsibility for love, and in developing, nurturing and expressing it.

Preparation for marriage organised by the Catholic Church is conducted using a number of different programmes. The preparation presented in the book *Zaprosili także Jezusa [They also Invited Jesus]*, whose author, Maria Braun-Gałkowska, is a family psychologist, includes, in addition to the outlines of the classes, homework suggested to the engaged couples. This usually involves conversations on a given topic, the solving of a problem using the principles of correct communication, a selection of biblical readings for the wedding mass, and answers to questions posed (Braun-Gałkowska 2009). Such activities encourage engagement amongst participants, allowing them to gain insight into different perspectives, express their views, engage in fruitful interactions, and develop problem-solving skills. Engaged couples can participate in Dominican Evenings for Engaged Couples, which offers them an even greater degree of activation in their preparation for marriage, as they have

the opportunity to talk in pairs or in groups, under the guidance of a moderator, who introduces and summarises each topic. Since 1975, the Academic Pastoral Ministry at the John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin has been conducting pre-marital courses using the workshop method. “This approach enables participants to broaden their knowledge and at the same time be actively involved, so that they acquire skills as well as knowledge” (Braun-Gałkowska 2009, p. 268).

Engaged couples residing in remote areas or working abroad find the weekend intensive programme highly advantageous. The programme presents an array of activities that enable all participants to express their personal opinions, enhance mutual understanding, and engage in meaningful discussions pertaining to raised issues.

The most common form of pre-marital courses includes weekly conferences, in groups of ten, and three individual meetings in Catholic Family Life Counselling Centres. The topics of the lectures cover the theology of marriage, the ethics of married life, and the liturgy of the sacrament of marriage (The Polish Episcopal Conference 2003, no. 30). Some examples of catechesis titles include:

- Who Is Christ for Me?
- What Does It Mean to Believe and to Be a Christian?
- Vocation to the Community of Believers—The Church Is Us.
- God Desires Our Salvation to Occur Within the Church (Sacraments).
- Marriage as a Sacrament (The Liturgy of the Sacrament of Marriage).
- Love in Marriage (Paths and Challenges of Love).
- Building and Sustaining Marital Communion.
- Responsible Parenthood and the Regulation of Conception.
- Children and Creation of Nurturing Environment.
- Shaping Family Life (Religious Life, Organization, Custom).

Assimilation of the knowledge acquired will enable the engaged couples to comprehend the immense spiritual worth of establishing a close relationship with Jesus, founded on his teachings, actions and omnipotent glory. Mary’s conduct during the wedding feast at Cana and her encouraging words, “Do whatever he tells you” (Jn 2:5b), provide a tangible life pathway for individuals and their families to follow. The example of building a “house on the rock” and the manifestation of God in daily life in Nazareth serve as a model that many can benefit from (Mat 7:24–29). In the age of postmodernism, consumerism, and hedonism, a catechesis on love can have a significant corrective impact, as love can easily be mistaken for infatuation, crush, and lust. Self-centeredness causes one’s desire for the other’s good to be displaced with a desire for personal gratification “by using the other”. Betrothed couples, who are about to make a solemn vow to love each other till death, should understand what true love entails. The Gospel presents love as a vocation, a service, and an eternal gift of self to one another. It teaches that love develops, and that humans should be responsible for its development and for the stage of this development at which they are (Braun-Gałkowska 2009, pp. 45–67; Dudziak et al. 2013, pp. 31–49). Garry Chapman’s knowledge of the five love languages (Physical Touch, Words of Affirmation, Quality Time, Acts of Service, Receiving Gifts) should be shared not only with married couples, but also with those preparing for marriage. It can also serve as a valuable preparation for making love vows and as a sign of a relationship that can demonstrate love. Merely loving one’s spouse is insufficient; expressing this love in a manner that makes one’s spouse feel loved is necessary. And the partner will feel loved if love is expressed to him or her in a language he or she first understands among the five languages of love (Chapman 1995; Chapman and Thomas 2022). Over the course of nearly three decades, in the premarital courses, the author has taught engaged couples the psychology of love, a subject matter that has consistently attracted their attention and proved beneficial, as well as practical, to them. During the workshop activities, the engaged couples completed two unfinished sentences. The first sentence was, “I feel most loved when he/she. . .” followed by what the partner does, says, or gives. The second sentence read, “I try to express my love to him/her through. . .” After completing the sentences, they listened to a lecture on the five languages

of love. Comparing the content of the lecture with the sentences they had written helped them identify their primary love language. Identifying the primary love language of both partners is crucial in facilitating daily expressions of love and ensuring that each partner feels loved by the other. This also contributes to each partner skilfully expressing their love (according to the expectations of the recipient) and (experiencing similar efforts from the other) thus feeling loved.

Theological issues, especially liturgical ones, are addressed by the parish priest in the premarital course, and the ethics of conjugal life, as well as methods of regulating conception, are covered by a lay family life counsellor. During a two-year programme of family studies, aspiring counsellors are instructed in familial, psychological, pedagogical, and medical aspects of this topic. As part of the programme, participants are certified in natural family planning, and they then pass their knowledge on to fiancés during counselling sessions. The sessions prove to be a substantial aid to individuals preparing for marriage. Questionnaire surveys conducted over the years have shown that a significant percentage of fiancés starting the course are unfamiliar with fertility physiology and the methods of natural conception regulation, which aim to identify fertile and sterile days in the menstrual cycle (Dudziak 2022a). The course enables fiancés to overcome this knowledge gap.

The formation of human religious maturity is not only linked to the theoretical presentation of moral standards regulating sexual and procreative behaviour. In addition to this, instilling a sense of responsible parenthood in prospective partners necessitates the imparting of some pragmatic skills. These include: observation of fertility symptoms, preparation of menstrual cycle charts, interpretation of fertility symptoms, and determination of fertile and infertile days in the cycle, according to the symptomatic-thermal method. To transmit the knowledge and skills, individual sessions take place between the engaged couples and a counsellor at the Catholic family life counselling centre. As part of these sessions, both the man, as the future husband and father, and the woman, as the future wife and mother, use workbooks to interpret the fertility charts of several anonymous women. During the last meeting, when the future wife presents her own observations, the fiancé can mark the fertile and infertile days of the couple on the chart. The presence of a counsellor who pays attention to the details of interpretation gives the couple a sense of security and reassurance that the knowledge has been correctly applied. Thanks to the parish counselling centres organised by the Church, along with a team of skilled counsellors, newlyweds start their journey into marriage fully prepared. Their expertise encompasses physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being. Natural family planning, instead of abortion, abortifacients, and contraceptives, enables the identification of fertile and infertile days in the menstrual cycle. This method provides a foundation for upholding moral standards in the sexual and procreative sphere. As emphasised by subject matter experts, it promotes the physical and spiritual well-being of the husband, wife, and children and serves to strengthen marital bonds, foster family education, and generate beneficial social impacts (Beral et al. 1999, pp. 96–100; Larid 1994, pp. 458–68; Małolepsza 1987, pp. 49–76; Wójcik 2008, pp. 285–93). It is worth noting that medical personnel in health centres do not teach the physiology of fertility, which serves as the foundation of procreative responsibility, nor is it taught prior to the civil wedding ceremony at the Registry Office. It is the Catholic Church which helps couples acquire knowledge, in addition to providing moral teaching, that enables them to practically apply fertility awareness methods in their future married and family life.

4.2. Premarital Courses in Other Countries

It is worth noting that proposals for preparing for Catholic marriage are also available in other countries, such as the Archdiocese of Saint Paul in Minneapolis Minnesota, USA (Archdiocese of Saint Paul in Minneapolis n.d.a). Its website provides “more than 100 questions and 50 conversation topics to ask yourself and/or discuss with your potential future spouse as you discern engagement and marriage”. The authors maintain that “this is a great way to better understand one another and respond to God’s call!” (Archdiocese

of Saint Paul in Minneapolis n.d.b) The questions asked of themselves and each other cover a range of topics including children, faith, sex, goals, marriage, relationships, beliefs, work, career, personal history, and others. These conversations allow engaged couples to examine their own views and plans, gain mutual understanding, and develop communication skills that will benefit their future marriage and family.

The Legacy Marriage Academy, established in the United Kingdom, is an interesting concept. Its aim is “helping prepare and equip couples for a rewarding and fulfilling marriage”. The proposed sessions cover various topics including: Purpose and Function of Marriage, Financial Responsibilities, Emotional and Spiritual Intimacy, Physical Intimacy, Communication and Conflict Management, In-Laws, and Future Intentions. In addition to talks, questions, and suggestions aimed at integrating couples, training videos are also available featuring Byron and Carla Weathersbee, who have prepared thousands of couples for marriage over a period of nearly 30 years. During the countdown to marriage, they want to teach how to love via an online course, (The Legacy Marriage Academy n.d.)

The website that provides information about preparing for marriage in the Archdiocese of Washington starts with the question, “You’re engaged. Now what?” It then proceeds to provide the answer.

1. **“Pray!** It is about a close relationship with the One Who is Love and asking God to bless this relationship and the process of preparing for the wedding that is the beginning of these two’s life as a married couple.
2. **Meet with your priest.** The purpose of this meeting is to complete all necessary paperwork, including the submission of required documents and forms.
3. **Participate in an Archdiocesan Marriage Preparation Program.** The sessions enable participants to gain a deeper understanding of their fiancé/fiancée. Topics covered include self-awareness, communication skills, the meaning of love, marriage, the sacrament of marriage, prayer and spirituality in marriage, finances and marital sexuality, as well as natural family planning. These sessions should be attended as a couple, rather than individually, starting 2–9 months before the wedding day.
4. **Premarital inventory.** Completing the form enables the engaged couple to gain a deeper understanding of themselves, each other, and their relationship. Additionally, it highlights key topics that should be discussed to ensure the longevity of their future together.
5. **Attend Natural Family Planning classes.** NFP is a series of classes, which as authors from the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Washington maintain, “that provides you with the information needed to understand and interpret natural signs of fertility and infertility to either achieve or avoid pregnancy. Natural Family Planning has the added benefit of strengthening your marriage through enhanced communication and intimacy” (The Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Washington n.d.)

The Archdiocese of Washington has an Archdiocesan Office of Family Life that provides significant assistance to future spouses in learning their chosen method of natural family planning. According to their website, natural family planning natural family planning offers the following benefits:

- “It is extremely **effective**.
- It is green. It is **all natural**, completely **safe** and there are **no harmful side effects**.
- It is **morally sound** and completely consistent with the teachings of the Catholic Church.
- It is **virtually free** and **very easy to learn** and practice.
- It is **useful** throughout a woman’s reproductive years including breastfeeding, perimenopause, post-partum.
- It is **custom tailored** to each individual woman’s cycle, regular or irregular.”

(Marriage Preparation Archdiocese of Washington n.d.)

Those preparing for marriage are informed that “Natural Family Planning is a morally sound and highly effective method for couples to manage their fertility in a way that respects God and each other. Instead of wrestling with their fertility or working against

it; couples are trained to understand, and then cooperate with, their naturally occurring fertility signals in order to make informed and prayerful decisions regarding the growth of their family” (Natural Family Planning n.d.)

The further stages of preparation for Catholic marriage include: planning the wedding liturgy with the priest (readings, prayers, music, hymns, date, and time), **obtaining your marriage license** (if the wedding is planned in a parish other than the engaged couple’s own). With that completed, it remains to take the encouragement of the authors of this programme, expressed in their words: “Celebrate your blessed wedding day!” When solemnising a marriage, the husband and wife are not left without support. It is recommended that they take advantage of available resources. The diocese offers opportunities for couples to “attend marriage enrichment workshops during your marriage or join a marriage enrichment group to gain support in your new Vocatio.” (Marriage Preparation Archdiocese of Washington n.d.)

The Catholic group Our Lady of Bethesda runs the weekend form of marriage preparation at the Retreat House. The programme includes Mass celebrations, prayer sessions, confession, and discussions with retreat participants conducted by priests. Additionally, married couples share their experiences, and professional family life counsellors give lectures. The programme organisers claim that the time spent together and the activities offered strengthen knowledge and love for each other and for God. Listening to speeches, completing questionnaires, and reflecting privately can help couples “deepen their understanding of Catholic marriage—with all of its possibilities and challenges (Our Lady of Bethesda 2023). The focus inventory is a self-diagnostic tool that helps couples learn more about themselves and their relationship, providing material for conversation and “helping them identify and resolve issues before marriage” (Ibid.). Registered couples receive the inventory one week prior to the retreat. The completed forms are then interpreted by the priest leading the retreat, who is also the author of the inventory. A qualified marriage counsellor discusses the results with the couples. The counselling provided by the counsellor, which is also available after the retreat weekend, complements the counselling provided by the priest (Our Lady of Bethesda 2023).

In Ireland, Accord Catholic Marriage Care Service, located at the Columba Centre in Maynooth, offers pre-marriage courses for couples who choose to marry in the Catholic Church, as well as counselling for couples and individuals. The counsellors in this group aim to explore, reflect on, and work through difficulties that arise in marriage and other interpersonal relationships (Accord Catholic Marriage Care Service n.d.)

The pre-marriage course provides couples with the opportunity to reflect on their communication, understand their commitment to the relationship, acquire conflict resolution skills, prepare for parenthood, and live the sacrament of marriage (Ibid.). The course consists of eight modules:

- “Marriage and your Family of Origin and Self-Awareness
- Marriage and how you Communicate
- Marriage and Your Conflict Management
- Choosing the Sacrament of Marriage
- Marriage and Your Commitment
- Marriage and Your being Parents
- Marriage and Your Fertility Awareness and Well-being
- Marriage and Your Sexuality and Intimacy” (ibid.).

Apart from discussing the modules, providing relevant materials (e.g., readings from the wedding mass to be chosen by the engaged couple), personal counselling, and individual and couple meetings with a qualified marriage counsellor are available, which can also be conducted online. The Accord Group website offers a variety of resources, including downloads, articles, and answers to frequently asked questions. It also includes links to

useful websites, including publications on preparing for marriage at and information for those planning their wedding in Rome (Accord Catholic Marriage Care Service n.d.)

Another course programme, called SmartLoving Engaged—Online Catholic Marriage Preparation, was developed in 2022 by Byron and Francine Pirola in Australia. (Pirola and Pirola n.d.; Smartloving n.d.) It was approved for use in dioceses throughout Australia, New Zealand, the UK, the USA, and Asia. Participants of this course receive a PDF workbook and complete the suggested exercises. The course covers topics presented in the following chapters: “Mission to Love”, “Dialogue”, “Knowing Me, Knowing You”, “Building Unity”, “Restoring Unity”, “Sex Sacred Embrace”, “Love Gives Love”, “A Living Sign”, and “Soul Mates for Life”. The entire content spans 204 pages and includes prayers, videos, suggestions for self-reflection, quizzes, and discussion questions. Each lesson builds upon the previous one, and it is expected that a participant will be able to answer at least 80% of the questions correctly to progress to the subsequent stage. Feedback and certificate information can be found on page 201. Upon completion of the course, couples are required to take a final test consisting of individual and joint questions. The answers provided can be used as a basis for discussion with the priest regarding any issues encountered and areas of improvement for the couple. The test is valuable, as it can identify areas that require consideration, providing concrete assistance in building and strengthening the mutual bond of the spouses (Smartloving n.d.)

5. Conclusions

Differences between civil weddings held in Registry Offices and Catholic weddings conducted in churches are evident from the analysis of legal acts and church documents. The offices do not provide courses for engaged couples to prepare for marriage; they solely confirm the marriage’s occurrence. A vow of love is not included in secular marriage vows. The spoken vow involves a pledge to take all necessary actions towards a joyful and enduring marriage. However, there is no assurance of “till death do us part”. The option of civil divorce permits separation, which may occur if the husband, the wife, or both acknowledge an unhappy marital union. Individuals who are emotionally immature may have the belief that they have the right to end a current relationship and pursue a new one. These individuals may have stopped developing their capacity for love and may believe that they are entitled to take without giving anything in return.

Civil divorces, as well as declarations of nullity of marriage due to the immaturity of one or both of the fiancés, indicate the need for even more careful preparation for marriage and verification of the maturity of those deciding to marry. It is crucial for the priest to have a conversation with the fiancés and draw up a pre-marriage protocol, which he must sign to confirm his responsibility. The announcement of the planned marriage in the church after three consecutive Sunday Masses obliges parents, relatives, acquaintances, and neighbours to inform the priest of any obstacles to the marriage. Those preparing for marriage must also have a positive attitude, a responsible approach, and a solid formation. It is not acceptable for someone to enter into marriage without having learned to love. It is also not acceptable for someone to confuse love with fleeting infatuation, lust, selfish pleasure, and the objectification of their spouse when taking on the role of husband or wife. To prevent marital crises, it is essential to provide precise, detailed, and in-depth explanations of the marriage vows to the fiancés. It is evident that an individual who does not comprehend the vow he or she is making is incapable of consciously, faithfully, and joyfully fulfilling it (Dziewiecki 2023, pp. 48–49).

The lack of approval and possibility of divorce in the Catholic Church gives spouses a better chance of trying to resolve any problems that arise, rather than trying to dissolve an indissoluble marriage. If couples acknowledge that “we must resolve the issue, not dissolve the marriage”, they are more motivated and stimulated to take effective measures that will support the well-being of both partners. In rare circumstances where addictions or violence are present, a separation of spouses may occur to facilitate the provision of treatment and psychological therapy. No individual or court possesses the authority to

dissolve a marriage, although it may transpire that a given matrimony was void from the commencement. Nevertheless, such decrees can be avoided if an insurmountable obstacle is identified during the marriage preparation stage. This further underscores the importance and practicality of these preparations, requiring genuine engagement on the part of those involved and the reliability of those in charge of them. Ultimately, dedicating time to something is indicative of its value to an individual. The existence of various forms of premarital courses accepted by the Church provides participants with the opportunity to choose. The choice is left to the discretion of the engaged couple.

The study of biblical passages provides an opportunity to explore the aesthetic and moral meaning of sacramental marriage. The elaborateness of the nuptial ceremony and the celebration of subsequent wedding anniversaries, the time for reflection and thanksgiving, and the invocation of divine assistance provide not only an opportunity for marital joy, but also for psychological and spiritual support. Moreover, couples can avail themselves of comparable aid during retreats they may attend. These events take place not only before Christmas and Easter, but also during weekend marriage encounters or two-week retreats arranged by the Domestic Church Movement. For couples wishing to enhance their conjugal spirituality, participation in formation programmes offered by organisations such as the Focolare Movement, Comunione e Liberazione, Rodzina Rodzin [Family of Families], Rodziny Nazaretańskie [Families of Nazareth], Equipe Notre Dame, and Chemin Neuf can offer valuable opportunities. The relationship between one's religion, general culture, personal treatment, and respect for others should be noted. Karol Wojtyła/John Paul II made notable efforts towards this and played a significant role in promoting it (Osewska et al. 2022).

The role of religion in the lives of marriages and families is evident in the moral standards that safeguard sexual and procreative behaviour. Preserving premarital chastity, marital fidelity, the indissolubility of marriage, and responsible parenthood would help prevent many of the problems that would arise for spouses, parents, and children if these standards did not exist or were no longer accepted (McDowell 1989; Dudziak 2009; Przygoda et al. 2023). Adhering to moral standards enhances the credibility of prospective parents as educators of their own children.

Proper preparation for marriage also involves reading relevant books, discussing them, jointly analyzing their content as an engaged couple, presenting individual perspectives, and providing each other with responses. Interesting questions, tests, insights, and tips for those planning marriage can be found in the following books: Wołochowicz and Wołochowicz (2017)'s *Which Way to Marriage?*, Neil Clark Warren (1992)'s *Finding the Love of Your Life: Ten Principles for Choosing the Right Marriage*, and Walter Trobisch's (1971) *I Married You*.

Premarital courses offered by Catholic parishes teach couples the truth about love and how to identify fertile and infertile days in a woman's cycle, helping them to adopt an attitude of responsibility for love and life. Furthermore, they support the physical, mental, and spiritual health of individuals (Dudziak 2022a). This advantage extends to society, which becomes better when it consists of a greater number of genuinely loving and responsible citizens. A mature approach to life involves recognizing that love can be both given and received, and that it requires nurturing and development. This fosters a decent life and is an expression of the spouses' striving for holiness and the realization of themselves through the proper fulfillment of their vocation.

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¹ In the Catholic Church, the Canon of Holy Scripture consists of 46 books of the Old Testament and 27 books of the New Testament. (Catholic Straight Answers n.d.). According to the Christian tradition (Catholicism, Orthodoxy, and Protestantism), quotations from biblical passages are recorded using an abbreviation derived from the name of the book, along with the chapter and verse numbers.

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Article

Volunteering as an Instrument for Preparing Young People for Christian Marriage and Family Life

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Abstract: Volunteering is an organized service for people and social groups in need, characterized by selflessness, voluntariness, and regularity. The roots of modern volunteering should be sought in various forms of social commitment and charity activities already existing in the circle of Christian culture in antiquity. Contemporary volunteering is one of the important segments of civil society, which is why it develops well in democratic countries. In totalitarian states, it has no *raison d'être*, because the necessary condition for its development is the social space of freedom. The aim of this work is to seek an answer to the question: how can the involvement of young people in volunteering contribute to their good preparation for life in a Christian marriage and family? The article is theoretical and falls within the field of practical theology. The author will use the method of secondary analysis of available materials in the fields of philosophy, social sciences, and Catholic theology in order to show the relationship between the involvement of young people in volunteering and good preparation for future tasks of Christian spouses and parents. The starting point of the search will be a presentation of the current condition of marriages and families in Europe. The next step in the research process will be the presentation of the review-focused research methodology, and in the final part of the article, the advantages of volunteering as an instrument of preparing young people to take up the future tasks of spouses and parents will be emphasized.

Keywords: volunteering; Christian marriage; family; youth; preparing for marriage; preparing for family life



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1. Introduction

The current state of marriages and families in countries belonging to Western civilization is unstable. Many young people rarely enter into marriages, and existing marriages are affected by crises (cf. Pope Francis 2016a: 231–40; Landwójtowicz 2017; Dudziak 2022). For researchers, it is vital not only to confirm this state of affairs through scientific study but also to show development trends and provide a prediction for the coming years. Yet, for a theologian, and particularly a practical theologian, this will not suffice. Learning about the causes of the destruction of marriage and the family—as a model known and widely used at least since the time of Christ in the Christian West—should be the starting point in the search for an effective way of preparing the younger generation for life in a Christian model of marriage and family.

God's eternal project for human life in happiness, fulfilment, and love (cf. Ps. 128: 1–6) is a calling still open to young people. Today, they should receive strong support from clergy and lay family workers—both at the stage of preparation for life in marriage and during the implementation of this divine work. The task of practical theology, on the other hand, is to seek new methods and ways to prepare young people for the difficulties and challenges of life in marriage and family. It seems that there is some dormant, underutilized potential in the practice of volunteerism to prepare young people for life in Christian marriage and family.

Defining the phenomenon of volunteering scientifically poses many difficulties. This is further complicated by the fact that volunteering is researched by representatives of

a diverse range of scientific disciplines, such as cultural anthropology, sociology, social psychology, political science, pedagogy, legal sciences, practical theology, etc. Despite the diverse methodological tools and the various aspects addressed in research across these scientific disciplines, it is possible to identify a certain conceptual range for the concept of volunteering used in this study. By its very nature, the concept of volunteering must remain vague, as it encompasses a highly diverse range of activities, dominated by voluntary and selfless assistance to one's fellow man. However, it need not be fully voluntary or selfless. Musick and Wilson define volunteering as 'a form of altruistic behaviour. Its purpose is to provide help to others, a group, an organisation, a cause or an entire community, without expectation of material reward' (Musick and Wilson 2007, p. 3). Pure altruism is not the only motivation for volunteering, as individuals may also engage in volunteering to gain skills, connections, or some kind of psychological satisfaction from the beneficiaries' gratitude. According to Erhardt, volunteering refers to professionally organized social service for the benefit of individuals and groups in need, characterized by voluntariness, selflessness, continuity and regularity, and independence from family, colleague, and friendship ties (Erhardt 2011, pp. 15–21).

Volunteers also have an important role in the congregations of Christian churches, including the community of the Catholic Church. Pope John Paul II stated the following: 'If this impartial service be truly given for the good of all persons, especially the most in need and forgotten by the social services of society itself, then, volunteer work can be considered an important expression of the apostolate, in which lay men and women have a primary role' (Pope John Paul II 1988: 41). Pope Benedict XVI expressed the Church's total support for this valuable service to others and stressed that volunteering contributes to bringing a human and Christian dimension to contemporary society. Volunteering has much to do with grace; it echoes gratitude for the gift of life that we have not earned. The deep communion that binds those involved in the multiple forms of volunteering ultimately stems from gratuitousness. According to the Pope, 'It was as a free gift that we received life from our Creator, it was as a free gift that we were set free from the blind alley of sin and evil, it was as a free gift that we were given the Spirit with his many gifts' (Pope Benedict XVI 2007).

2. Background of the Study: The Current State of Marriage and Families in Europe and the USA

Modern social life is characterized by a series of continuous and intense changes, affecting many aspects of individual life. These changes have not bypassed family life either, affecting the formation of a new type of family and its organization, functioning, and structure. Modern culture, through the emergence of new values such as freedom, consumerism, individualism, self-fulfillment, assertiveness, and devoting most of one's time to making a career in life, promotes family disintegration, which is reflected in the increase in the number of divorces while marriages are declining (see statistical analysis below). Social pathologies, especially various addictions, are also a cause of the deconstruction of marriages and families. A person addicted to alcohol, drugs, the Internet, or computer games automatically transfers his problem to marital and family life, causing its destruction sooner or later (Bieleń 2018).

Cultural transitions concern not only the structure of the family but also the range of functions it performs. The family is increasingly shifting away from the traditional model towards a relationship of partnership and friendship. Social sciences have seen the emergence of a whole range of new marriage and family relationship models, e.g., modern family, classical family, nuclear family; gay family, homosexual family; foster family, professional foster family, professional specialist family, unrelated foster family; broken family, incomplete family, monoparental family, monogenic family, single-parent family, minimal family; nomadic family, commuting family, visiting family; reconstructed family, patchwork family (Burchacka 2017, p. 72). The growing acceptance of alternative relationships is one indicator that marriage is undergoing 'deinstitutionalization,' described as 'a weakening of

the social norms that determine the behavior of partners'. This theme is also evident in the emphasis on individualism, the post-material valuing of self-actualization over conformity, the second modernity in the 'institutionalization of individualization' and 'normalization of diversity,' and the emphasis in 'pure relationships' on meeting emotional needs (Treas et al. 2014).

In addition, let us not forget the group of singles who never intend to marry or enter into a partnership. Lifelong aloneness is a relatively rare demographic, averaging about 5% in the European Union. High levels of loneliness are concentrated in those societies where traditional gender values have weakened, but gender egalitarianism remains weak (Bellani et al. 2017). However, levels of lifelong loneliness vary widely among countries in Europe. Both short-term and long-term loneliness trajectories are highest in northern Europe (Klímová 2023). Other researchers (Schwanitz and Toulemon 2017) have emphasized the importance of national context in shaping young adults' leaving home and how this is influenced by educational attainment, enrolment, and parental education. For example, the positive educational gradient in leaving home to live without a partner was found to be stronger in most western European countries (except Austria) and less strong in Sweden and Norway and most eastern European countries (except the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland).

The condition of marriages and families is well illustrated by the statistics that will now be presented for Europe and the US. According to data on marriages and divorces published by Eurostat on 16 May 2022, there is an apparent trend of decreasing number of marriages with an increase in the number of divorces (Eurostat 2022). Since 1964, the marriage rate in the European Union (EU) has declined from 8.0 per 1000 people in 1964 to 3.2 in 2020. At the same time, the divorce rate increased from 0.8 per 1000 people in 1964 to 1.9 per 1000 people in 2010, before declining to 1.6 per 1000 people in 2020. According to the latest 2020 figures, around 1.4 million marriages and around 0.7 million divorces will occur across all EU Member States, compared to an estimated 1.9 million marriages and 0.8 million divorces in 2019. The unprecedented decline in marriages in 2020 can be attributed to some extent to the COVID-19 containment efforts. As of 2020, the EU Member States with the highest number of marriages in proportion to population were Hungary (6.9 marriages per 1000 people), Latvia (5.6), and Lithuania (5.5). In contrast, the lowest marriage rates were recorded in Italy (1.6), Portugal (1.8), and Spain and Ireland (1.9 each). In 2020, the lowest number of divorces in relation to population among EU Member States was registered in Malta (0.5 divorces per 1000 people), followed by Slovenia (0.8). In contrast, the highest divorce rates were recorded in Latvia, Lithuania, and Denmark (2.7 divorces per 1000 people for all three), Sweden (2.5), and Finland (2.4).

Among US adults aged 50 and older, the divorce rate doubled between 1990 and 2015 (Stepler 2017). According to the US Census Bureau's National Center for Health Statistics, there were 10 divorcees for every 1000 married people aged 50 and older in 2015, compared to 5 in 1990. Among those aged 65 and older, the divorce rate has tripled since 1990, reaching 6 per 1000 married persons in 2015. While the divorce rate among adults aged 50 and older has risen sharply over the past 25 years, the divorce rate among this age group has remained relatively stable since 2008, when the Census Bureau began collecting divorce data annually as part of the American Community Survey. Even so, the divorce rate among those under 50 is about twice as high as among adults aged 50 and older. Further, the divorce rate has also increased slightly among adults aged 40 to 49 since 1990, although not as much as among those over 50. In 2015, there were 21 divorcees aged 40 to 49 per 1000 married people in this age range; this figure was slightly lower than in 1990, with 24 divorcees per 1000 married people recorded at the time. This decline is attributed at least in part to the younger generation postponing marriage until a later age. The median age at first marriage for men in 2016 was 29.5 and for women 27.4—compared to 26.1 and 23.9, respectively, in 1990 (Stepler 2017).

In the US, statistics are showing a growing percentage of American adults living without a spouse or partner. An analysis of Pew Research Center census data found that

nearly 4 in 10 adults aged 25 to 54 (38%) were not in a relationship as of 2019, that is, they were neither married nor living with a partner (29% in 1990). Men are more likely than women to be without a partner, which was not the case 30 years ago. The increase in the number of single people is mainly driven by the decline in the number of marriages among working-age adults. At the same time, the proportion of cohabiting couples has increased, but this has not been enough to compensate for the decline in marriages—hence the overall decline in domestic partnerships. While the unmarried population includes some adults who had been married before (but have since separated, divorced, or been widowed), the entire increase in the unmarried population since 1990 is due to a rise in the number of people who have never been married. This trend has broad social implications, as does the growing gap in well-being between adults living in and out of relationships. When analyzed based on a range of measures of economic and social status, unmarried adults generally see different—and often worse—outcomes than married or cohabiting ones. This pattern is evident among both men and women. On average, single adults have lower earnings compared to adults in relationships and are less likely to be employed or economically independent. They also have lower education levels and are more likely to live with their parents. Other research suggests that married or cohabiting adults see better health outcomes in certain areas compared to single adults (Fry and Parker 2021).

Marriage and family are the basis of social life, which is why it is crucial to care for their condition in all relevant dimensions. Therefore, it is necessary to seek new ways to better prepare young people for life in a relationship, for social and religious reasons alike. In particular, the Catholic Church sees caring for the permanence of marital relationships as one of its fundamental tasks (Second Vatican Council 1965: 52).

3. Methodology of the Study

The purpose of this article is to demonstrate that the practice of volunteering by young people can prove to be an effective instrument in the process of preparation for marriage and family life. In general, the problem of this work can be expressed in the question: what are the points of contact between the practice of volunteering and married life, and more specifically: what experiences of involvement in volunteering can strengthen the competence and practical skills of future spouses and parents? To solve this problem, the method of meta-analysis of available materials in the databases of the following scientific disciplines was used: philosophy, social science, and practical theology.

In the first stage, material for secondary analysis was prepared. These are books and scientific articles published after 2000. Out of the selected 40 publications on volunteering, 22 were extracted after preliminary analysis, which potentially indicated a connection between the experience of volunteering and preparation for marriage and family life. These publications were subjected to an in-depth qualitative analysis in terms of the skills and character traits created by young people's involvement in volunteering that are useful in future marriage and family. On the basis of this analysis, four thematic areas were identified in which the potential relationship between volunteering involvement and preparation for marriage and family life showed up as the most likely. In particular, volunteering for a long period of time and carried out in the area of charitable activity develops in candidates for life in marriage and family such qualities as a culture of love, relational spirituality, the capacity for altruism, and an attitude of service to neighbor. The conclusions of the empirical research so far will then be reinforced with theological arguments.

The article is a conceptual manuscript that seeks to theorize the links between volunteering and marriage and family. The author has not conducted his own empirical research and the argumentation used is indirect in nature. It should be made clear that this is an approach to the topic from the point of view of practical theology, which is not as focused on empirical findings as the social sciences. Practical theology aims to create and improve models for the pastoral activities of individual religious congregations. Cooperation between practical theology and the social sciences is necessary because pastoral activity is always carried out in a community: it starts with the marital community, then there is the

family, local communities, including parishes, and finally the space of influence of churches and religious congregations is the global community. Practical theologians on their own rarely conduct social empirical research, but they have developed several models for using in their analyses the secondary results of research conducted by representatives of the social sciences (Osmer 2011). The purpose of this article is not to develop a comprehensive model for the preparation of young people for Christian marriage and family, but only to point out the possibility of improving the various models of such preparation used so far in different countries by using youth involvement in volunteering.

4. The Usefulness of Volunteering Experience in Preparing for Life in Christian Marriage and Family: Discussion

The Catholic Church in Poland attaches great importance to preparation for marriage and family life. After the Second Vatican Council, the Polish Bishops' Conference prepared three pastoral instructions on this issue (1969, 1975, and 1989) and later published the *Directory for the Pastoral Care of Families* (Dyrektorium duszpasterstwa rodzin) (2003), as well as the document *Serving the Truth about Marriage and Family* (Służyć prawdzie o małżeństwie i rodzinie) (2009). In the Catholic Church in Poland, there are three stages of marriage preparation: remote, proximate, and immediate. Remote preparation takes place as part of family education and religion lessons at school. Proximate preparation takes place in the family, school, and parish. Immediate preparation is carried out in the parish during meetings with the pastor and lay family life counsellor, beginning at least three months before the planned marriage date (Pyżlak 2018, p. 231). The many purposes of preparing for Christian marriage and family life include an introduction to a culture of love, as well as an introduction to a culture of interpersonal relationships (Polak 2008, pp. 110–17, 123–30). It seems that these purposes can be more easily achieved using the practice of volunteering by marriage candidates.

4.1. Volunteering of Young People as an Introduction to a Culture of Love

Can volunteering experience help introduce young people to a culture of love and thus allow them to better prepare for Christian marriage and family life? This question can be answered based on empirical research results from recent years. The essence of Christian love is the ability to be a gift to others (pro-existence). This is a difficult art that should be learnt from childhood in the family environment. One concrete manifestation of pro-existence is the ability to give various things to others. The purpose of this qualitative research, conducted by interviewing youth and parents in a Protestant religious setting traditional to the United States, was to answer the question: how do religious youth learn to give? (Herzog and Mitchell 2016). The main conclusion of this study is that giving in adulthood is related to (a) being taught to give as a child and (b) having some trigger that internalizes giving in adulthood. Childhood experiences continue to have lasting effects and continued religious involvement in adulthood appears to be key to activating these childhood learnings. Although parental upbringing does not always bring immediate and visible effects on young people, it can provide a vital foundation for later activity. This is why children should be taught to give from an early age. This thesis goes without saying, but one has to ask how to do it effectively.

According to Herzog and Mitchell, there does not appear to be a 'one size fits all' approach to how to teach giving. Rather, parents can model giving, talk about giving, and guide their children to give, knowing that these efforts are likely to pay off later in life. From in-depth interviews with parents, Herzog and Mitchell identified nine approaches to teaching giving: (1) modeling giving by giving donations in the presence of children; (2) providing children with money to give; (3) giving children donation envelopes to place in baskets and donation plates; (4) teaching children to give by talking about the importance of giving; (5) providing children with positive reinforcement for giving; (6) encouraging, expecting, or forcing them to give; (7) a method called give, save, spend, which clearly categorizes some of children's money into spending, some into saving, and some into giving;

(8) describing giving time as an alternative to giving money; and (9) a general emphasis on fiscal responsibility, in which giving is one part of a broader focus on discussions about finances. Viewing several of these methods as a common basic approach, the researchers singled out three teaching styles that (a) model giving; (b) talk about the importance of giving; and (c) guide children to give. An important finding of this study for parents and religious leaders is that the most common way of teaching giving was a ‘diverse portfolio’ of approaches, combining multiple methods (Herzog 2017). The conclusions of the above research are important not only in terms of introducing children to the experience of volunteering from an early age but also from the perspective of preparing them for the future challenges of marriage and family life. Indeed, a frequent reason for the breakdown of marital life is the lack of the ability, confirmed by practice, to give—first small things, then increasingly important ones, and finally, giving oneself to one’s spouse.

An important environment for preparing young people for married life is their family of origin. Family is considered the first and most crucial environment for the formation of pro-social attitudes (Kalinowski 2004, p. 164). Being a community of love, the family teaches its members to become a gift to each other and then a gift to others in wider social life. The pro-social attitude acquired in the family home can then be reinforced and consolidated through involvement in various voluntary groups. It is in the family that young people can experience how their parents love each other, what God’s call to love means, what the characteristics and signs of marital love are, but also what threatens it, and possibly, what destroys it (Dudziak 2007, p. 123). Recognizing love as a personal and social value and paying attention to the multiple dangers that threaten true love implies on the part of parents the need for exceptional vigilance, attention, and care in teaching their children to love. One major challenge faced by parents is sex education for young people, whose ill-considered decisions and moral choices in early adulthood can ruin plans for a happy life in a Christian marriage and family (Przygoda et al. 2023). Naturally, parents cannot be left to tackle this task on their own, which is why the role of peer groups, constructive pastoral meetings, community seminars, retreats, and pilgrimages, but also involvement in voluntary work, is so important.

According to Pope Benedict XVI, through helping others, volunteers increasingly realize that their actions bring no merit, nor are they a reason for boasting, but rather are a grace since they have received many gifts from others, and especially from God, the source of all endowment. This is because volunteers pass on to others what they have already received through their involvement. This is about love that cannot be given unless it is first received (Pope Benedict XVI 2005: 14). In Benedict XVI’s view, this logic of gratuitousness, which goes beyond mere duties and moral imperatives, is part of the essence of voluntary service. God first bestowed His love on man and is still looking for those who can love others with Him. The essence of volunteering in Christian terms is well captured by Jesus’ famous *agraphon*, recalled by St Paul of Tarsus in his farewell address to the Ephesians gathered in Miletus: ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive’ (Acts 20: 35). If this statement of Jesus refers to charity volunteers, does it not capture the essence of married life to an even greater extent? Conjugal love is far from calculating, but consists in mutual giving of spouses. Over time, this endowment extends to children and other people in the neighborhood.

4.2. Volunteering of Young People as an Introduction to Relational Spirituality

How can volunteering experience prove useful in introducing young people to a new culture of human relations? Do the results of social surveys reveal anything about this? The literature on volunteering has consistently documented the positive relationship between religion and volunteering (Putnam and Campbell 2010). Religiosity, both private and public, is one of the strongest predictors of volunteering. While attending religious services enables initial engagement in volunteering, a strong sense of the importance of religion is more important for sustained engagement in pro-social activity (Petrovic et al. 2021). Why do people with stronger ties to a religious congregation tend to be more active

in volunteering than those who are religiously indifferent? This is because volunteering, as a form of engagement, requires resources (Musick and Wilson 2007, p. 111), and religious congregations provide all kinds of resources that are needed for volunteering activities, such as altruistic values, civic skills, and social networks (Putnam 2000). Notably, religious congregations provide personal friendship networks that link their members with voluntary organizations to form a close-knit community (Wilson and Musick 1997). It seems that this experience of social relationships outside family and business ties can have a positive impact on learning about relationships useful for future marriage and family life.

The relational spirituality proposed by Mahoney (2010) assumes that (a) family members who believe in God or a transcendent reality regard their family relationships and other areas of their lives, such as volunteering, as part of the sacred, and (b) such people make every effort to maintain and enhance positive family functioning by practicing religious rituals at home, attending church services, and giving and receiving social support from fellow believers (Mahoney 2010, p. 807). This framework is useful for understanding the link between religion and volunteering among married couples, as it recognizes that individuals' perceptions of the sacred not only drive religious behavior but also relate to social behavior, including marriage and family relationships and involvement in the local community.

According to Marks's (1986) triangle theory, marriage consists of a pair of interacting triangles, with each having three corners: the inner self (one corner), the spouse (the second corner), and other interests or commitments (the third corner). If volunteering is a common third corner for both spouses, their internal relationships are enriched and their marital bond reinforced, as involvement in volunteering allows them to spend more time together (Kim and Dew 2019). It also seems that engaged couples and even those planning long-term relationships can learn to develop personal relationships through volunteering. Apart from the stated purposes of pro-social activity, there is always a lot of added value in volunteering, and personal psychosocial development is one of the values of great importance to candidates for a Christian marriage and family life.

Typically, the effects of volunteering have been studied from the perspective of volunteers and society as a whole. We know that volunteering has positive effects on several aspects of volunteers' well-being and health, and that volunteering increases social capital and reduces public spending on social welfare (Putnam and Campbell 2010). Grönlund and Falk (2019) performed a secondary analysis of 22 scientific articles on the effects of volunteering but from the perspective of recipients of volunteer activities. They found that two effects of volunteering were key for the recipients: a) the support of volunteers or peers increases the sense of participation and reduces loneliness; b) volunteering enhances the recipients' self-esteem and sense of empowerment. One of the main factors influencing the effect of volunteer services is the voluntary nature of the relationship between volunteer and recipient. Reciprocity, neutrality, and presence as the basis of the relationship make receiving help and support from a volunteer distinctly different from professional help. Volunteers, who by definition engage voluntarily and are driven largely by altruistic motives, combat the negative self-image of the person suffering from loneliness as an unwanted companion. In addition, positive experiences of social interaction help recipients view social interactions in a more positive way; volunteers are there to help or support the recipient. A sense of participation, a sense of loneliness, a sense of self-esteem, and a sense of agency thus underlie loneliness as a phenomenon, as well as the effects of volunteering. Moreover, the mechanisms of the benefits of volunteering for volunteers are, at least to some extent, similar to the benefits for recipients. Volunteers experience bonding and competence in volunteering, especially when they offer help of their own volition. Thus, the voluntary nature and intrinsic motivation of the interaction is key to the benefits for both the recipient and the volunteer. Volunteering has the peculiarity that distinguishes this relationship from that of professional help, and to some extent it is also different from help from family and relatives, who can also be seen as obligated to visit and help (Grönlund and Falk 2019, pp. 22–23). Thus, volunteering teaches to build personal relationships

and develops them, which can be of great importance in the process of preparing young volunteers for marriage and family.

How much the experience of volunteering develops and enriches personal relationships is shown by the charitable work of Frederic Ozanam (1813–1853), whom Pope John Paul II proclaimed Blessed of the Catholic Church in 1997. Ozanam founded the St. Vincent à Paulo Conferences among university students in Paris in 1833. Each conference consisted of a dozen or so volunteers, meeting regularly to discuss the social problems they encountered and their own spiritual formation. Each member of the conference had one poor family under his or her care, with whom he or she met regularly and aided with immediate needs. Frederick Ozanam, like his other comrades, visited families, prayed with them and organized material assistance for them. ‘It is necessary to cross the threshold of a poor man’s home,’ he said to members of his Conference, ‘it is necessary to freeze together with him in order to learn the secrets of a heart that cannot find comfort and the secrets of a conscience that cannot find peace’ (Ester 1986, p. 235). Ozanam’s charitable work grew rapidly in France and in many other countries around the world, as it was built on the personalistic relationship between the volunteer and the person in need of help. Ozanam was not only a well-educated professor at the Paris Sorbonne, a strongly committed social activist, but above all a good husband to his wife Amélie Soulacroix and father to his daughter Marie. Ozanam’s life story shows how personal relationships developed through volunteering can serve to build good relationships in marriage and family.

4.3. Volunteering of Young People as an Introduction to the Experience of Altruism

In the 19th century, the French philosopher August Comte, based on his idea of the ‘religion of humanity’, created the concept of altruism as the opposite of egoism, meaning selfless action, i.e., offering something of oneself without expecting to receive something in return (Regozini 1977, p. 82). Since then, the term has also been increasingly used to describe the selfless assistance provided by volunteers from charitable institutions. Undoubtedly, Christianity has also left its mark on the concept of volunteering, highlighting various ways to implement the commandment to love one’s neighbor since its earliest days, not only in the form of individual commitment but also through organized aid institutions. The 19th century, which brought the emergence of modern volunteering, saw the flourishing of various secular and religious aid institutions, including Caritas, the main charitable organization of the Catholic Church. The above institutions sought as many volunteers as possible for social service, thus becoming promoters and protectors of altruism.

Religion is also a key factor in explaining who a volunteer is. As noted by Wilson and Musick, ‘by teaching altruistic values and encouraging pro-social behaviour, religions elevate the importance of caring for others’ (Musick and Wilson 2007, p. 88). Religion can also influence volunteering by providing different types of capital, such as social capital (opportunity networks), human capital (skills), and cultural capital (religious capital), as well as a range of incentives to volunteer (Lewis et al. 2013). Religion can provide an ethical worldview in which helping others is highly regarded and supports this value system through networking opportunities that make volunteering possible. However, researchers of volunteering have only recently begun to incorporate the multidimensional insights of religious scholars into their models of religiosity and volunteering (Paxton et al. 2014).

It is worth recalling here the results of a study linking Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor’s theory (horizons of meaning; strong and weak evaluation; and narrative identity) to qualitative research on volunteer motivation conducted in Norway and Finland (Pessi and Nicolaysen 2010). The results of this research showed that volunteering is rewarding in many ways. Respondents noted the importance, sociability, or concreteness of their chosen activity form. Moreover, social engagement offers the opportunity to express one’s individuality and self-fulfillment. Volunteers also gained well-being and emotional security from volunteering, including a sense of success, as well as of being needed and having a place in society. Giving is usually linked to altruism or personal crises, based on which a person feels they have something to offer to another person through volunteering. It should

also be noted that receiving and giving are strongly linked—more so than in the case of any other motivational pole. Volunteering is very much a matter of reciprocity: gaining by giving, mutual help, and the idea of personal growth through interaction. The results of the referenced studies further confirmed the following relationship: when volunteering is initiated based on altruistic desires, volunteers are surprised by how much they actually gain. The social nature of volunteering seems to be one of the main arguments in favor of it. The results also indicated that volunteering is sometimes seen as a channel for promoting social interaction—the volunteer advocates values, altruism, faith, or caring. For some volunteers, a significant value in volunteering is experiencing the community spirit. The latter is often based on a sense of acceptance, shared experiences, a shared sense of humor and, in more practical terms, conversations and discussions (Pessi and Nicolaysen 2010, pp. 137–39).

These optimistic findings on volunteers' motivations can be viewed from the perspective of preparing for Christian marriage and family life. One may say that volunteering shapes a good person in terms of social relations, which raises the hope that the volunteer is or may one day prove to be a good husband or wife and a good parent. For those on the verge of adulthood, volunteering can be an instrument to help them discover their vocation in life, which is a daunting task for young people in the context of today's cultural and religious changes—even with the support of Christian parents and pastors. However, it is worth stimulating young people to think critically and to seek values higher than consumer goods. It is especially a matter of directing their attention to love, which is the foundation of marital and family life, but also of wider social relations. Through this stimulation, young people may develop the belief that they do not live only for themselves, but also for others. Today, only based on altruism is it possible to ask young people about their life's vocation, and then help them find answers (Lipiec 2016, pp. 142–44).

Reaching the hearts of young people with the Gospel's message requires inserting oneself into their life experience, their perception and understanding of reality, and their highly individualized axiology and complex decision-making processes. They want to be creative participants in the ongoing social, cultural, and religious changes. Therefore, they must not be treated as passive recipients of pastoral programs or strategies created without their involvement. If parents, ministers, or lay activity organizers from religious communities can enter the world of young people, they will also be able to set high demands on them in terms of the human love necessary for their development in view of their preparation for marriage and family life (Fiałkowski and Sadlak 2021, pp. 23–24).

4.4. Volunteering of Young People as an Introduction to Attitude of Service to Neighbor

The experience of volunteering carried out especially in the area of mercy ministry contributes to the development of an attitude of readiness to serve one's neighbor. The above thesis is supported by some empirical findings, but also by theological arguments. The results of qualitative research already cited above, conducted in Finland and Norway, on volunteer motivation—understood holistically, not focusing on the reasons for starting volunteering—showed that late-modern volunteer motivation appears to be a surprisingly complex, all-encompassing phenomenon. Indeed, volunteer motivation encompasses a variety of different, including contradictory, elements at any given time, and can change over time. A volunteer's motivation may be more inward-oriented—but definitely not necessarily more selfish—toward varieties of thought, distance, continuity, and acquisition. In addition, the attraction of volunteering may be to the external elements of the individual—but not necessarily more altruistic—to the many ways of action, proximity, novelty, and giving. Notably, all of the volunteers interviewed were—to some, varying degree—motivated by a general desire to help: a desire to promote the well-being of others and be useful to them. Some of them also emphasized their altruistic qualities and experienced volunteering as natural, or even as a calling, in a spiritual sense. Personal experiences also motivated volunteers to help, with some wanting to encourage others through their own recovery. Altruism is closely linked to other motivational elements,

particularly giving and thinking; volunteers want to help, and their values and norms go hand in hand with their altruistic desires (Pessi and Nicolaysen 2010, p. 139).

In 2010, the author of this paper conducted a sociological study on a sample of 722 volunteers from charity groups in the Catholic parishes of the Polish Church. When asked about their motives for volunteering, 80.7% of respondents indicated that an important motive was to help people in need. The second-highest ranked motive was the desire to follow the Gospel precepts (40.0%). In contrast, far fewer respondents pointed to their choice to volunteer being motivated by such things as persuasion from their environment (15.5%), the desire to experience a special community (10.9%), family tradition (6.8%), the desire to learn new skills (6.5%), and the desire to overcome feelings of loneliness and emptiness in life (6.1%). Further, 3.2 per cent of respondents indicated other motives for their decision to volunteer while 2.5 per cent of respondents indicated no motive at all (Przygoda 2012, p. 123). On the other hand, when inquired about their level of satisfaction with their involvement in volunteering, more than half of the respondents identified with the following statement: 'it makes me happy to help others, because I too may need help one day' (65.5%), as well as the thesis that volunteering allows one to fulfil the Gospel's commandment to love one's neighbor (55.3%). Nearly one in three respondents agreed with the statement that volunteering increases one's sense of social usefulness (30.1%), and almost one in five agreed that volunteering is a source of personal happiness (18.0%). One in ten respondents confirmed that volunteering helps to forget loneliness and one's own problems (11.9%) and that it increases personal self-esteem (11.5%). Few respondents agreed with a negative view of volunteering, expressed as follows: 'I would gladly give up this commitment in favor of something else' (0.6%) or 'I find this commitment tiresome and exhausting to the limit' (0.4%) (Przygoda 2012, p. 128). Thus, both in motivation and in perceived satisfaction among respondents, the motive of service to neighbor dominates. It probably does not need to convince anyone how useful an attitude of service to neighbor is in the life of marriage and family.

Theological argumentation also points to the fact that the experience of volunteering is a school of active love, which is manifested by helping a neighbor in need. St. John the Apostle teaches: 'Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth' (1 John 3:18). Pope Benedict XVI emphasized in his teaching that volunteering is, especially for young people, 'a school of life and teaches solidarity, the readiness to give not only something, but oneself' (Pope Benedict XVI 2005: 30). In addition, Benedict XVI pointed out that 'whoever respects the priority of his neighbor and lives and acts according to the Gospel also shares in the mission of the Church, which always sees the whole man and seeks to make him feel the love of God' (Pope Benedict XVI 2007). In one of his speeches, Pope Francis stated that 'in volunteering, every service is important, even the simplest. And its ultimate meaning is opening to the presence of Jesus; it is an experience of love that comes from on high, that makes you go on a journey and fills you with joy' (Pope Francis 2016b). Pope Francis, who highly values selfless service to neighbor in young people, noted that volunteering unleashes new developmental possibilities in young people. According to Francis, spiritual development is expressed primarily 'by growing in fraternal, generous, merciful love' (Pope Francis 2019: 163). In married and family life, the attitude of service is useful every day, and especially in the event of illness, disability, old age, and many other unpredictable life circumstances.

In conclusion of the discussion, it should be emphasized that many questions remain open and require further research. The state of knowledge so far does not make it possible to demonstrate which type of volunteering is more conducive to preparation for marriage and family life and which to a far lesser degree. At present, only with a great deal of caution can it be said that involvement in charitable, systematic, and long-term volunteering creates opportunities to develop skills and competencies for a happy life in marriage and family. However, this thesis is intuitive and cannot be confirmed at this stage by concrete results of empirical research. Moreover, new research is required to answer the question of what specific qualities of a young volunteer are important in the perspective of future life in

marriage and family. Thus, the discussion initiated in this study needs to be continued. New empirical research is needed, followed by a substantive discussion on the interpretation of the results. It is highly advisable that, in addition to psychologists and sociologists, practical theologians, especially specialists in marriage and family ministry, be included in the discussion of the study's findings.

5. Conclusions

According to Pope Francis, 'the welfare of the family is decisive for the future of the world and that of the Church' (Pope Francis 2016a: 31). Meanwhile, the results of social research point to a multifaceted crisis in marital and family relations, making it increasingly difficult for young people to start a family in the absence of adequate support from society. This is also why many young people are abandoning marriage in favor of more unstable and informal forms of affective relationships. However, research results also highlight that the family is still the first source of social life and show the existence of good practices that deserve to be shared and disseminated worldwide. In his message for the Family Global Compact, Pope Francis stressed that 'it is in the family that many of God's dreams for the human community are realized. Hence, we cannot resign ourselves to the decline of the family in the name of uncertainty, individualism and consumerism, which envision a future of individuals who think only of themselves. We cannot be indifferent to the future of the family as a community of life and love, a unique and indissoluble covenant between a man and a woman, a place where generations meet, a source of hope for society' (Pope Francis 2023).

The family is a source of the common good: good family relationships are an inalienable resource not only for spouses and children but for the entire ecclesiastical and civic community. This is why it is such an important task for parents, as well as for pastors, to prepare the younger generation well for marriage and family life. Based on a secondary analysis of publications selected from worldwide resources, we have shown how the involvement of young people—candidates for marriage and family life—in volunteering can be useful for this endeavor. Volunteering experience in childhood and youth teaches the art of giving, introduces one to mature relationships with others, and gives confidence to people standing on the verge of adulthood to make responsible decisions, especially in terms of discovering their life's vocation and choosing a specific life path.

The relationship between volunteering experiences and the preparation of young people for marriage and family life necessitates further sociological and psychological research. The author of this paper acknowledges the limitations of their argumentation. To present a coherent case for a direct link between youth volunteering and preparation for marriage and family life, empirical studies would need to be undertaken. Despite an exhaustive search of worldwide scientific databases, no results from such studies were discovered. Consequently, the author of this work opted for a secondary analysis of available empirical study outcomes related to various facets of youth involvement in volunteering.

Nevertheless, initiating a discussion regarding the connection between young people's volunteering experiences and their readiness for marriage and family life appears to be a valuable endeavor. From the perspective of practical theology and religious education, the interplay between volunteering experiences and preparation for life within a marriage and family context can yield promising insights. It is hoped that this article will serve as an inspiration for sociologists and psychologists to undertake such research in the near future.

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Article

Metaphorical Language and Function of the “Bridal Pick-Up” Ritual in Anatolian Traditional Weddings with Its Origin and Reflections

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Abstract: In the urban centers of Türkiye, where cultural changes are more widespread and effective, wedding processional is replaced by the solemnization of the marriage at indoor weddings, and the Kūdegū (old Turkic language; refers to bridegroom, son-in-law) awaiting the bride’s arrival at the boy’s house is replaced by differences in the way of the bride and groom’s entry together; moreover, while wedding rituals such as the bridal bath and groom’s hammam are being forgotten, bachelor/bachelorette parties are on the rise. The beliefs and practices related to the bride being taken out of the girl’s house with a special ceremony have deep meanings, such as blessing the bride who has just joined the family, acclimatizing the bride who feels like an outsider and avoiding her from these feelings, and protecting the bride and groom from the körmös (spirits in Turkic mythology, devilish entities living in the underworld), bad spirits, and the evil eye. In this paper, the structure, function, practices, and beliefs of the rituals surrounding the bride and groom on the last day of Anatolian Turkish weddings are analyzed using a qualitative research method. In addition, this study identified the betrothal, performance, beliefs, and practices surrounding the ritual of “bridal pick up” among Anatolian Turks and evaluated the symbols and signs in the ritual procedures in the functional context of the origins and reflections of traditional Turkish beliefs.

Keywords: marriage; wedding feast; bridal pick-up; bridal migration; wedding processional; ritual; folk beliefs



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1. Introduction

Marriage rites are especially common in human societies that have reached a higher level of culture and among tribes that have been in contact with them (Erdentuğ 1970, p. 235). The wedding, which is a celebration at the beginning of a marriage, may vary from society to society in terms of its ceremonial performance, structure, and function, as well as within subgroups within the same society. The rules to be followed in wedding feasts are passed down and become tradition. Even though traditions change and transform, the traces of the past do not completely disappear (Yolcu 2014, p. 252). Regarding the impact of rituals on the formation of a national identity, (Roche and Hohmann 2011, p. 115) points out that rituals can create indicators that are open to the accumulation of new associations and references. The establishment of a family represents a significant transformation in societal dynamics. Newlyweds often entail a process of relocating to a new residence. Household transition is typically marked by ceremonies that signify not only the financial transition but also separation rituals (van Gennepe 2022, p. 137).

Given the stages of ceremonial structures of traditional Turkish weddings as described in the studies of Boratav (1984) and Örnek (2014) on the Anatolian Turkish folklore, wedding

feasts begin with the intention to marry or to marry off, and continue with phases such as looking for a girl, asking for the bride's hand, betrothal, engagement, wedding, marriage, the migration of the bride, nuptial night, and post-nuptial (Boratav 1984, p. 172; Örnek 2014, pp. 255–84). However, the implementation of these stages has changed depending on the social class. Marriage, which is a turning point in a person's life, is an important transition ceremony in Turkish culture, which is associated with celebrations, entertainment, rituals, symbols, and many other details. Marriage, which represents the transition from singledom to a new life situation, is seen as a ritual in which the family, considered the smallest unit of society, is built. Due to the importance of marriage in the life of the society and the individual, marriage rituals attract the curiosity of researchers because they have a detailed and complex structure, sometimes with regional differences.

Wedding feasts can be seen not only as rites of passage, celebrated to ring out the past and welcome the new; they are also functional structures in which soon-to-be married couples and their families display their social and cultural identities and realize their social status. According to Roche and Hohmann (2011, p. 113), in order to create a common identity, the continuity of traditions in the historical context is emphasized, while cultural rituals of resistance are proposed in which ethnic, local, and national identities are put forward against standardization/homogenization. Tradition, defined as knowledge, customs, and behaviors passed down (Karataş 2014, p. 138), as well as rituals, signs, and symbols that enable the transmission of traditional knowledge conveyed through tradition, are the elements of nonverbal communication in Anatolian Turkish weddings. The definition of human as a social being with rituals and at the same time as a ritual-producing being makes it necessary to explain ritual beliefs and behaviors and the reason behind them (Kutlu 2013, p. 4). In the context of rituals, three concepts come to the fore: the sacred, an order in continuity, and symbols, which gather the expressions of symbolic meaning. Rituals, regarded as the symbolic expressions of traditional beliefs and religious order, are accepted as the forms of behavior toward the sacred. The concept of the ritual, which is used in a wide spectrum, is considered as worship in the sense of religion, but it has also formed a bridge between humans and the state. Rituals are called ceremonies and are found in many phases of social life, sometimes at graduation ceremonies, sometimes at nights of henna or wedding feasts. From schoolyards to concert halls, from entertainment venues to hotel lounges, many places are considered the modern sites of ritual, for ritual is present in every aspect of human or social life. Drinking coffee, talking with a friend, and eating have certain patterns and behaviors, i.e., ritual frameworks (Kutlu 2013, p. 6).

Although rituals occur in all aspects of life, in this study they are expressed in a specific time and place. The bridal pick-up is one of the most important rituals in weddings and signifies the departure of the bride from her father's house, where she has lived for years, with a special ceremony. The people who see the bride off from her family home, and in some regions of Anatolia, the people who are chosen to accompany the bride to the groom's house, or the external participants who formed the wedding processional in earlier times, are the chosen people determined by tradition and ceremony. The games, ceremonies, and prayers in the wedding processional should be studied in detail by identifying their correspondences in the cultural codes. The practices in the process of going from the groom's house to the bride's house, such as blocking the doorway, jug breaking, jumping the broom, planting/flying a flag, picking up the bride from the girl's house, the change and transformation that occurs in line with the rules of the oral law in the process until the bride is brought to the man's new house, and current practices taking place today constitute the subject of our research. Little is known about the symbols and rituals of Turkish weddings and their relationship to beliefs and traditions, or how these elements have shaped picking-up practices in the past and present. Although Anatolian Turkish weddings include a variety of rituals related to bridal pick-up, there are very few studies on this topic. This paper is a complementary study to the previous research and highlights many customs, ceremonies, and practices with religious, magical, and ritual content.

2. The Methodology of the Conducted Research

In this article, literature review and document analysis have been employed as the research methods. Various sources have been utilized to identify and understand traditional knowledge and practices related to Turkish weddings. The written materials among the secondary sources include articles, books, and graduate theses. The focus has particularly been on source works consisting of data obtained from field research and primary oral sources. Literature review and document analysis allow for the systematic examination of the existing information, enabling the categorization and synthesis of the data obtained from various sources. In this article, the traditional structures of Turkish weddings and marriage rituals have been examined using these methods. Relationships between the data have been established, judgments have been formulated, and evaluations have been made.

This article has focused on socio-cultural analysis. Cultural analysis is important for identifying a society's cultural identity, understanding its social structure, solving social problems, or developing policies for societal issues. This article encompasses cultural elements such as beliefs, rituals, values, traditions, and symbols. Socio-cultural analysis has been employed to define and describe the "bride pick up" ritual. In this analysis, the aim is to gain a clearer understanding by examining the oral actions and behaviors of the participants in the event. Therefore, in our study, we focus on socio-cultural analysis to uncover the cultural characteristics of the "bridal pick up" ritual in Turkish culture.

3. Bridal Pick-Up on the Basis of Matriarchal/Patriarchal Order

The research on the family structure of the ancient Turks is characterized by two branches. The first is the idea of the Western sociologist Genard that "the Turkish families are patriarchal", while the second is the view of Gokalp that "the Turkish family structure is based on the equality of men and women". Gokalp emphasizes that a strong family and social structure is formed jointly with men and women, citing examples such as the assumption of joint tasks in social life by women and men among Turks, the joint receptions of the Khan and the Khatun in state authority, the presence of the Khatun in state government, and the portrayal of women as epic heroes in the Book of Dede Korkut, which is one of the exemplary works related to the elucidation of Turkic traditions and customs (Gökçe 1978, p. 13). According to the customs reflected in the marriage traditions, in the ancient Turkish traditions, it is the right of the girl's house to start the wedding. The wedding, therefore, begins in the bride's house and ends in the groom's house (Ögel 1988, p. 269).

Ögel acknowledges the symbol of the marriage as "home" while emphasizing the significance of the "Hearthstone" as the symbol of the home and hearth in Turkish culture. In Yakut Turks, marriage is expressed as "lighting an everlasting fire" (sönmez bir ateş yakma), while the matrilineal family structure of the Mongols brings the concept of "reaching adulthood" (ere varmak) to the forefront. In Uyghur poetry, marriage is approached with a sentimental perspective, and the term "reunion" (kavuşma) is frequently employed. In Anatolia, marriage is conceptualized as "building smoke" (duman kurma) and "kindling a hearth" (ocak tütürme) with the bride being described as "a fire that illuminates the home" (evi aydınlatan bir ateş). In other Turkic communities, emphasis is placed on the "joy of a burning hearth" (yanan ocağın neşesi) and in this context, the hearth and the family are identified with each other through the prayer "May your fire be warm" (Ateşin sıcak olsun). In Anatolia, the phrases "the extinguishing of the hearth" (ocağın sönmesi), "family hearth" (aile ocağı), and "hearth hope" (ocak umudu) for fifteen-year-old children are indicative of the influence of pre-Islamic Turkic folk beliefs (Ögel 1988, pp. 253–54).

Beyond the feelings of honor (reverence), veneration, and sometimes fear toward the family's deceased ancestors, ancestor cult forms the strong basis of patriarchal societies, with their attitudes and behaviors towards living elders. Although patriarchal authority began to falter with the spread of divine religions, women, who lagged behind men in many areas, such as the social and political spheres, occupied a central position in transforming the Turkish family structure into a modern family type. Three years after the establishment

of the Republic of Turkey, men and women became equal with the adoption of the Turkish Civil Code, and as part of the Westernization of the Turkish family to transform into a modern family type with a sociological definition, these ideas were put into practice with the Civil Code (Gökçe 1978, p. 15).

4. Bridal Pick-Up Toy

A wedding is a *toy*¹, and for Turks, the family is considered the nucleus of the country and the continuation of the generation, and the wedding is celebrated in every era with feasts and entertainments. It was, therefore, also called “bridal toy” (*Kelin/gelin toyı*) in the time of the Khwarezmshahs. In the book of Dede Korkut, the betrothal *toy* (ceremony) is called “small wedding”, and the wedding toy is called “supreme wedding”. At the same time, the supreme wedding is also called “wedding of honor”. The Kazakh Turks, on the other hand, used to organize a “two-stage” wedding, namely “bridal pick-up *toy*” and “bridal drop-off”, i.e., “dropping off *toy*” (Ögel 1988, p. 269). In the 15th century, it is known that bridal pick-up, which is called “bridal migration” (*kız göçürür*) and has an important place in family formation among Turks, was a common *toy*/entertainment called “bridal migration *toy*” or “marrying *toy*” (Baykara 2001, p. 205). The process of bridal pick-up from her father’s house to the groom’s house is called “bridal migration” (Çakır 2023, p. 991), and those who participate in the bridal pick-up event from the girl’s house are called the persons who perform the bridal pick-up, which refers in Turkish to: “*gelinci*”, “*gelin alıcı*”, and “*gelin götürücü*” (Büyükokutan Töret 2013, p. 39).

After the bride is picked up from her father’s house with some entertainments, rituals, and practices, she is not immediately taken to the boy’s house by the shortest route. Since it is considered bad luck for the wedding processional to return by the same route (Köksal 1996, p. 77), the bride is taken to her new home by various means (Şişman 2017, p. 53). After the wedding processional picks up the bride, she is led around in a convoy amid horns and firecrackers, accompanied by drums, zurnas, games, and various entertainments. In the past, the wedding processional would pray after picking up the bride through the village, at the cemetery, or at the graves. After this ritual, the guns were fired, drums were beaten, zurnas were sounded, young people danced the *halay*, and the wedding processional continued on its way with joy and fun (Yalman (Yalgın) 1977, p. 263). The bride’s walk around the cemetery has a symbolic meaning: “The first destination is the birth, the second is becoming a bride and the third is the nonexistence, that is, cemetery. This is the last place you go, so act honorably and purposefully!” (Koşay 1944, p. 257), the custom of the bride going around the cemetery three times recalls this thought.

It is said that Anatolian weddings in the past were usually held on Thursday, the wedding processional took place on the same day and the day of the bridal pick-up was popularly called “getting right” (*hak alma*-Bartın) and “day of the bridal pick-up” (*düğün günü*-Antalya) (Koşay 1944, pp. 70, 206). Today’s weddings are usually held on Sundays because of the working days. The time for bridal pick-up is the last day of the wedding feast and traditional Anatolian weddings last three or four days. The fact that weddings take place at certain times and not at others is related to religious or magical contexts. Sacred or lucky days are most favorable for marriage (Gökalp 1976, p. 309). For example, Friday is a blessed day in Islam, and since Friday falls on Thursday evening, it is extremely important that the day of the bridal pick-up and the nuptial night coincide with that day. In Anatolian weddings, the timing of the bridal pick-up in the past was also based on the marital status of the bride. Single brides were usually married on Thursday and widowed brides rather on Sunday (Koşay 1944, p. 81; İhtiyar Büyüктаş 2019, p. 94).

In the Ankara province, the neighbors perform the mother’s henna on Tuesday, Wednesday is the henna night, Thursday is the day of the bridal putting down (*gelin indirmesi*), and the *mawlid* is recited on Friday. In the Çankırı province, the wedding starts on Monday, and on Tuesday the neighbors perform pre-wedding parties in the girl’s house. On Wednesday the girl’s trousseau is sent, on Thursday the trousseau is exhibited, and on Friday the henna night takes place. In the Kastamonu province, the wedding begins on

Monday, and the bridal bath takes place on Sunday. On Tuesday, *kashkak* (original name *keşkek*; a ceremonial meat or chicken in Turkish cuisine) is ground, on Wednesday a feast is given, and Thursday is the day of bridal pick-up (originally *gelin göçürme* in Turkish). In the Karaburun district of the Izmir province, on Monday the trousseau is prepared, on Tuesday the trousseau is exhibited and bridal bath is performed, and on Wednesday the boy's house comes and dresses the bride. In the Kırşehir province, the wedding begins on Saturday and lasts until Thursday. In the Kutahya province, on Thursday, the bride is dressed and made ready (*kızönü*, *kızın ihzarı* in Turkish) in the bride's house, and bridal pick-up ceremony is performed in the groom's house. In the Niğde province, the bridal pick-up takes place on Thursday. In Sinop, a henna night is held on Wednesday evening and a bridal pick-up is held on Thursday. Weddings in the Ünye district of the Ordu province start on Monday, and bridal pick-up is performed on Thursday (Koşay 1944, pp. 69–75). As can be seen, there are different practices in Anatolia.

5. Individual Perceptions and Socio-cultural Influences: Wedding Gifts as a Rule of Reciprocity

The traces of the functional effectiveness of the Anatolian Turkish weddings in the formation of the national structure in Anatolia, the dissemination of human values, and the continuation of positive behaviors by the people are clear. The gifts presented at wedding ceremonies function as the symbolic examples of cooperation and solidarity. Influence on the choice of wedding rituals can be families, friends, relatives, and external factors (organizers, social media, etc.). Research shows that the structure of an important and lively celebration such as a wedding is not fixed, but certain culturally specific rituals are incorporated later. Rituals are therefore used by cultural groups to convey and communicate complex ideas to their members without the need for explanations, and in this way, to re-establish social bonds with the group (Phillips 2020, p. 89). In past and present practices, the gifts of gold, earrings, necklaces, bracelets, banknotes, etc., pinned by close relatives in jewelry ceremonies are particularly monitored, and in some ceremonies, the gifts of whom and what are announced aloud, while the video recording of today's ceremonies with cameras increases socio-cultural pressure on individual emotions, influences behavior patterns, and reminds us of the rule of reciprocity (Emiroğlu and Aydın 2003, p. 244).

Özdemir (2008, p. 468) describes the tradition of gift-giving in Turkish society as “a culture-forming tradition, a complex system that creates and sustains social life” and sees the function of the gift-giving as an intermediary system that creates a social bond, keeps culture alive, and transmits and differentiates it. Depending on the degree of attachment to the bride and groom, everyone presents gifts at ceremonies such as betrothal, henna, and wedding ceremonies. In addition, public dinners, presentations (gifts to a superior person), gifts from the bride and groom to each other, and gifts from relatives on both sides to the bride and groom and from them to the bride and groom are considered magical practices to remove the effects of evil spirits or to ensure the happiness of the new family (Gökalp 1976, p. 309).

Those invited to the wedding usually bring the gifts of cows, sheep, goats, cloth for clothes, mares, mules, rams, oxen, carpets, runners, rice, oil, gold, and similar products, varying according to the economic status of the invitee, the closeness of the family and the status of the invitee in society (Koşay 1944, pp. 69, 79), while in today's weddings this tradition has been replaced by items such as banknotes (money) and gold. In some wedding halls in Anatolia, a charity box is common, where it is not clear who gives how much money, but it is used to provide material support to the owner of the wedding. In the past, in addition to gifts such as pots, plates, and copper, the custom of bringing a goat to the wedding was so common among the Anatolian Yuruks that it has become a traditional saying. The expression “Don't ensconce like a majordomo who brought a goat to the wedding” lives on in ancestral sayings to this day as a tradition that shows that those who bring goats to the wedding house act presumptuously, sit comfortably, and that bringing goats as a gift is a privilege (Koşay 1944, p. 95; Yalman (Yalgın) 1977, p. 259).

In the Ayvancık town of the Niğde province, on the day bridal pick-up (Thursday) at noon, the groom and the groomsman are shaved, and the groom is dressed in new clothes accompanied by folk songs sung with drum and zurna. Both wear a long coat called “red cloak”, which is known as local dress, and they go to the meeting place and kiss the hands of the big men there, and the elderly give money to the groomsman and the groom, and the groom kisses his father’s hand and his father grants his vineyards, gardens, and assets to his son (Koşay 1944, p. 205). Gift-giving is intensely experienced at every stage of the Turkish wedding tradition.

6. A Symbolic Ritual in the Wedding Processional: The Wedding Flag

In Anatolia, the wedding flag is at the head of the wedding processional formed when the bride enters or leaves (Bozyiğit 1987, p. 78). We consider it useful to briefly explain the characteristics and symbolic meanings of the wedding flag, which has numerous functions such as affiliation, social demarcation, social activity, union, reunion, and social continuity (Taşdemir 2019, p. 94) at each stage of the wedding. Rituals are symbolic by nature, and according to Mensching, they have at least two elements: the thing symbolized and the spiritual truth that this thing represents. From this point of view, it can be said that collective representations and rituals become the patterns of behavior that evolve from “individualities” to “us” (Kutlu 2013, p. 21). Symbols also exist in the world of objects, but it is people and societies that construct them with the dimension of meaning and ascribe meanings to them. As elements such as mythical narratives, religious beliefs, and traditional behaviors influence the ritual structure of similar elements in symbolic meaning, symbols have a national character and fulfill the unifying function of the religion and culture. The displaying of the flag, also called the “*toy* or wedding flag”, which is a common tradition among all Turks, is an important indicator (Ögel 1988, p. 269). The flag is the symbol of the beginning of the wedding in traditional weddings in Anatolia, and the side of the boy that announces the beginning of the wedding hangs/erects the wedding flag at the highest point of their house or in a place that can be seen by all.

Although it has no spiritual value as a material, the flag is perceived and identified as a symbol of a sacred being in relation to the values it represents, and a ritual of behavior toward the flag develops. Ögüt Eker (1998, pp. 165–67) notes that the concept of the flag has many connotations for Turks, and since the flag is not only a symbol of independence and honor but also has the ability to bring people together and unite them; the flag is used in wedding ceremonies to symbolize these feelings. The tradition of hanging the flag in the wedding house is a manifestation of the spiritual and national function of the marriage, in addition to its function of bringing together, uniting, and merging. The wedding flag may be a flag with the star and crescent, ornamented with apples, chicken feathers, and onions to the top, as well as decorated tree branches called *shah*, *nahl*, boxwood, rake (*gelbere*), and *yom*” (tree poles decorated with tulle, cloth, and various items)². In this context, the flag is a symbolic sign (Bozyiğit 1987, p. 71). In addition, in the wedding traditions of Karatepe, another symbolic value is attributed to the wedding flag. After the nuptial night, the groom takes apart the flag and fires a shot if he finds the girl as he wishes (as a virgin). If the opposite is the case, the shot is not fired, the flag is not taken apart and the families fall from grace. This is a symbolic sign of sadness (Bozyiğit 1987, p. 80). From the examples, it is clear that the flag has a wide range of meanings in Turkish weddings. The meaning attributed to the flag with different colors, shapes, and symbols reflects the characteristics of the culture.

7. Rituals and Practices before the Bridal Pick-Up

There are various rituals and practices that are performed until the bride is led out of her father’s house and gets into the bridal car. In the old Turkish tradition, the groom goes to his father-in-law’s house with his friends. They sing the traditional refrain “*Hay, hay ü leng, hay ü leng*³” and the bride’s father offers guest bread to the bride’s buyers according to tradition. Then, the father puts a hand-painted kerchief around the groom’s neck and hands

over his daughter into the hands of his son-in-law after the traditional ceremony. Since the hand-painted kerchief becomes a symbolic ritual, according to Gökalp and Grenard, paternal custody passes to the groom thanks to the hand-painted kerchief. After these practices, a large cup of salt water is brought. The parents of the young woman and the young man soak a piece of bread in this water and present it to the fiancé. After that, the woman can leave her father's house (Gökalp 1976, p. 311).

In Turkish folk culture, the tradition of preparing the bride and groom is common in Anatolia. The tradition of bridal bath and groom's bath, which does not occur in contemporary practice, went beyond a physiological need for cleansing and fulfilled functions such as religious belief and entertainment. The cost of the bath and the entertainment of the guests was borne by the boy's house. The bathing procession was entertained with music, singing, and folk songs. Although the main function was to purify the material and spiritual sense, the function of having fun, entertaining, and enjoying oneself accompanied by the *mani* (a form of Turkish folk song) and folk songs sung here was realized, and the groom was equipped and returned to the boy's house (Öğüt Eker 1998, pp. 158–61). The bath is also a symbol of the material and spiritual purification in ancient Turkish wedding traditions. Today, it can be partially said that this tradition has been replaced by shaving the groom and taking the bride to the barber or bachelor practices, depending on the place and concept of entertainment. In Gaziantep, the groom is dressed by one of the single young people by singing *mani*. In Siirt and Mardin provinces, there is the tradition of tree decorating, in which the groom shaves under a tree taken from the forest and planted in the area where the wedding is to take place, which is then decorated by the groom's friends. In the Muğla province, the groom is shaved first, then the groom is punched, and henna is burned on one hand. In the Kutahya province, the bride's side sends the groom's clothes (the groom's wedding suit) in a bundle, and after the boy's side receives the bundle, the groom is dressed under the prayers of the imam. In Anatolia, these ceremonies are called dressing or outfitting the groom (originally *güveyi giydirme*, *güveyi kondurma*, *güveyi donatma*) (Kabay 2022, p. 788).

Before the bride arrives at the boy's house, the boy's relatives send a mirror and the Holy Qur'an to the boy's house, and the girl's house tips the person who brings the Holy Qur'an (Altun 2004, p. 287). In the Çal district of the Denizli province, henna is applied on the palms of the groom and his groomsman before the wedding ceremony. They also dye the soles of their shoes with henna and the relatives who see this give money to the groom (Kabay 2022, p. 789). Among the Kocaeli/Kandıra Turkmen, the bride is fed eggs before she leaves her father's house, and eggs are laid beside her in the belief that she will lay eggs and have children. A chicken is sacrificed at the girl's feet⁴, and the blood of the sacrifice is spread on the doorstep (Altun 2004, p. 294). The blood of the sacrifice on the threshold can be thought of as a bloody sacrifice offered to the "demonic creatures of the threshold". Eggs as a symbol of the resurrection of man and nature, of productivity and renewal, appear in rituals and ritual practices in many societies (Kalın 2005, p. 17). One of the customs related to the egg takes place in the Gaziantep region between the wedding procession and the young men from the bride's village. When the wedding processional is on its way to pick up the bride, the young men who cut the path receive a tip in exchange for the egg, because it is believed that breaking the egg will bring bad luck, and the egg that the young men receive in exchange for the tip is given to the bride along with the prayers "May the bride be fruitful" (Köksal 1996, p. 77).

The cars of the wedding convoy are decorated in advance; towels, ribbons, or prayer rugs are attached to the side mirrors of the cars that are not the bride's car. In the past, the wedding convoy consisted of horses, camels, donkeys, sedan-chairs, and horse-drawn carriages; today, they are usually automobiles. However, the horse, camel, sedan chair, or car on which the bride rides has always been elaborately decorated and the most spectacular mount of the wedding procession/convoy. The initial letters of the bride and groom's names are written on a specially prepared heart-shaped base, and the bridal car can be decorated with ribbons, flowers, tulle, various ornaments, and general lettering such as

“Just Married”/“We are Happy” as well as lettering based on the couple’s special wishes. On the day of the bridal pick-up, the girl is prepared in her father’s house. In the afternoon, the women come to the girl’s house from the boy’s side and can enter the bride’s house only if they give the required tip. The mother-in-law enters first and recites surah al-Fatiha one time and surah al-Ikhlâs three times to the bride. After this ritual, the bride is subjected to an examination named “*yargınlaşma*”, first with her mother-in-law and then with her sisters-in-law, if any, to ensure that she is dignified and worthy after marriage. If the bride strongly presses the mother-in-law during the examination, it is considered disrespectful, as it means that she does not recognize her authority (Büyükokutan Töret 2013, p. 40). In the context of the global consumer culture, the heart symbol on wedding cars is merging with traditional symbols. Symbols and rituals within Anatolian wedding traditions are significant reflections of the cultural values and social norms interacting with the global consumer culture. Anatolian wedding traditions serve as the important reflections of the local cultural values and social norms. The “bridal pick up” ritual is considered a significant part of these traditions and is often performed as a central ritual of the wedding ceremony.

Before the bride leaves her father’s house, her brother, if any, or her father or uncle, if necessary, ties a red bridal sash around her waist. This bridal sash, also called the “sash of effort”, is a symbol of “having full control of one’s hand, tongue and belly (loins)” (Ataman 1992, p. 35). In Turkish culture, this bridal sash tied around the bride’s waist symbolizes the emblematic belief that the bride will bring wealth, happiness, and blessings to her destination, that she will be hardworking, powerful, and fertile, while today it is said that the perception of virginity is generally emphasized (Aça 2015, p. 79; Çakır 2022, p. 145). In Sivas, the bridal sash tied around the bride by her brother signifies that the departing bride has never been married. In Kayseri, the bride’s father ties a white *yashmak* (a Turkish and Turkmen type of veil) around his daughter’s waist as a symbol of virginity (Yeşil 2012, p. 210). The fact that the word “belly” in the Dictionary of Colloquial Compilation in Turkey means “seed, sperm” (Türkiye’de Halk Ağzından Derleme Sözlüğü 2009a, p. 605) can be seen as an indicator that the metaphorical language of the cultural memory becomes symbolic, as tying the sash around the bride’s waist is seen as a blessing for the continuation of the child’s generation. The person tying the sash ties it closed and unties three times or pretends to tie it twice and ties it the third time. During the ritual of tying the sash, in the Sunni tradition, surah al-Fatiha is recited one time and surah al-Ikhlâs is recited three times, and *salawat* (an Islamic complimentary Arabic phrase which contains Veneration for Muhammad) and prayers are said (Büyükokutan Töret 2013, p. 40). In the Alevi tradition, the bridal sash is tied with the words “Ya Allah, Ya Muhammed, Ya Ali⁵”, and the Alevi *dede* (a socio-religious figure in the Islamic Alevi community) says prayers and gives advice (Taş 2008, p. 60). In the Turkish Cypriot tradition, the sash of effort also symbolizes the couple’s commitment to each other in marriage. The tying and untying of the sash three times is interpreted as a message from the father to his daughter, saying, “Even if I bind you to marriage, the decision is still yours, you can give up even now if you want to” (Yeşil 2012, p. 210). In Anatolia, there is also direct advice from the father to his daughter-in-law⁶. After this ritual, the person who ties the red bridal sash around the bride’s waist covers her veil. Şimşek (2017, p. 106) explains that tying a red bridal sash around the bride’s waist and covering her head with a red bridal veil is preferred to protect the bride from the evil eye and evil because red is a symbol of power and protection in Turkish culture. The red bridal veil is also a symbol of blessing, and tying a red bridal sash around the bride’s waist symbolizes the sovereignty of the house (Ergun 2010, p. 278). In Nevşehir/Urgup, a red sequined veil called “*kıvrak*” was draped over the veil in the past for “keeping the bride away from getting puerperal fever” (Er 1997, p. 200). According to Erdentuğ, the rituals and ceremonies associated with marriage are based on fear and protection. It is believed that invisible creatures frighten the spouses on the occasion of the wedding during the transition period and that the bride is protected from the evil eye thanks to her bridal veil (Erdentuğ 1970, p. 253).

In some parts of Anatolia, the solemnization of the marriage ceremony is a religious ritual performed without informing anyone other than the witnesses of the two parties after the bride has left the bride's house or after the bride has entered the groom's house and confirmed the marriage. The purpose of the secrecy is to hide the solemnization of the marriage from evil people in case of jealousy, enmity, bondage, or bewitchment of the groom (Köksal 1996, p. 76). When the bride gets on the bridal car, she is covered with a carpet, blanket, or sacking to prevent the bride from being seen from the outside. This ritual is performed to protect the bride from the evil eye and evil spirits. Covering the bride using materials such as curtains or sheets to prevent her from being seen as she enters and exits is considered the mythological journey of the bride and symbolizes the prevention of the bride's return by preventing her from seeing the way she came. Although the mythological dimension of this custom has disappeared, it lives on in the Turkish world in the form of rituals (Ergun 2010, p. 278). The custom of hiding the bride is also seen in other Turkish communities.

8. Rituals and Practices Applied during Bridal Pick-Up

In all parts of Turkey, certain rituals and practices are performed at the time of the marriage, which are supposed to bring good luck, an abundance of children, happiness, and protection, among other things. Throughout history, bridal pick-up and getting married has not been easy. In the Göktürk script, another meaning of the word "girl" is "expensive". These expressions for the payment of dowry (tocher) are actually an effort and sacrifice, and this is also considered a legitimization of the marriage (Ögel 1988, p. 261).

When the bride leaves her father's house and gets on the bridal car, cold sherbet is served to the guests in the wedding processional and in the girl's house. The sweetness/coldness symbolized by the sherbet is a separation ritual for the bride to leave her home, get used to her husband's house—her new home—faster, and feel estranged from her father's house that she left behind. Before the bride leaves her mother's house, she is given bread, salt, sugar, plates, cups, and spoons so that she gets her share and goes, does not cause trouble in her husband's house by trusting her father's house, gives up hope for her father's house and gets used to her husband's house in a short time, and accepts it as her own house (Öğüt Eker 1998, p. 348). The bride is a stranger in her new family and home, where she is likely to experience uncertainty and unfamiliarity (chaos) because she has left the order to which she belongs (her father's house). To ensure a healthy, peaceful, and happy transition to a new life and to ease the adjustment, rituals take place around the bride. One of these rituals is the tradition of scattering, one of the examples of bloodless sacrifice in Anatolian Turkish weddings, which can be observed at every stage of the bridal ritual.

Scattering is a traditional custom symbolized in the cultural memory by various objects during the bridal pick-up and the bridal drop-off to bring blessings such as fertility, protection, happiness, constancy, and health. The abundance of wheat among the scattering objects is meant to indicate the easy accessibility of wheat in Anatolian Turkish society as well as the importance of wheat in people's lives and its ritual representation of fertility in important representations. For this reason, it can be assumed that in marriage rituals, the fertility of wheat is to be transferred to the new union. For this purpose, wheat, corn, hemp seeds, rice, barley, etc. are sprinkled on the bride's head, and the bride is welcomed with baked goods (cakes, bread, cereals, etc.) made of these materials or crumbled on the bride's head; these are different practices that feed the rites. The elements applied to the bride in these rituals symbolize the "descendants" related to the seed-lineage generation, as well as fertility since they are applied in the belief of bringing "abundance and prosperity" (Erdentuğ 1970, p. 243). Sprinkling money on the bride's head is also done to ensure abundance and prosperity, and in addition to being sprinkled as a scattering, money is also placed in the shoes of the bride and groom (Koşay 1944, p. 257; Yeşil 2012, p. 226). The purpose of this custom is to wish for abundance, fertility, and wealth, and it is also

considered a means of protection from the evil eye. According to Erdentuğ (1970, p. 255), this ritual is a belief based on sympathetic magic acquired later.

9. Rituals and Practices Applied to Bridal Drop-Off and Afterwards

Although the moment when the bride is taken to the groom's family house and the time after are considered a small period within the marriage customs, it is clear that many rituals and practices are performed in this section when the bride enters her new home. Throughout Türkiye, the practices of "bridal drop-off" during this period show great similarities within the traditional structure. The bride is taken from her father's house with a special ceremony, brought to the groom's house with a special ceremony, and the bridal drop-off (horse, vehicle, etc.) is an important ceremony in all Turkish provinces. The gifts (such as vineyards, gardens, heifers, cows, money, gold, etc.) given to the bride by the groom's house (groom's mother, father, uncle, etc.) when she enters the groom's house are called "*indirmelik*" in Anatolia. The three rituals "*Saçı*", "sacrifice", and "threshold" in the traditions of the bride's entry have different meanings and functions in themselves (Türkiye'de Halk Ağzından Derleme Sözlüğü 2009b, p. 2541). The archaic traces of "*saçı*" go back to shamanism and appear as different practices in the wedding ceremonies of Muslim Turks (Köksal 1996, p. 75). Among the Yuruks in the Taurus Mountains, when the bride arrives at her new home, the groom watches the wedding procession from a high place in the boy's house with the groomsman, and the groom sprinkles the bride's head with water before the bride drops off in front of the house (Yalman (Yalgın) 1977, p. 264). The sacrifice is also called "fortune sacrifice" in Anatolia (Ögel 1988, p. 267). In Diyarbakır province, after taking the "*indirmelik*" the bride jumps over the sacrifice and passes under the Holy Qur'an held by a young girl (Aksu 1997, p. 76). In Kocaeli province, the mother-in-law holds the Holy Qur'an at the threshold when the bride enters the house, and the bride enters her husband's house under the Holy Qur'an. This custom is practiced with the aim and concern that the marriage will be holy, auspicious, and blessed (Altun 2004, p. 287).

In the context of social bonding rituals, rites associated with thresholds and doors are notably intriguing. These rituals are practiced either forcibly or with the consent of the inhabitants within (van Gennep 2022, p. 157). Among the Turks, the threshold is sacred, and in Turkish culture carpets or cloths are laid out to prevent the bride from stepping on the threshold (Ögel 1988, p. 267). The sacred belief in "crossing the threshold without stepping" is based on the belief that supernatural creatures, the "guardians" of the house, stand at the threshold (Boratav 1984, p. 112). Since the threshold of the house is a kind of "taboo" to the bride, she does not step on it (Şişman 2017, p. 58) because it is believed that this might otherwise cause harm. Before the bride's foot touches the threshold, they lead her into the house and take her to the fire that is burning in the house. In this way, the fairy of the bride is introduced to the fairy of the groom (Gökalp 1976, p. 312). It is believed that the present custom of carrying the bride across the threshold on the groom's lap has its origin in this belief. However, the bride usually enters the house by reciting "Bismillah" and placing her right foot over the threshold first (Gürbüz 2015, p. 55). Similar rituals also exist in Anatolian provinces such as Ankara, Kırıkkale, and Yozgat (Yeşil 2012, pp. 223–30). Since the threshold is considered the gate of truth (*Hak Kapısı*), the bride says prayers and supplications at the threshold.

In the Bandırma district of the Balıkesir province, the mother-in-law and father-in-law wrestle with each other after the bride arrives at her new home. In this traditional behavior, which is actually a symbolic sign of establishing superiority, the mother-in-law wrestles on behalf of the bride and the father-in-law wrestles on behalf of the groom, and it is believed that whoever wins the fight has authority in the house (Kabay 2022, p. 790). Among the mother-in-law's practices to prove her superiority over the bride is breaking a pitcher of water in front of the bride, with the idea that the bride should obey her and not disobey her. When the bride enters the house, she passes under the arms of the mother-in-law, which is a sign of the status that the mother-in-law is trying to gain from the first day. The

mother-in-law spits in the sherbet which the bride will drink or bites into half of a candy or Turkish delight and make the bride stuff down the rest to make the bride follow her advice and love and respect her in her new home (Büyükokutan Töret 2013, pp. 42–43). The bride and mother-in-law put a fingerful of honey in each other's mouths to sweeten their tongues. Before the bride enters the house, a sheepskin with a gemstone underneath is placed in front of the door (threshold). According to the belief, the sheepskin is a ritual to make the bride docile like a sheep, while the gemstone is a ritual to prevent her from becoming a rebellious and defiant person (Aksu 1997, p. 76). Altunsu Sönmez (2019, p. 1160) argues that the origin of the bride and mother-in-law's conflict lies in the inability of women to share the position assigned to them in the patriarchal family structure; however, it would be incomplete to consider this situation as simple jealousy because although the object of the conflict seems to be the man, the real reason is the power acquired by the man in patriarchal societies.

To put the bride to the test, a broom and rolling pin are placed in the bride's path. If the bride is a neat and tidy person, she will not ignore them but will move them out of the way and set them aside. In another ritual, a rolling pin is used to determine the gender. After the bride arrives, a knife and a rolling pin are placed in front of the door, and the gender of the first child is predicted according to the bride's preference. If the knife is preferred, it is assumed that it is a boy; if the rolling pin is preferred, it is assumed that it is a girl (Büyükokutan Töret 2013, p. 43). In the Diyarbakır province, after the bride is dropped off, her strength is tested with a jug that is broken at the threshold; if the bride fails to break the jug, she is considered "a weak bride"; if she breaks the jug, she is considered "a strong bride" (Aksu 1997, p. 76).

The bride is given oil and honey when she enters the door and is asked to rub the door with it three times. After this ritual, the bride's right hand is put into a flour sack in the hope that it will be fruitful, and then she is given a rolling pin (Büyükokutan Töret 2013, p. 42). This introduces the bride, the new member of the new house, to the *körmös*, demonic creature of the threshold. Oil and honey are bloodless sacrifices made to the demonic creature of the threshold. The practices associated with the rolling pin given to the bride symbolize the tree cult and the tree of life (Ergun 2010, p. 278). It is believed that the hand of the bride is fertile and auspicious. After the bride's arrival, she is placed in the hall, her right hand and foot are washed, and then the water in the basin is poured into the cellar, believing that it will bring prosperity (Aksu 1997, p. 76). Putting the bride's hand in the flour sack reflects this fertility belief, which has evolved into a ritual with the belief of more prosperity. In Erzurum and Erzincan provinces, the groom and the groomsman wait on the roof until the bride is brought. When the bride arrives in front of the house, the groom throws prepared apples on the bride's head, and if the apples hit her, it is said to bring good luck (Köksal 1996, p. 78). In southern Azerbaijan and Kirkuk, a similar ritual is performed with apples or oranges (Tokatlı 1994, p. 34). In Turkish folklore, the apple is a symbol of procreation (offspring), abundance, fertility, and healing (Altun 2008, p. 263). In Safranbolu, the apples are thrown by the bride as a scattering (*saçıtı*) element, and the guests holding the apples sell them to the groom. It is believed that these apples strengthen the love between the bride and groom and provide fertility and happiness (Şimşek 1996, p. 213).

After the bride's arrival, the groom and the groomsman shake hands with the guests one by one; the guests give money to the groom and congratulate him. The groomsman and the groom's friends leave the boy's house with the groom and stay at the groomsman's house or a relative's house until the Isha prayer. To protect the groom from the evil eye, the groomsman keeps the groom away from the place until the nuptial night following the bride's drop-off. However, in some parts of Anatolia (as seen in the example of the village of Gozyaka in Aydın province), there are traditional practices in which the groom is forced to do so by his friends after the bridal pick-up, and the groom is subjected to various difficulties and entertained (Abalı 2018, p. 114). For the bride and groom, the central figures

of the Turkish weddings, functions such as having fun, entertaining, protecting, supporting traditions and ceremonies, keeping the culture alive, and passing it on are paramount.

10. Religious and Cultural Interactions in Marriage Rituals in Anatolian Culture

In all divine religions, marriage is considered the sole legitimate relationship that ensures the continuity of the human race by establishing the private spheres of both women and men. The wedding ceremonies of marrying couples have profound historical origins in the annals of the human history. Despite showing various details in different cultures and geographies, celebrations generally tend to be oriented towards entertainment and faith.

In Islamic law, there are no specific requirements for a special ceremony or particular festivities regarding the marriage contract. Marriage holds paramount importance as a social and religious event within Muslim Turkish communities, thus warranting a celebration that amalgamates both Islamic and traditional elements. Islam places importance on family structure and societal solidarity, hence seeking societal support in marriages. Marriage customs and ceremonies serve as the tangible examples of the societal support through their broad and inclusive invitations. In Islamic law, the official marriage is established through the contract of the marriage (nikah). Islamic marriage, conducted in the presence of witnesses, is established through the free consent of both the man and woman, alongside the declaration and acceptance of the mehir, which serves as a protection for the woman. In Islamic law, mehir is considered a right that should be given to the woman. Ayat and prayers from the Qur'an may be recited during the marriage ceremony.

The Quran commands support for individuals who have reached the age of marriage and desire to marry. "Marry those among you who are single (whether men or women) and those of your male and female slaves that are righteous (and fit for marriage). If they are poor, God will grant them sufficiency out of His bounty. God is All-Embracing in His mercy".⁷ (The Qur'an, An-Nûr, 24:32). Slavery and concubinage in Anatolia were prohibited by the laws of the Republic of Turkey. Due to the influence of patriarchal traditions, in Turkish societies, it is expected that young individuals of marriageable age seek permission and approval, particularly from their fathers, before marriage. The Quranic verses encouraging marriage do not solely address guardians; even slaves and female slaves cannot marry without their owners' permission. Individuals facing financial hardship within society may lack the opportunity to marry due to their poverty. Allah emphasizes aiding the impoverished individuals who desire to marry by reminding His servants of these truths.

Islam has influenced the legal system and traditions of Turkish communities, integrating Islamic law (Sharia) with some local legal systems. Furthermore, under the influence of Islam, social and moral norms among Turks have also undergone change. However, the Republic of Turkey specifies in its constitution that it has a secular legal framework. Therefore, marriages conducted according to Islamic law or polygamous marriages do not hold legal validity in terms of the state's legal regulations. Turkish traditions have historically advocated monogamy both before and after Islam. In pre-Islamic Arab culture, polygamy was often regarded as a symbol representing wealth and social status. However, the practice of polygamy is restricted to a maximum of four wives as stated in the third verse of Surah An-Nisa in the Quran. In Anatolia, marriages involving multiple women can be explained not only by religious rules but often by the influence of the local culture stemming from social and cultural conditions.

The issue of marrying multiple women in Islam is based on the following verse clearly stated in the Quran. "If you fear that you will not be able to observe their rights with exact fairness when you marry the orphan girls (in your custody), you can marry, from among other women (who are permitted to you in marriage and) who seem good to you, two, or three, or four. However, if you fear that (in your marital obligations) you will not be able to observe justice among them, then content yourselves with only one, or the captives that your right hands possess. Doing so, it is more likely that you will not act rebelliously". (The Qur'an, An-Nisa, 4:3). This rule specifies the permissibility of marrying multiple women

but emphasizes the conditions of justice, consent, and societal rationale, among others, to be fulfilled. Although not widespread, the tradition of marrying multiple women based on Quranic verses has been practiced among the Turks. However, the laws of the Republic of Turkey prohibit marriage with multiple spouses today.

In traditional marriages, the preferences of young individuals regarding marriage are determined through arranged marriages. The Islamic faith allows and approves of such traditional practices. However, Islam emphasizes the consent and free will of women in marriage, hence the significance of a woman's decision to marry. Hence, the Islamic faith encourages the marriage process to occur with mutual consent and harmony. In Anatolian society, when it comes to choosing a spouse, it is generally understood to imply the man choosing the woman. According to Islam, the criteria regarding marriage and the selection of a spouse (woman to be married) are outlined in the hadith as follows: "Women are married (preferred) for these four qualities: wealth, lineage, beauty, and religious commitment. (O believer,) Choose the one who is devout, (otherwise) you may fall into poverty". (el-Aynî n.d., pp. 86–87).

The decision to marry marks a significant milestone in the lives of both a woman and a man. This decision is typically celebrated through wedding ceremonies, publicly announcing it to society. The statement of the Prophet Muhammad "Announce the marriage and celebrate it with the sound of the tambourine" (Ibn Mâce 1992, p. 611, no: 1895) signifies the public announcement of the marriage. The jubilant celebration of weddings with festivity and merriment demonstrates its religious appropriateness (Yaran 1994, p. 15). In the Islamic faith, it is observed that wedding celebrations conducted within legitimate boundaries have shaped and influenced the wedding traditions in Anatolia.

In Anatolia, in accordance with religious traditions, weddings have not exceeded a duration of two days. The Anatolian wedding, commencing after the Friday prayer, concludes at the latest on Sunday afternoon with the arrival of the bride. During this period, festivities are organized for two days, accompanied by feasts. Average two-day wedding ceremonies are based on the saying of the Prophet Muhammad: "The meal of the first day is a rightful celebration, the meal of the second day is a tradition, and the meal of the third day is a display of extravagance. Whoever displays extravagance, God will expose them (on the Day of Judgment)". (Ibn Mâce 1992, p. 617, no: 1915).

The Prophet Muhammad advised his companions, "Even if it is by slaughtering a sheep, hold a wedding feast". (el-Buhârî 1992, p. 139). The form of the wedding feast may vary depending on the financial situation and generosity of the marrying parties. It is crucial for the offerings and organized events at weddings to align with Islamic principles. In today's traditional Anatolian weddings, adherence to Islamic rules is generally observed, with readings from the Qur'an and the recitations of religious hymns (mawlid).

11. Conclusions

Ritual marriage bridal pick-up practices are significant indicators reflecting a society's cultural identity and values. These practices express the deep-rooted beliefs and concepts of the marriage and family within the society. Particularly, the bridal pick-up ritual is a meticulously planned and carefully executed step in many cultures.

Bridal pick-up practices are significant indicators of identity formation, reflecting specific societal roles, gender norms, and family relationships. For example, the details and traditions of the bridal pick-up can reflect a society's approach to gender roles and family structure. These practices often emphasize male dominance and the patriarchal structure of the family, particularly in patriarchal societies based on the authority of the father. Additionally, the bridal pick-up ritual is often used as a symbol of the social status and wealth. For instance, in some societies, bridal pick-up ceremonies are elaborately organized to showcase the family's social and economic status. The traditional attire, jewelry, and other symbols used in these ceremonies emphasize the family's social position and prestige.

Moreover, bridal pick-up practices are also valuable as a part of the transmission of the cultural heritage and traditions from generation to generation. These rituals demonstrate a profound commitment to a society's past, cultural values, and beliefs. The traditional songs, dances, and other rituals used in bridal pick-up ceremonies serve as the expressions of the society's identity and unity.

In conclusion, ritual marriage bridal pick-up practices are significant indicators reflecting a society's cultural identity and values. These practices are valuable not only for highlighting societal roles, gender norms, family relationships, and social status but also as a part of the transmission of the cultural heritage and traditions from generation to generation.

Among the Anatolian Turks, there are a variety of beliefs, practices, rituals, and traditions related to the bridal pick-up. Many of these practices are based on shamanic elements and traditional Turkish beliefs. It can be seen that the customs and ceremonies of bridal pick-up/bride migration (*gelin göçü*) that take place in Anatolia as part of the marriage process, which is an important phase of human life, have great similarities except for minor differences. The fact that the bride and groom are at the center of the bridal pick-up traditions, which we examined from the ritual structure of Turkish weddings, and that the bride plays a greater role among them can be viewed from two perspectives. First, in the Turkish family structure, women have had an important status since historical times, and the bride's adaptation is, therefore, ensured by religious-magical rituals, so that she gets used to her new home and has no problems adapting to her husband's house after her father's house. Secondly, in the Turkish family structure, the wife is also a central figure beside her husband and is considered the "head of the household".

In Anatolian Turkish wedding traditions, it would be insufficient from a cultural analysis point of view to consider the ritual of bridal pick-up/bridal migration as an individual behavior in which two young people unite their lives in order to marry and start a family. Although the bride or groom is at the center of the rituals, as an individual within the phenomenon of event and time, which we have limited in our article, building and strengthening the kinship relations between the bride and groom and consolidating their relations are also one of the most intense phases, involving social rituals to protect the family from demonic creatures and to allow friends, relatives, and neighbors to share in the happiness of the families. However, today's wedding ceremonies, which take place in a limited time and space and with a limited number of guests, are socially incomplete compared to traditional ceremonies and rituals in which everyone participates. The change in the structure of traditional weddings, which last three to four days, is striking, especially in city centers where urban life predominates. In the solemnization of the marriage and wedding ceremonies held together in wedding halls, there is a decline, forgetting, and non-execution of the rituals of bridal pick-up due to the effects of place, participants, and time. Although traditional weddings are preferred in villages, cities, and provinces where traditional life persists, traditions that are not practiced in popular culture lose their vitality and are forgotten over time because they cannot be passed on to younger generations.

Among the main reasons for the change in rituals are factors such as mass media, education, tourism, and migration, and these changes lead to the emergence of some new syntheses. The structure and content of the wedding ceremonies and celebrations are social texts practiced as oral ceremonial texts. Weddings enable the realization of the social, religious, and cultural expectations. However, in a globalizing world, the power of mass communication and social media has a major impact on people's choices and behaviors. Rituals, therefore, may change over time, or the essence of the practices may be forgotten over time and become a consumer ritual. The social and cultural values also have their share in the rapid development and changes of our time. While many traditional practices and rituals have disappeared, some of the traditions that have not have survived with some changes in their structure and function (i.e., carrying the bride across the threshold by embracing her). However, there are also rituals that have persisted for centuries with the

same structure and function (the fertility/chastity belt), while new traditions have emerged more recently, such as the bachelor/ bachelorette parties.

It can be said that the changes and transformations related to the structure, framework, and organization of a wedding are influenced by the contemporary norms and the administrations of living spaces and urbanization, and that mass media promote personal and social changes. However, it can also be assumed that in TV series and films in the media, wedding rituals have been unified in their structure (brought to the same form and quality) and that diversity has been reduced and led to uniformity. In recent years, it can be said that migration, urbanization, and marriages with foreigners have influenced Anatolian Turkish wedding practices. In Anatolia, during the times when the agricultural society was predominant, the autumn time was preferred as the wedding time, but today the wedding time is influenced by processes such as the working time, economic status, and the educational level of the couples to be married. Although the wedding season usually continues in the fall, the end of the harvest season in rural areas, weddings in urban life can occur twelve months out of the year. It is in the nature of culture that folkloric elements, variable because of their dynamic structure, are always appearing or disappearing. However, what is important is that we can determine how and why these changes, forgetting, and appropriation take place, which gives us the opportunity to know the society better.

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Notes

- ¹ The origin and initial usage of the term “toy” have not been definitively determined. This term was originally used in the sense of “state assembly, council, assembly” as a derivation from the religious ceremony, “toy”. However, over time, it evolved to mean “feast, banquet, festive meal, wedding” and similar contexts (Duymaz 2005, p. 39). In Turkish written languages and dialects, especially in Turkish spoken in Turkey, the word “toy” is commonly used to mean “wedding, festival, feast”. In Azerbaijani Turkish, however, “toy” refers to meanings such as “wedding ceremony, celebration, joyous gathering”. Toy, in Turkmen, refers to a grand feast, celebration, or event marked by lavish festivities held in honor of someone or something. In Kyrgyz, the term “toy” is used to refer to a feast, celebration, wedding banquet, or festival. In Kazakh, the term “toy” signifies meanings such as festival, feast, banquet, or wedding. In New Uyghur, the word “toy” means “wedding”, while in Sakha (Yakut), “toy” signifies meanings such as feast, banquet, celebration, or wedding ceremony. In Altai, the term “toy” denotes meanings such as festival, wedding, or wedding feast. In Karaim, the term “toy” is used to mean “wedding” or “feast”, while in Uzbek, it signifies “entertainment” or “festivity” (Özakdağ 2018, p. 129). In the article, the term “toy” has been used to refer to meanings such as wedding, wedding feast, and marriage ceremony.
- ² In Anatolia, one can encounter various forms of wedding flags. In almost all Turkmen villages, it is customary to hang a flag at weddings, which is hung over the door of the boy’s house. This flag is known for having its own characteristics (Koşay 1944, p. 86; Yalman (Yalgın) 1977, p. 80).
- ³ Today it is estimated that it is a national refrain, the meaning of which is unknown (Gökalp 1976, p. 311).
- ⁴ In Anatolia, it is a matter of pride to honorably marry the girl off, and it is a common custom to make a sacrifice in thanks.

- ⁵ The expression “Ya Allah, Ya Muhammed, Ya Ali” is a commonly used religious phrase in the folk beliefs of Anatolia. This expression is considered a reflection of Islamic belief and includes prayers to Allah, the Prophet Muhammad, and Ali. Ali, the cousin, son-in-law, and one of the first caliphs of the Islamic Prophet Muhammad, holds special importance for Alevi Muslims. The phrase “Ya Ali” signifies prayers, intercession requests, and requests for assistance directed towards Ali. This expression is commonly used in religious rituals, prayers, and remembrances. Among Sunni Muslims in Anatolia, there is not a significant cult or tradition of prayer directed towards Ali. However, the importance of Ali in Islamic history and his religious values are also respected by Sunni Muslims.
- ⁶ While the bridal sash is being tied with prayers, the bride’s father wishes his daughter well and gives her the following advice: “Get along well with your mother-in-law and father-in-law. Be happy where you are. Obey them. Get used to it. It is your home. You go in your wedding dress and come back in your shroud” (Er 1997, p. 200).
- ⁷ “This is not a compulsory order, as marriage depends on the choice of an individual. However, if a person wants to marry but cannot afford it, those responsible for them among their relatives or, in case of their being without relatives, the state should arrange their marriage” (Ünal 2006, p. 688).

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Article

Promoting Peace through Christian Education in the Family

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Abstract: Peace has always been a topic of great importance and the origins of thinking about peace and education for peace can be traced back to ancient philosophy. In the 21st century, the presence of peace has been desired by all nations, societies and people of goodwill, especially due to so many international conflicts and wars (the dramatic situation in the Middle East, Sub-Saharan Africa and Ukraine). Historical and socio-cultural developments concerning peace and violence urge pedagogues, psychologists, sociologists and theologians to seek the foundations of education that promote peace. Taking into consideration the given context and importance of peace, this article will reflect on the issue of Christian education for peace, especially in the family environment. Educators dealing with the issue of peace education refer to various inspirations and sources of knowledge. As this article is written from the perspective of the Christian understanding of peace, the authors will first refer to the teaching of Pope John Paul II as a strong promotor of peace. Papal documents and speeches consequently present that peace has its roots in the upbringing of human beings; therefore, in the next part of this article, Christianity serving the good of the family, the assumptions of Christian education towards peace in the family and practical indications will be shown.

Keywords: Christianity; peace; education; the family



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1. Introduction

The origins of thinking about peace and education for peace can be traced back to ancient philosophy and Christian theology, which undertook studies on the causes of international conflicts and wars, and the conditions that must be met in order for the world to become a peaceful place. In the present society, there exists a strong contrast between a “desire” for peace and an offered vision to ensure that peace can be given through various theoretical and practical means. These efforts for peace prove to be rather ineffective because the methods used are counterproductive or irrelevant. Obviously, the need for peace should be emphasised, but with the indication for efficient and responsible actions in order to acquire peace. Unfortunately, some concepts of peace are the source of confusion and mystification.

In this light, a proper understanding of peace is of great importance, as well as an ability to encourage a dialogue for peace and indicate principles upon which peace can be created. These are some fundamental ideas that, if not taken seriously, can jeopardise the promotion and maintenance of peace. This also depends upon the readiness and openness of the educational setting to undertake not only the actions but also the long-standing process of building peace. The purpose of this article is to promote peace through Christian education in the family and present the specificity of education towards peace within the family based on discovering the truth about a human being as a worthy, free and responsible being, in need of an upbringing. An attempt to answer the following questions will help in achieving the assumed goals: What is the essence of John Paul’s teaching on peace? What makes peace contradict itself and what does its falsification lead to? Do ongoing conflicts and wars pose a challenge to Christian and especially to Catholic educators? Has Catholic

family education genuinely contributed to global peace promotion? What conditions must be taken into account for family education in order to promote peace? What assumptions of education for peace are given by experts from Central and Eastern Europe? Taking into consideration the given context and the importance of peace, this article will reflect upon the issue of education for peace, especially within the family environment. Educators dealing with the issue of peace education refer to various inspirations and sources of knowledge. As this article is written from the perspective of the Catholic understanding of peace, the authors will first refer to the teaching of Pope John Paul II as a strong promotor of peace. This point of departure emphasises the legitimacy of treating peace as an issue that goes beyond immediate political, economic and social solutions and obliges one to seek ways of consolidating and wisely promoting peace, including through education and upbringing. The theoretical exploration of education for peace in the family requires theological, psychological and pedagogical analyses. The authors will use the method of critical source analysis to answer the research questions.

2. The Essence of Peace in the Teaching of John Paul II

In Central and Eastern Europe, many families, schools, educational organisations and parishes still try to offer a setting that nurtures children and young people to acquire a deeper and stronger understanding of peace and promote a peaceful culture together in strong connection with other values. The education for peace begins in the family—in the choices the family makes, in the way it responds to challenges, to conflicts, to joys and sorrows, and in the way it lives everyday life. For parents to adequately teach their children how to avoid conflicts, violence and aggression it is necessary to make them aware of all that denies and compromises peace (Osewska et al. 2019). On the contrary, as supporters of peace, they ought to take upon themselves the task of being “peacemakers”, raising their children to peaceful coexistence with other people, starting from family members and neighbours, then moving out to broader communities, promoting attitudes of dialogue, love and peace.

Since his election in 1978, the Pope from Krakow has been a strong supporter of peace and education for peace. His reflection on peace, based first of all on the dignity of the human person, can be found in his actions, which started in Krakow during the Second World War and during communism imposed on Poland (e.g., the Krakow Memorial prepared together with lay experts), and later in his teaching based on this experience, but especially in annual messages for World Day of Peace. The Pope’s commitment to the process of creating peace strongly affected the matters of the nations and peoples, especially the faithful from the Roman Catholic Church. Transcendental and earthly aspects of the value of peace make the Slavic Pope a strong opponent of wars and conflicts in every form, even conflicts between married couples. Both major military conflicts and wars, but also minor acts of violence solve nothing; on the contrary, they render everything even more difficult. Christian, and in particular Catholic families still refer to his teaching. Papal encyclicals, exhortation letters, messages, catechesis and homilies were intended to present the response to problems to which postmodernity gives rise, identifying and explaining the presumptions on which peace should be built. The Pontiff, possessing the talent for interpersonal communication, used some exhortations, speeches and homilies to encourage all people to understand better and to commit themselves to supporting peace as the proper foundation for a truly human society. Understanding the great importance of peace, the Pope developed the idea launched in 1967 by Paul VI of a World Day of Peace, assigning to every year an important motto. Some examples are 1979—To Reach Peace, Teach Peace; 1983—Dialogue for Peace, A Challenge for Our Time; 1988—Religious Freedom: Condition for Peace; 1994—The Family Creates the Peace of the Human Family; 1998—From the Justice of Each Comes Peace for All; 1999—Respect for Human Rights: The Secret of True Peace; 2001—Dialogue Between Cultures for a Civilisation of Love and Peace; 2004—An Ever Timely Commitment: Teaching Peace (John Paul II 1979–2005).

In this short article, it is not possible to provide a comprehensive presentation of the foundations of peace, but rather the aim is to highlight certain features of the Slavic Pope's thinking about peace. His existential, philosophical and theological realism leads to the affirmation of human dignity. Consequently, he deeply believed that the human ability and willingness to respond to peace was not enough. Peace is strongly linked to the formation of a human being and a human society. A person is responsible for any value that appears and demands the performance of an act as a recognised and chosen good. Thus, the most important presupposition is the human person as the fundamental structural principle for peace, and not as a subordinate part of social life. In that context, the cornerstone for long-lasting peace should be a genuine respect for a human being and proper reintegration of the human person in contemporary society. It can be introduced not only through legal declarations but rather through real psychological, ideological, juridical, political and socio-cultural exercises of the rights and obligations. For the Pope, correct anthropology is the basis of the social teaching of the Roman Catholic Church with regard to peace between people (Coughlin 2003). The Slavic Pope underlines:

“Peace is not essentially about structures but about *people*. Certain structures and mechanisms of peace—juridical, political, economic—are of course necessary and do exist, but they have been derived from nothing other than the accumulated wisdom and experience of *innumerable gestures of peace* made by men and women throughout history who have kept hope and have not given in to discouragement. *Gestures of peace* spring from the lives of people who *foster peace first of all in their own hearts*. They are the work of the heart and of reason in those who are peacemakers (cf. Mt 5:9). *Gestures of peace* are possible when people *appreciate fully the community dimension of their lives*, so that they grasp the meaning and consequences of events in their own communities and in the world. *Gestures of peace* create a tradition and a culture of peace. *Religion has a vital role in fostering gestures of peace and in consolidating conditions for peace*. It exercises this role all the more effectively if it concentrates on what is proper to it: attention to God, the fostering of universal brotherhood and the spreading of a culture of human solidarity”. (John Paul II 2003, no. 9)

From a theological perspective, the Pope perceives the human being as created in the image of God, redeemed by the love of Jesus Christ and sanctified by the Holy Spirit, but still conflicted as a consequence of the freedom to choose between good and evil. Therefore, the human being needs support in order to choose good. At the same time, in the light of the teaching of John Paul II, it can be said that every human being, by virtue of having reason and free will, is responsible for their development and education. Undoubtedly, for the Polish Pope, education for peace is an extremely relevant issue.

In order to achieve peace, there must be a clear and conscious acknowledgement that no form of violence is acceptable and that it never solves problems.

“Violence is a lie, for it goes against the truth of our faith, the truth of our humanity. Violence destroys what it claims to defend: the dignity, the life, the freedom of human beings. What is needed is *a great effort to form consciences* and to educate the younger generation to goodness by upholding that *integral and fraternal humanism* which the Church proclaims and promotes. This is the foundation for a social, economic and political order respectful of the dignity, freedom and fundamental rights of each person”. (John Paul II 2005, no. 4)

The Pope from Krakow knows very well, from his own experiences of totalitarian regimes (Nazism, communism), that at the deepest level, evil coming from the human heart is a dramatic rejection of love. Taking into account the contemporary context of the lack of education for peace and freedom manifested by the screaming crisis of education, subjectivity and the tragic lack of respect for the dignity of a person, John Paul II was consistently making permanent appeals to refrain from using various means of destructions and peacebuilding through education (Lewandowski 2014). The Pope reminds us:

“Finally, we are unable to overlook another phenomenon that is quite evident in present-day humanity: perhaps as never before in history, humanity is daily buffeted by *conflict*. This is a phenomenon which has many forms, displayed in a legitimate plurality of mentalities and initiatives, but manifested in the fatal opposition of persons, groups, categories, nations and blocks of nations. This opposition takes the form of violence, of terrorism, and of war. . . The human family is thus in itself dramatically convulsed and wounded. On the other hand, totally unsurpassable is that human longing experienced by individuals and whole peoples for the inestimable good of *peace* in justice. The Gospel beatitude: ‘Blessed are the peacemakers’ (Mt 5:9) finds in the people of our time a new and significant resonance: entire populations today live, suffer and labour to bring about peace and justice. The *participation* by so many persons and groups in the life of society is increasingly pursued today as the way to make a desired peace become a reality”. (John Paul II 1988, no. 6)

According to Pope John Paul II, in order to build peace, the will to respect other humans and their dignity is essential. There are two kinds of peace: the peace that people can build with their own strength, that is, with their own weapons. It is fragile and uncertain. But peace, which is a gift from God, based on a balance of power, born in the human heart, is lasting and strong, based on justice, respect, solidarity and love, and penetrates deeply into human hearts, a gift that God gives to people who follow Him (Borutka et al. 2004).

The Pope highlights that the Catholic Church has always taught and continues to proclaim the axiom: peace is possible. “Peace must be built on the four pillars given by Pope John XXIII in his Encyclical *Pacem in Terris*: truth, justice, love and freedom. A duty is thus imposed upon all those who love peace: that of *teaching these ideals to new generations*, in order to prepare a better future for all mankind” (John Paul II 2004). Virtues highlighted by John XXIII create a credo for the education for peace. It is not enough to speak about values, it is necessary to recognise them and to discover, name and act according to them. The four virtues truth, justice, love and freedom, must be recognised as the most important for humanity. The foundation is truth, followed by love and justice. Recognising that these values are common to different religions because they are rooted in the nature of the human being is also very important (John Paul II 2004). Peace is not simply the absence of conflicts and oppression but is strongly connected with human acts. The Slavic Pope emphasised that peace is born from the human heart, so peace cannot be achieved without educating every person on peace from an early age. The paradox is obvious. People want to live securely by establishing the law, but they forget that true peace requires proper education. Peace will always be uncertain, weak and short-lived when there is no deep change in the person (John Paul II 1987, no. 38). According to John Paul II:

“The establishment of true peace in the world, *justice must find its fulfilment in charity*. Certainly law is the first road leading to peace, and people need to be taught to respect that law. Yet one does not arrive at the end of this road unless justice is complemented by love. Justice and love sometimes appear to be *opposing forces*. In fact they are but *two faces of a single reality*, two dimensions of human life needing to be mutually integrated. Historical experience shows this to be true. It shows how justice is frequently unable to free itself from rancour, hatred and even cruelty. *By itself, justice is not enough*. Indeed, it can even betray itself, unless it is open to that deeper power which is love”. (John Paul II 2004, no. 4)

There are so many challenges and preventions of peace in the 21st century, yet carefully studying the encyclicals, exhortation letters, homilies, catechesis and various messages, it becomes clear that for the Slavic Pope, peace, based on the fundament of human dignity, has been a great challenge. The sources of abuses of power, conflicts, aggressiveness, controversy, antagonism and violent confrontation lie in the heart of every human being (Lewandowski 2014), in the face of so many world conflicts and divisions on every social level, even within families and between couples. Christian families must refuse to give in to

helplessness and discouragement but remember that the present difficulties are a simple test of humanity. Lasting peace is very fragile but awakens dreams and renews humans; peace linked with hope is liberating the best of the human mind and heart (John Paul II 1983).

These presented issues seem to be very complicated on the international and national level but hope for peace and justice reflects everyone's needs. The efforts for peace in society depend upon many factors, but above all on educational environments like families, schools, youth associations and clubs. Recognising the value of peace, teachers, pedagogues, educational leaders, but also grandparents, parents and relatives, need to help children and youth to build love, peace and harmony. Families have to become active agents for peace, through the virtues they express and transmit and through a real conversion of hearts. In order to educate toward peace, the family has a right to decide consciously, intentionally and responsibly, on the basis of their ethical and religious convictions when to have a child, and how to educate that child in accordance with those convictions (John Paul II 1994).

3. Christianity Serves the Common Good of Family

Christianity often identifies the family as the critical nexus: the first and the most important setting where the future of religion in society is guaranteed or destroyed. As the present family is shifting in many regards in contemporary society, the educational processes within the family are also shaken. The well-established socialisation, formation and education practices of the past no longer lead to the expected results (Lombaerts and Osewska 2010). There is a lot of uncertainty about what then should be a valuable alternative. According to Thomas Luckmann, "religion is *not* a passing phase in the evolution of mankind but a universal aspect of the *conditio humana*. Appearing under different socio-structural conditions in various historical forms, it remains a constituent element of human life, bonding the individual human being, most particularly its experiences of transcendence, to a collective view of the good life" (Luckmann 2003, p. 276). In recent decades, a growing consensus has emerged among sociologists that religion serves the common good of the family (Mariański 2006). According to Lombaerts, the position and status of religion in a postmodern environment prompts Christian educators, parents and ecclesial communities to reflect upon the original features of Christianity and examine what may lead to a qualitative difference within the family in the present socio-cultural context (Lombaerts 1998). In the opinion of the Polish sociologist Piwowarski, Christianity with reference to the Gospel gives the family the strength to build unity and love despite various difficulties (Piwowarski 1996). According to Roman Catholic Church documents, the family is the natural setting for sharing Christian faith, values, norms and style of living. Within the informal style of living, unselfish love, a caring atmosphere, mutual respect and interpersonal communication, young generations assimilate and integrate Christian ideas, values, virtues, norms, vocabulary and rituals connected to sacred spaces, etc. This is the starting point for building their Christian identity and a decisive reference framework (Lombaerts and Osewska 2010). Within the Christian family, children share with their parents the same presuppositions and commitments, so if the European society is dreaming about peaceful living, Christianity lived in the family and the larger social circle will strengthen and deepen the value of peace that children experience with their family.

Today's ideological and socio-cultural situation is raising many questions but also may invite followers of Jesus Christ to withdraw from the threatening secularist society to the responsible faith community (Tománek 2015). Some European political leaders, due to present challenges, want to situate religion exclusively in the "private sphere", where people can live according to their convictions. The usual argument given is that religion should not play an active role in the public sphere of present society. But this indication does not take into consideration that the institutionalised religions have a legal status in society, and as such, also have a public responsibility (Lombaerts and Osewska 2010).

Polish family psychologist Maria Ryś highlights that strong and happy families function much better than unhappy ones in various everyday situations. Strong families do not react passively to difficult situations but introduce their own strategies to survive.

Coping well implies obtaining a balance between normal family functioning and the new challenges that are set for the family. The well-functioning coping strategies deal well with the results of the stress, anxiety, fear and various problems in everyday life. Contemporary psychologists use many concepts to explain family strengths and happiness. According to Ryś essential characteristics of strong and good functioning include marital strengths, communication, commitment, time, family coping strategies, marital and family satisfaction, but also spiritual or religious well-being. This spiritual well-being can be described in many ways, but most experts speak about a solid core of moral, ethical, spiritual or religious beliefs that translate into the idea that families who have strong religious beliefs that are connected with commitment, good interpersonal communication and time for themselves are stronger and happier (Wilk and Bieleń 2006; Mazan 2013; Simonič 2015). Thus, important family resources are religious beliefs and moral norms. If education for peace is not a passive acceptance of the ideas from the outside, but a personal and creative process strongly connected with family culture, then the family members need to draw from the spiritual wellbeing.

The importance of the Christian family in the process of shaping the offspring's personal, moral and religious growth has been underlined by John Paul II:

“The family has a decisive responsibility. This responsibility flows from its very nature as a community of life and love, founded upon marriage, and from its mission to guard, reveal and communicate love. Here it is a matter of God's own love, of which parents are co-workers and as it were interpreters when they transmit life and raise it according to his fatherly plan. This is the love that becomes selflessness, receptiveness and gift. Within the family each member is accepted, respected and honoured precisely because he or she is a person; and if any family member is in greater need, the care which he or she receives is all the more intense and attentive. The family has a special role to play throughout the life of its members, from birth to death. It is truly *the sanctuary of life*: the place in which life—the gift of God—can be properly welcomed and protected against the many attacks to which it is exposed, and can develop in accordance with what constitutes authentic human growth”. (John Paul II 1995, no. 92)

Consequently, the role of the family in forming children for a loving and peaceful existence and creating a culture of peace is significant and irreplaceable. The family prepares every family member for peaceful and open coexistence with others.

Christianity strongly binds family life and religion. Religion is connected with the physical, psychological and spiritual health of family members and their functioning in the family. From a psychological perspective, emotional healing and the development of persons are important results of religious growth and maturity. A survey of research completed on the relationship between mental health and religion (Worthington et al. 1996), discovered that individuals with strong religious beliefs report higher levels of life satisfaction, deeper personal happiness, better social support from friends, deeper empathy, higher levels of optimism, less depressive symptoms, a lower level of hostility and lower narcissism. Moreover, parents with high religious scores correlated with more favourable parenting practices; therefore, Christian beliefs and virtues provide solidity, integrity and coherence for families. In addition, Christian parents “take care” of virtues that are worthy of being handed down from generation to generation (Osewska and Stala 2003). Christianity also provides a framework of moral principles coming from the Bible and tradition that are necessary for strong families. Accepting that a healthy, strong and happy family is a fundament of human development, Christians acquire their response to existential questions regarding human beings, marriage, family, the meaning of life, suffering, death, etc., not only from natural reason but also from divine revelation. Therefore, in order to discover what is family, its purpose, objective, identity and mission, good Christian knowledge and morality are required (Adamski 2002), especially in a situation where so many different responses may lead to uncertainty, confusion and even chaos in regard to the family's identity and role in the postmodern society. However, it should be also noted

that religion in the family can be used to manipulate, control and even oppress family members. Consequently, instead of developing faith, love, respect, justice and peace, it can foster irrational guilt, fear or confusion (Griffith and Rotter 1999). Some adults have had negative childhood experiences with a strict religious approach. Strict principles justified by religious beliefs can be strongly counterproductive to the emotional, mental, relational, moral and religious growth of children (Bartkowski et al. 2008).

It is crucial for the family to create a positive atmosphere at home; this means presence, connectedness, respect, love, safety, warmth, care, protection, kindness and, at the same time, regularity and stability (Simonič 2015). Through emotional contacts, communication skills and ways of doing things, the young generation learns about Christianity by “osmosis”. Particularly, the assimilation and creative use of language are essential for the verbalisation of everyday life experiences. This is a basis of family education forming young generations towards living with others in love and peace (Lombaerts and Osewska 2010). For family life, authenticity is one of the most important factors. All events in a family should happen in a natural and usual way and by following an everyday routine. If children and youth are interested in religious matters, the actions in the family will need to appear more personalised. For every person, but especially infants, the feeling of being accepted and safe within a family circle is crucial; they need to feel that their needs and interests are being attended to, and they may present their approach to religious issues. It is not inconsistent for some children and youth to want to dismiss particular religious rules, while at the same time dreaming of being understood by their parents (Osewska and Stala 2003).

In recent decades, the family as an educational setting has been strongly affected by ideological, social and cultural changes (Adamski 2002); therefore, many parents are not able to secure the moral and religious future of their offspring. In this regard, the Roman Catholic Church takes up the challenge:

“The Church is called to cooperate with parents through suitable pastoral initiatives, assisting them in the fulfilment of their educational mission. She must always do this by helping them to appreciate their proper role and to realize that by their reception of the sacrament of marriage they become ministers of their children’s education. In educating them, they build up the Church, and in so doing, they accept a God-given vocation”. (Francis 2016, no. 85)

This cooperation is an opportunity for more personal and innovative pastoral activities of the Church. At the same time, love, respect, unity and openness may be taken as a great opportunity for family renewal. A mature and responsible parent conscious of building real relations with society is aware of the fact that as a human being, one needs to cooperate with institutions following the same values in order to strengthen the process of educating for peace.

4. Important Assumptions of Child Education towards Peace

When contemporary adults feel discouraged, helpless and confused by moral anomy, pluralism and socio-cultural changes, they refuse to have children, or if they do, they try to delegate the responsibility for their children’s upbringing to institutions (kindergartens, schools, clubs, various organisations, etc.), but none of these social units is able to create bonds of love, intimate relationships, close community, and first of all the strong sense of security and the characteristic closeness of the family (Rynio 2019). It is within the family community that the person’s life begins and develops on all levels and this start of life, to a great extent, determines the child’s future (Osewska 2015).

A great influence on the process of upbringing within the family is the very character of the functioning of the domestic community. Every human family is special because the personal community makes the family from the very beginning a privileged and original setting of upbringing (Stala and Garmaz 2018). This result primarily comes from the fact that the mother and father, who have given life to their child and have welcomed it in an atmosphere of love and security, are endowed with educational abilities that no one else

possesses. Parents usually know their children in all their originality and the resources of their personal love. This is due, above all, to the bonds between the members of each family, which are impossible to recreate in any other living environment and are indispensable for the preservation of their mental, spiritual and physical health. None of the existing social bonds have, by their very nature, such basic and strong foundations as the family bond. The community system, which is specific only to the family because it has a natural character, is unique and cannot be replaced by any other. The entire inner strength of the family institution can survive and overcome a variety of difficulties, although this does not mean that it cannot be undermined or even completely destroyed by powerful external factors.

From a theological perspective, Jesus Christ identifies himself with those in need and those who are weak, “As you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me” (The Holy Bible 2008, Mt 25:40). The love of God and the love of neighbour have become one in every human being. That is why for Christians, the bonds between individual family members tend to be very personal, intimate and warm. Interpersonal bonds of the family members are also characterised by spontaneity and the pursuit of common goals, although this is not always fully expressed (Rynio 2013). The result of this close association within the family is the merging of certain individualities into a community, or even a unity, in such a way that the personality of each member of the family is the object of common experience for the whole family, and the growth of this personality constitutes its objective. In order to undertake an education promoting peace and love in the family, it is necessary to make some basic assumptions (Osewska 2015).

The human person cannot live without this love and respect. If the human being does not experience love, then he remains incomplete (Ryś 2006). For this reason, the first assumption for education towards peace and love is the caregiver’s presence in the child’s everyday life (Tománek 2015). This does not just mean a problem of rejecting or abandoning a child, but also in a sense, emotional loneliness of the child, despite the physical presence of adults in the family. Many infants, children and youngsters suffer because they do not experience strong emotional ties with their parents. Unfortunately, there is a growing group of parents who, due to so many obligations, do not share their children’s lives and do not offer them sufficient support, which results in the child’s insecurity, distrustfulness and loneliness (Osewska 2015).

Strongly tied to the first condition, is the second one—mutual love of the parents. The relationship between the husband and wife, as well as the process of bridging personality differences, shapes the psychological identity of each family, and its unity of feelings, thoughts and activities (Ryś 2006). The original structure of the family requires the recognition of the fundamental physical, psychological and also spiritual nature of the woman and man. The system of family relationships is built upon the basis of the natural originality and mutual love of the spouses (Stala 2019). This anthropological principle, which is revealed in family life, allows children to discover the importance of love for every human being (John Paul II 1981). Children discover love and learn to love by observing the mutual love of their parents, the father’s love for the mother manifested in words and gestures, comfort and support in everyday situations, as well as the mother’s love for the father presented by many simple means of sensitivity and responsibility (Dudziak 2012). Unfortunately, when the parents are not expressing their mutual love, their children are living in a state of distress and anxiety. Even if one of the parents does everything to express tenderness and love in the family, the situation will not improve dramatically, because children feel loved, recognised, respected, safe and precious only within the parameters of the mutual love of their parents (Osewska 2015).

The third presupposition is the recognition of the family as a community of love, where “complex of interpersonal relationships is set up—married life, fatherhood and motherhood, filiation and fraternity—through which each human person is introduced into the human family” (John Paul II 1981, no. 15). Not only parents, but all the family members, (grandparents, sisters, brothers, relatives and caregivers) are important in the process of child formation. Parents not only give life to their child together with their genetic

make-up but also, especially in the initial stage of the infant's life, "create their space of development". Children rely on all the family relationships and bonds by participating in everyday situations; therefore, every person and every relationship in the family is liable to strengthen or destroy the family community (Osewska 2015). This condition is strongly connected with the personal and religious maturity of adults in the family. The parent, grandparent or educator is the person who is to be, in a way, a signpost for the child or young one; thus, above all, they should be an authentic person, aware and in need of growth and deepening of personal maturity, the realisation of which results from the responsibility for oneself and others. A mature person understands the importance of peaceful coexistence in the process of one's upbringing (Ryś 2006).

The next condition underlying the process of child education within the family towards peace is the recognition of the value and dignity of the child (Rynio 2013). For every child, remaining a unique human being is unique in a natural and spiritual sense. Christianity, following classical philosophy, perceives human beings as a dynamic and irreducible unity of body and spirit (John Paul II 1981). In this respect, education should be based on the assumption that all the education participants deserve respect and appreciation for their intelligence, free will, emotions, culture and spiritual awareness. This remarkable psychophysical and spiritual unity deserves to be appreciated and respected (Wilk and Bieleń 2006).

The fifth condition is the recognition of family culture, which is a unique space for presenting cultural factors like norms, values, language, cultural assets of the family (books, art, music), ways in which family members spend their free time, qualifications of parents and other family members for the upbringing of children, the parent's attitude to their children's schooling and their future profession, the attitude of family members to tradition and novelty. The parent gives life not only in the physical but also in a spiritual sense. Parents create a profound space to share everything that is important for the family (Wilk and Bieleń 2006).

Last but not least, the final assumption is building a civilisation of love. Already John Paul II warned of the battle between two civilisations: the civilisation of life and love and the civilisation of death. Building peace is closely connected with the civilisation of love, which is based on a foundation of values and norms, headed by love, truth, goodness, authentic beauty, solidarity, justice and respect for every human life. The civilisation of love—although it is based on evangelical values—is a universal idea, an idea to which all people of goodwill should commit themselves. It is a civilisation that is meant to be servile to all and can only become a reality if everyone is involved in its implementation, regardless of differences in worldview (Osewska and Simonič 2019). Polish families have presented a civilisation of love and peace in a very simple way by welcoming war refugees from Ukraine into their homes despite historical conflicts. A total of 18.6 million Ukrainians escaping from the armed conflict in Ukraine, mainly women and children, have arrived in Poland since its inception on 24 February 2022. However, some of them have already returned to their homeland or other countries. This is information obtained from the Border Guard. There were no refugee camps in Poland. The refugees were welcomed lovingly by families and local associations as a result of the Christian attitude of love. Polish families shared what they had: housing, meals, medicines, clothing, transport, conversation, entertainment and, above all, their time and love.

5. The Scientific Discussion on Education for Peace in the Family Environment

An interesting approach towards education for peace is presented by Polish pedagogues Stanisław Kawula, Alina Rynio and Katarzyna Olbrycht. Kawula points out that education for peace is the formation of attitudes conducive to the realisation of peace. These attitudes are shaped on three planes: intellectual, emotional and practical. The intellectual level is connected with passing on from the older to the younger generation knowledge about peace and war, armed conflicts and the various consequences of conflicts, but first of all about creating the possibility of properly orientating the fact that war and

peace are a reality. The second level—the emotional—encompasses the emotional attitude of the pupil towards wars or conflicts and peace and the correct valuing of phenomena associated with the state of war and peace. The third level—the practical level—consists of the specific actions of the young person, as well as the right valuing of phenomena related to the state of war and peace. Concrete actions of the young generation foster the acceptance of life under the conditions of eliminating prejudice against other people or nations (Kawula 1981).

Alina Rynio emphasises the importance of parents' pedagogical culture in the process of upbringing and peace education. The components of the content of the parents' pedagogical culture and their characteristics are interrelated and significantly influence the process of upbringing in the family. It is indicated that the higher the level reached by each of these components by parents and the more they are harmonised with each other, the higher the level of the pedagogical culture of parents. She presents the following components of the pedagogical culture of parents: the educational awareness connected with responsibility, the ability to establish an educational relationship and pedagogical knowledge, the synthesis of which are certain pedagogical principles and the ability to use methods and means of upbringing (Rynio 2013).

An important recommendation is given by Katarzyna Olbrycht, who applies the concept of "peaceful child development" from the perspective of Christian personalism. The author emphasises the value of the human person and the need to strengthen the sense of one's own dignity, reasonableness, free will and responsibility for recognised virtues, especially love. At the same time, love is understood in the Christian perspective as a full, complete and voluntary gift of oneself to the other person, to the community and to God. Love requires active involvement in the life of the community, starting with the peer and family community. Olbrycht advocates the creation of situations that will stimulate the child's personal development (Olbrycht 2000).

Taking all the above-mentioned conditions and indications of Polish pedagogues, it can be considered that every child in the family is gradually introduced into the family culture according to their age and ability. Parents' educational awareness is closely linked to their responsibility for the child's development, upbringing and future functioning in the world. Parents should show their children peace as one of the basic virtues (Horowski 2020). Acquiring that knowledge, children also learn to evaluate, choose what is valuable and reject what is worthless. The ability to establish a nurturing relationship that is inseparable from time spent with the child and proper communication is important. This ability fosters the formation of emotional bonds and the proper organisation of family life based on fixed rules, the creation of a proper family atmosphere, the recognition and satisfaction of needs and the creation of optimal developmental conditions. Parents' pedagogical knowledge helps them build a community of love, respect, kindness and goodness, which enables the child to reach full personal, social and axiological maturity. When the child discovers a virtue and its presence, they experience it emotively and then fully comprehend it. Parents' ability to use methods and proper means of upbringing helps them to achieve better results. Therefore, it is important that the pedagogical method takes into account the child's capabilities, has a positive and liberating effect and is preventive (Olbrycht 2000). This process of child education, based on the relationship between the child and their parents as well as all the other relatives who constitute the family community, may start with simple everyday situations like overcoming misunderstandings and solving conflicts. Children need to learn how to deal with conflicts in a peaceful way (Ryś 1998). When the child is well prepared, conflict could serve as an opportunity to learn to trust and serve people and grow more responsible by confessing their wrongs and turning away from attitudes that promote conflict. It is wise to help family members step back from a conflict, simmer down a bit and search for proper solutions, so that in this way, the conflicts may be special opportunities to mature. A variety of family experiences can trigger a change in the personal approach towards conflicts, aggressions and violence. Christianity proclaims that

love and peace are not abstract concepts, but values that dwell in the heart of every person, so families are called to respect peace and act for peace (John Paul II 1994).

Peace belongs to the essentially human order; for this reason, in this article, the issue of peace education in the family has been undertaken from the Catholic perspective. Following the teaching of Pope John Paul II, especially given in his messages for the celebration of the World Day of Peace, the authors present the possibility of reaching peace through education within the family. The Roman Catholic Church highlights that lasting peace will not be ensured by international organisations or regulations alone, as peace between people begins with peace in the smallest communities. This presupposition is supported by Polish specialists in family studies, pedagogy and psychology. Therefore, the condition for peace is to undertake education for peace and love. Families filled with faith, love and hope and engaged in an education that promotes peace are the best setting for peace. Reaching peace is strongly connected with overcoming selfishness, egocentrism and individualism. Ongoing conflicts and wars, especially in Ukraine, pose a challenge to Catholic educators, who responded by reminding them that everything starts within human hearts. Polish families have demonstrated peace education in a simple way by welcoming refugees from Ukraine into their homes. Peace is not the simple absence of war, nor is it reduced to a state of equilibrium between opposing forces. It is a dynamic process that must take into account all the factors that favour or disturb it. It is an order of justice that respects the just rights of every person and every nation. In a personalistic vision of peace given by Pope John Paul II, peace is based on the dignity of the human being, which stems from the fact that humans have been created in the image of God. There is no peace without forgiveness, respecting the human being and supporting their growth. Christians see the commitment to educating ourselves towards peace as something at the core of this religion. Christianity proclaims the Gospel's call and supports every family to be "peacemakers". Consequently, education in the Christian family tries to raise people of peace who are able to identify the causes of conflicts, seek good solutions and lead a peaceful coexistence.

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Article

Marriage and Family in Putin's Russia: State Ideology and the Discourse of the Russian Orthodox Church

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Abstract: The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) presents itself as a defender of traditional Christian values. Among these values, representatives of the ROC mention concern for marriage and family. To what extent is the position of the ROC an expression of commitment to the traditional Christian concept of marriage and family? In this article, we analyse the contemporary Orthodox discourse in Russia since Kirill Gundyayev became the Patriarch of Moscow in 2009. From a political science and security studies perspective, we highlight the main ideological elements of this discourse. We contrast these elements with similar content in Russian official documents and Vladimir Putin's statements. An analysis of what the ROC says about the problems and protection of marriage and family in Russia, against the background of Putin's statements and the actions of the state authorities, shows that the ROC's discourse on marriage and family echoes the main themes of the political discourse controlled by the state authorities. In its understanding of marriage and in its efforts on behalf of the family, the ROC represents a conservative doctrinal position. Although, in doctrinal terms, it essentially expresses the traditional Christian teaching on marriage, the strong ideologisation and securitisation of demographic issues in Russia are also reflected in church discourse.

Keywords: Russian Orthodox Church; Russia; Patriarch Kirill; Vladimir Putin; Russian ideology; Russian conservatism



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1. Introduction

In contemporary political discourse, Russia seeks to portray itself as a bastion of conservative values, opposing attempts to redefine marriage and family. After Russia's military incursion into Ukraine on 24 February 2022, this professed moral conservatism has also been leveraged for anti-Ukrainian and anti-Western propaganda. Among the reasons given for Russia's conflict with Ukraine, both governmental representatives and the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) cite a motivation to resist Western cultural and moral shifts, and to safeguard the 'traditional values' upon which Russian society is founded. Notably, Patriarch Kirill of Moscow's first public address following the onset of the full-scale Russian offensive against Ukraine is illuminating. In a sermon on 6 March 2022 at the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in Moscow, Patriarch Kirill (2022b) alluded to the conflict's 'metaphysical significance,' pointing to purportedly false values imposed on Donbas inhabitants, alluding to perceived notions of freedom, happiness, and even referencing 'gay parades' as indicative of the West's moral degradation against which Russia must militarily fortify itself.

The portrayal of Russia, both by the state and the ROC, as a conservative bastion runs deeper than superficial observation might suggest. This is not merely a bid to shield

specific values or familial norms from foreign, predominantly Western, influences. Such messaging seeks to bolster the core ideological tenet of Putinism, Russia's civilisational uniqueness, whilst reinforcing the perception within Russian society that the ostensibly morally bereft Western culture poses a tangible threat to Russian traditions and identity. This brand of Russian conservatism is fundamentally ideological and political in nature. Within this anti-Western and isolationist strategy of Putin's reign, the ROC, helmed since 2009 by Kirill, operates; notably, he openly endorses the actions of the Russian authorities and enjoys various privileges stemming from his collaboration.

This paper aims to probe the manner in which the Moscow Patriarchate addresses matters of marriage and family, specifically their definition, perceived threats both external and internal, and the church's envisioned role in their preservation. We postulate, however, that the statements from ROC representatives should be juxtaposed against Putin's pronouncements to discern their interconnectedness. We posit that a discernible linkage exists, shaping the trajectory of official church rhetoric in Russia. This is manifested in the church's selective emphasis on certain topics—such as the Western redefinition of marriage and family, and the increasing acceptance of non-heterosexual individuals—whilst other pressing issues, like domestic violence, economic struggles faced by families, and alcoholism, are noticeably underrepresented. Similarly, there is a pronounced alignment of the church's discourse with the state's ideological narrative in pinpointing external cultural influences, chiefly Western, as principal threats to the Russian marital and familial fabric, with meagre attention to indigenous socio-economic challenges. This alignment in ecclesiastical rhetoric with state ideologies has become pronounced since Kirill Gundyayev's tenure as the Moscow Patriarch, during which he has veered decisively towards close alliance with the state, resonating with the latter's domestic and international policy objectives. To this end, we shall focus our analysis on declarations made by Kirill and other senior ROC members from 2009 to 2023.

In this paper, the research perspective of political science and security studies is employed. Whilst this is not the sole perspective for exploring the relationship between the ROC and the formal political stance of Russian Federation authorities, it offers valuable insights into contemporary Russian political, religious, and ideological discourse. Our analysis of the ROC discourse is principally limited to statements by Patriarch Kirill and, to a lesser extent, other representatives of the Moscow Patriarchate whom we deem most representative of the ROC's views. This paper does not claim to encompass the entirety of the ROC's activity concerning marriage and family; instead, it seeks to highlight discernible convergences between Russian political and church discourse.

Our primary sources comprise sermons and addresses by Patriarch Kirill and selected prominent ROC figures, supplemented by materials from the Moscow Patriarchate's official website. To illustrate the church's alignment with state ideologies, we have extracted analogous content from Russian legislative acts, particularly those formulated amidst escalating tensions with the West, as well as utterances from Vladimir Putin.

Our analysis suggests that, whilst the ROC's discourse retains foundational elements of conservative Christian doctrine concerning marriage and family, precluding potential reconsideration or redefinition, it simultaneously mirrors the political objectives of the Russian authorities. This is particularly evident in its portrayal of the West as an existential menace to Russia's social fabric, concurrently sidelining other significant challenges. Thus, even as it ostensibly preserves Orthodox anthropology and marital ethics, the ROC's rhetoric aligns with state objectives of insulating Russian society from Western cultural influences, casting Russia as a distinctive conservative entity—culturally and morally superior to an ostensibly waning West.

This article is structured into four parts. The introductory part explores the interplay between population policies and state ideologies in what can now be termed Putin's authoritarian Russia. The second delves into the protection of marriage and family within the ideological framework of 'mature Putinism'—a term we employ to denote the quasi-democratic, authoritarian system manifest since Putin's pivotal 2007 Munich Security

Conference speech, heralding a confrontational stance against the West. The third part examines the primary elements of the ROC's rhetoric on marital and familial matters. The concluding part encapsulates our research findings.

2. Population Policy and State Ideology: The Case of Putin's Russia

The Russian official discourse concerning the protection and support of marriage and family is influenced not only by the ideological presumptions of the state authorities, backed by the ROC, but also emerges from observations of the fundamental challenges Russian society encountered in the late 20th century. Although one could argue that the matter of safeguarding marriage and family is deeply ideologised in Putin's Russia, with increasing securitisation amid heightened tension with the West, it is imperative to recognise that such contemplation is a reaction to contemporary Russian societal challenges. Thus, to fully grasp the ideological facet of this discourse and the ROC's role therein, one must first consider the correlation between population policy and state ideology, particularly under the authoritarian conditions that have come to define Russia under Putin. Three considerations are pertinent: (1) the significance of biopolitics and ethnopolitics in authoritarian states' ideologies, (2) the demographic and societal challenges confronting Russian authorities at the onset of Putin's leadership, and (3) the principal components of Russian population policy in the early 21st century.

2.1. *Biopolitics and Ethnopolitics in the Ideologies of Authoritarian States*

The fundamental definition of ideology, perceived as a consistent set of beliefs or values, has largely remained unaltered in political science. However, its associated connotations have evolved. In the nineteenth century, ideology reflected a commitment to liberal democratic values. By contrast, in the early 20th century, as opposition to fascism and communism became paramount, ideology began to represent any system of beliefs, with democratic ideology juxtaposed against totalitarianism. As Kathleen Knight posits (Knight 2006, p. 619), despite Daniel Bell's (1960) assertion of ideology's demise in the 1950s, the latter half of the 20th century emerged as a fervently ideological era.

The literature delineating Soviet-style systems differentiates between 'pure' and 'practical' ideologies. The former underpinned the systemic existence and supremacy of the ruling party, rooted in foundational writings. The latter comprised ideas that rationalised potential actions, aiming to cultivate an unquestioning societal loyalty to the established order and a conviction that policies endorsed by those in power resonated with societal interests and values. Concurrently, it facilitated adjustments to doctrinal tenets in line with a state's prevailing societal milieu (Schurmann 1968, pp. 21–22; Holmes 1987, pp. 114–15). In the context of contemporary Putinism, perhaps the most insightful is the Marxist approach to ideology. Ideology, in this framework, serves not merely as a worldview, but rather as a superstructure reinforcing the structure of a given society. As such, according to McCarthy (1994, p. 419), ideologies were criticised by Marx as unreal because they 'obscure, distort, or mystify reality'. From a Marxist point of view, 'ideology is the alienation of thought from life' (McCarthy 1994, p. 417). Furthermore, the Marxist view of ideology also has other noted weaknesses, already contained in the very concept of superstructure. As Eagleton (2000, p. 239) notes, the function of the superstructure is to help manage the social contradictions, obviously in the interests of the ruling class, arising from productive activity. In his view, the term 'superstructure' reifies a number of political or ideological functions in an immobile ontological field. An institution behaves superstructurally only if it somehow supports a dominant set of social relations. It follows that an institution may be superstructural at one point in time, but not at another. Moreover, its different functions may be contradictory in this respect. In Eagleton's assessment, the reality is that most of our activities are neither superstructural nor infrastructural. Nevertheless, it is the understanding of ideology as a superstructure that reinforces the social structure that may justify the ideological orientation of Putin's Russia, in which the consolidation of society is attempted by the authorities through the sacralisation of the nation.

Notwithstanding its inherent ambiguity, ideology often carries a derogatory connotation in practice. The term, especially when referring to state ideology, is frequently associated with negative implications, often equating it with totalitarianism and its early 20th-century origins, characterised by attempts at societal homogenisation through social engineering and the rise of totalitarian regimes. Dependent on their developmental trajectory and prevailing political climates, states have historically leveraged diverse tools of social engineering, particularly biopolitics and ethnopolitics. Biopolitics seeks to mould a society wherein power oversees and governs life (Kvashnin 2011). As noted by Kharkevich and Kasatkin (2011, p. 220), biopolitics is currently understood primarily as the practice of political regulation of the life processes of society. Ethnopolitics endeavours to foster ethnically uniform societies or manages ethnic relations to avert societal and state disruptions (Drobizheva 2001).

Biopolitics and ethnopolitics' presence in authoritarian state ideologies is inherently linked to their foundational ideologies. This does not negate the likelihood that specific population policy elements (or even the majority) stem from the genuine demographic conditions of a given state. However, within authoritarian regimes, ideological factors might assume enhanced significance in formulating population policy objectives. This, sequentially, enables state authorities to incorporate ideologically aligned entities into policy execution—a phenomenon discernible in Putin's Russia.

2.2. Demographic Challenges in the Early Putin Era

Early into his tenure as the Russian Federation's President, Putin endeavoured to shield Russia from the impending demographic calamity of depopulation, particularly pertinent considering Russia's uneven population distribution and the escalating depopulation of regions like Northern Russia, Eastern Siberia, and the Russian Far East. Central to Putin's policy was bolstering state support for families (Rivkin-Fish 2010, pp. 712–13). It is worth noting that early pronouncements during Putin's regime about augmenting state support and stimulating birth rates were largely a response to the economic and societal adversities Russia endured in the 1990s, consequent to the USSR's disintegration. This transition ushered in a profound societal crisis, manifested in dwindling state support for families, surging poverty, and resultant challenges for familial stability and birth rates (Sätre et al. 2016; Kostin and Kostina 2016, pp. 228–32; Rivkin-Fish 2010, p. 710). Russia's population has been in continual decline since 1992, a trend that only began to abate in the early 2000s (Vishnevskiy 2015, pp. 151–59) with the relative enhancement in Russians' economic conditions and the implementation of certain pro-family and pro-natalist policies.

Nevertheless, despite certain advancements, the complexities associated with these difficulties have perpetually eluded resolution within the Russian Federation. Additionally, the oligarchic economic configuration, originally established during the tumultuous era of the 1990s and increasingly subjected to state control post-2000, has precipitated a substantial escalation in economic inequality. Concomitantly, the ineffectiveness of governmental policies has exacerbated an already precarious healthcare crisis and intensified the pressing predicament of inadequate housing availability to families subsisting on average incomes (Aksenov et al. 2010, pp. 114–16). These formidable social and economic tribulations originating from the 1990s, coupled with emergent challenges that imperil the financial stability of Russian families post-2000, are discerned within Russian scholarly contemplation as existential threats to national security.

As expounded by Kostin and Kostina (2016, pp. 16–17), the threat to social cohesion and, by extension, to the stability of the state, emanates from the widening material differentiation of the populace and an increment in the levels of poverty, engendering potential social unrest. The societal stratification, characterised by a limited stratum of affluence and a predominantly indigent majority, exacerbates unemployment and augments the proportion of urban dwellers subsisting in extreme penury. These factors collectively contribute to a proliferation in drug addiction and organised criminal activities. Furthermore, there is an escalating disparity in socio-economic advancement across various regions within Russia,

compounding the internal challenges. Another menace to economic security emanates from the criminalisation of both society and economic activities. This disconcerting trend has been exacerbated by escalating unemployment, alleged affiliations of certain governmental officials with organised crime syndicates, and the attenuation of the system of state oversight. Such criminalisation not only threatens the immediate economic fabric but also has the potential to undermine the broader integrity and stability of Russian society.

2.3. Main Elements of Russian Population Policy after 2000

Putin has frequently addressed Russia's demographic challenges, suggesting that state assistance to prospective parents should act as a catalyst to stimulate an increase in birth rates (Scheller-Boltz 2017, p. 82). As highlighted by Temkina (2013, p. 8), the cornerstone of Russia's population policy is to enhance the birth rate by incentivising women to have more than one child. Within this context, the complexities of family planning and birth control seem to recede from the public discourse, manipulated by state authorities. Moreover, there have been sporadic endeavours in Russia to curtail access to abortion (Rivkin-Fish 2010, pp. 721–22; Temkina 2013, p. 10), a procedure which was, with occasional exceptions, relatively straightforward during the Soviet Union era and regarded as a *de facto* contraceptive practice (Rivkin-Fish 2013, pp. 572–73). However, the limitation of access to abortion did not crystallise into a critical component of the population policy programmes implemented during Putin's tenure.

The 2001 Concept of Demographic Policy of the Russian Federation envisaged implementing measures to augment the health and life expectancy of Russian citizens, elevate the birth rate, fortify family status, and oversee migration processes and population movements within the country. The postulated alterations encompassed children's and adolescents' education. Simultaneously, for adults, there were proposals to increase resources for disease and workplace accident prevention, ameliorate the financial position of the healthcare system, and expand the medical facility network. The anticipated population growth was intertwined with a benefits system for families with two or more children and enhancements in the material circumstances and quality of life for Russian families. The concept asserted the need to halt emigration and the 'brain drain,' accelerate the registration and adaptation of labour migrants, and safeguard their rights (Yefremova 2007). The somewhat ambiguous set of guidelines, the absence of identified funding sources, the lack of delineation of responsibilities, and the failure to clarify various actors' roles in programme implementation led to many proposed ideas remaining confined to the planning stage (Szabaciuk 2017, pp. 277–78).

The year 2007 marked a significant development in the state's population policy, incorporating support for families. Subsequent years witnessed the introduction of the 'maternity capital' programme and other social schemes aimed at improving the material conditions of mothers raising children and stimulating birth growth (Rivkin-Fish 2010; Dolmatova 2018, p. 140). An essential aspect to note is that these programmes were implemented during a relatively stable period in Russia, both prior to the Russian–Georgian war in 2008 and before the global financial crisis. The Russian Federation's revised Demographic Policy Concept of 2007 was more expansive than its predecessor, elucidating tools for authorities at various levels to enhance Russian citizens' living standards, improve birth rates, reduce mortality, and prolong life expectancy. The most significant alterations were in migration policy guidelines, explicitly delineating a model immigrant's profile. The programme aimed to entice ethnic Russians and former Soviet citizens, including their children, to settle in Russia. Encouragement was also extended to foreigners, particularly Russian university graduates, to establish permanent residency. The inflow of migrants was perceived as an opportunity to ameliorate the demographic situation in strategically vital yet depopulated regions, such as Eastern Siberia and the Russian Far East (Szabaciuk 2017, pp. 278–80).

The subsequent phase of pro-family policy commenced amid the antagonism with the West following Russia's illicit occupation and annexation of Crimea and Sevastopol, and

engagement with pro-Russian separatists in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions in eastern Ukraine. This confrontation harboured an economic dimension, aggravating the financial strain on numerous Russian families. During this period, several strategic and conceptual documents were promulgated, relating to demographic policy. These included the Concept of State Family Policy (25 August 2014), the Strategy of Measures for Citizens of the Older Generation (5 February 2016), the Presidential Decree on National Objectives and Strategic Tasks of Development of the Russian Federation (7 May 2018), and the Presidential Decree on National Objectives of Development of the Russian Federation (21 July 2020). In 2016, the Russian Government released the National Strategy of Action for Women for 2017–2022, followed by a new Strategy of Action for Women for 2023–2030 in 2022. Intriguingly, both Strategies of Action for Women cite the state's obligation to curtail the level of violence against women (Natsional'naya Strategiya 2023, sec. 14–15).

A noteworthy aspect of the execution of pro-family and pro-natalist policies amid the conflict with the West was Putin's 2012 May Decrees. Among other provisions, these decrees assured financial support to families and supplementary resources for large families (Gileva 2017). In the lead-up to the presidential elections in which Putin sought a fourth term, a new pro-family programme was initiated on 1 January 2018: Putin's so-called 'demographic package'. This package served both as an extension and modification of the 2007 solutions, encompassing increased financial assistance for impoverished and large families to further stimulate birth growth, in addition to investments in health and education infrastructure (Putin 2018; Petrova 2017).

3. Ideologisation and Securitisation of Population Issues in Putin's Russia

The securitisation of marriage and family issues is influenced not merely by the demographic crisis but also by the social, economic, and ethnic challenges observed in contemporary Russia (Kostin and Kostina 2016, p. 254). Increasingly, however, the call for the protection of marriage and family is becoming subject to ideologisation. As Russia's conflict with the West has intensified—most notably since 2014—the definition of marriage and family, along with purported threats from Western culture, have become salient elements in Russian security discourse.

Three key aspects warrant consideration: (1) ideological justifications for pro-family state policies, (2) discriminatory actions rationalised by concern for the family, and (3) the role of the ROC in an ideologised public discourse.

3.1. Ideological Justification for the State's Pro-Family Policy

The ideologisation and securitisation of marriage and family mirror the ideological shifts initiated in the Russian Federation in 2007, becoming markedly apparent during Putin's third presidential term after 2012. From this period, a comprehensive 're-ideologisation' of Russian domestic, foreign, and security policies can be discerned (Engström 2014, p. 356).

Although the Constitution, even following the amendments of 2020, guarantees ideological pluralism and precludes the establishment of a state-imposed ideology (Konstitutsiya 2020, Article 13), Putin has, since 2012, increasingly emphasised Russia's cultural and civilisational distinctiveness vis-à-vis the West (Tsygankov 2016, pp. 237–38). Putin's narrative posits Russia as the antithesis of the West in cultural, axiological, and even civilisational terms, thereby justifying Russia's security, survival, and development against both external and internal threats (Biscop 2019, p. 12).

The impetus for Russia's observable 'conservative turn' resides in the prevailing anti-globalism within the nation's dominant political discourse. However, this anti-globalism is largely framed as a rejection of Western culture, values, and lifestyles. Fundamental to Putin's anti-Western and conservative ideology are key constructs such as 'traditional values', the affirmation of a heteronormative family model, discriminatory practices against minority groups, and a notable emphasis on public morality (Riccardi-Swartz 2021).

According to Putin, the defence of marriage and family forms an intrinsic element of Russia's civilisational distinctiveness, as evidenced by Mal'chenkov (2022). This dis-

tinctiveness was first articulated by Putin in 2007 and gained greater prominence during his 2013 speech at the Valdai Club meeting. During this address, Putin starkly contrasted Russian values with those of the West, accusing the latter of relinquishing core moral principles, including those concerning family life and marriage. These principles, Putin asserted, are crucial to Russia's identity. Interestingly, in Russian political discourse post-2014, Ukraine has been portrayed as succumbing to Western influences by undermining traditional concepts of marriage and family and promoting non-heteronormative lifestyles (Soroka 2021, p. 14).

At a declarative level, efforts are underway to cast Russia as a state prioritising marriage and family. Symbolic gestures, such as the establishment of a 'Day of Family, Love, and Fidelity' in 2008, in collaboration with the ROC (Patriarchia.ru 2008), and its subsequent declaration as a state holiday in 2022 (Kremlin.ru 2022), serve this objective. Similarly, the 'Parental Glory' order, initiated by President Dmitriy Medvedev in 2009, is bestowed upon parents of large families 'for their significant contributions to child-rearing and the reinforcement of family traditions' (Patriarchia.ru 2009).

The sanctity of the family is further enshrined in the revised version of the Constitution of the Russian Federation, initiated by Putin and adopted in 2020. The Constitution's new drafting articulates the state's obligation 'to defend the family, motherhood, fatherhood, and childhood; to defend the institution of marriage as a union between a man and a woman; to create conditions for the dignified upbringing of children in the family and for full-grown children to fulfil their duty of care for their parents' (Article 72 zh1). Moreover, it prescribes the government's role in 'strengthening and defending the family' and 'preserving traditional family values' (Article 114 v).

The construct of 'traditional values,' encompassing familial values, is also a central tenet within the National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation. The 2021 Strategy document recurrently emphasises the necessity for the state to defend traditional Russian spiritual and moral values (Strategiya 2021, sec. 11, 22, 25.7, 26.8) from various forms of erosion, including the destabilisation of marital and family values, and the overemphasis on individual liberties and the promotion of immoral behaviour (Strategiya 2021, sec. 85). Notably, the United States and its allies are explicitly delineated as the primary threats to these traditional Russian values (Strategiya 2021, sec. 87). Among the values the Strategy specifically enumerates are 'a strong family' and 'high moral ideals' (Strategiya 2021, sec. 91). A cornerstone of the state's strategy for ensuring national security is the provision of support to the family, largely predicated upon incentives designed to stimulate an increase in birth rates and promote larger families (Strategiya 2021, sec. 30, 33.3).

It merits observation that, within official state discourse, the promotion of marital and familial institutions is almost exclusively couched in terms of encouraging demographic growth to meet state exigencies. Furthermore, this state-centric approach to population policy conspicuously lacks critical reflection on domestic factors that may be undermining familial sustainability within Russia, instead concentrating predominantly on external threats of a cultural and ideological nature.

3.2. Discriminatory Measures

While professing an imperative to safeguard Russian families, state authorities—exploiting their near-total monopoly over media—have, post-2012, co-opted confrontational stances that were once the preserve of conservative and Orthodox circles within Russia. These stances encompass, among other things, a resistance to the redefinition of marriage and an intent to curtail abortion rights with the aim of ameliorating the nation's demographic landscape (Chebankova 2013, pp. 11–12). In the Russian context, initiatives designed to bolster familial structures and enhance birth rates are inextricably linked to institutionalised discrimination against minority groups, as well as to a discriminatory discourse perpetuated by state-controlled media (Scheller-Boltz 2017, pp. 13–14).

The primary target of media and propaganda campaigns, ostensibly justified by concerns for familial integrity, are non-heterosexual individuals. The struggle against non-

heteronormative life patterns, ideologically substantiated, is hardly a novel phenomenon in Putin's Russia. After an initial period of sexual freedom in the early years of Bolshevik Russia (Healey 2008), from Stalin onwards, throughout the Soviet era, homosexuality was ideologised as symptomatic of Western bourgeois decay (Bozhkov and Protasenko 2019, pp. 193–94). Analogously, contemporary state propaganda depicts the visibility of non-heterosexual individuals within Western public spheres and cultures as emblematic of societal decadence (Scheller-Boltz 2017, p. 16). In both popular and scholarly Russian discourse, demographic challenges afflicting Western nations are attributed to the acceptance of non-traditional familial paradigms (D'yachenko and Pozdnyakova 2013). Notably absent from these discussions are Russia's own demographic tribulations, which Putin has failed to fully redress even during periods of relative political and economic stability.

Subsequent to the dissolution of the Soviet Union, legislative provisions criminalising homosexual conduct were expunged from the Russian penal code. Though homophobia persisted within Russian popular culture (Borenstein 2019, p. 135), discrimination against non-heterosexual individuals during the 1990s and the initial decade of Putin's governance was not tethered to state policies intended to fortify marital and familial institutions. This paradigm shifted markedly in 2013, with the enactment of legislation prohibiting the dissemination of content related to 'non-traditional sexual relations' to minors. This state-endorsed homophobic crusade was part of a broader movement to promulgate 'traditional values', championed by an alliance comprising nationalists, communists, President Putin, the United Russia party, and the ROC. Legislative amendments prohibiting the adoption of Russian orphans by the inhabitants of the countries where same-sex marriage is legal (Barabanov 2014), as well as by individuals in same-sex relationships, were further discriminatory undertakings, rationalised as necessary for ensuring children's wholesome upbringing and shielding them from pernicious non-traditional sexual norms (Interfax.ru 2013). In 2022, legislative constraints were tightened further, extending the prohibition on the dissemination of content concerning 'non-traditional sexual relations' and 'gender reassignment' to adult audiences (Sokolov and Martynova 2022). In 2023, Putin signed into law a blanket ban on gender reassignment within Russia (Volkova 2023).

Legislative enactments of a discriminatory nature, buttressed by accompanying homophobic propaganda campaigns, are incessantly justified under the auspices of protecting children and adolescents from detrimental influences (Bozhkov and Protasenko 2019, pp. 202–3), as well as by the state's aspiration to rectify the nation's demographic imbalance (Scheller-Boltz 2017, p. 83). Thus, as Edenborg (2017, p. 77) observes, homophobia in Russia is transmuted into a political phenomenon, deployed as a strategic tool by the state in its quest for socio-political control and hegemony.

3.3. ROC as an Essential Element of Ideologised Public Discourse

According to the provisions of the Constitution, the Russian Federation is a secular state preserving the principle of separation of state and church (Konstitutsiya 2020, Article 14). Despite constitutional amendments in 2020 initiated by President Putin—which introduced a reference to God (Article 67.1) among other ideological tenets—the Russian Federation remains theoretically secular. Herein, freedom of conscience and religious expression constitute fundamental pillars of the constitutional edifice (Bimbinov and Voronin 2017, pp. 112–13). Nevertheless, akin to issues concerning marriage, family, and a plethora of other social and cultural matters, religious life under Putin's aegis has undergone pronounced securitisation. Consequently, limitations have been imposed upon non-state-controlled religious organisations, notwithstanding constitutional assurances to the contrary (Admiraal 2009, p. 205). Simultaneously, the ROC, as the predominant religious institution, has emerged as a pivotal collaborator with state authorities in executing domestic policies, especially those of ideological import. As Engström (2014, p. 366) observes, within the context of Russia's nascent conservatism, Orthodoxy functions principally as a political religion, legitimising, among other things, conflict or warfare with the West.

In Western perceptions—particularly post-2007 and subsequent to the 2008 Russian-Georgian war—Putin has endeavoured to portray himself as a stalwart defender of Christian values. He also referred to Christianity when justifying the occupation and illicit annexation of Crimea and Sevastopol in 2014 (Engström 2014, pp. 373–74). Actions of a political and legal nature aimed at fortifying the ROC underscore its role as a quintessential ally in moulding social dispositions favourable to state authorities. Hence, a discernible trajectory has emerged since 2012, accentuated by legislative amendments, towards augmenting the ROC's societal influence. The 2012 protest by the Pussy Riot group at Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Saviour epitomises a turning point. Although intrinsically political rather than anti-religious, the protest assailed the symbiotic relationship between the ROC and state authorities, including their joint stance on sexual minorities and women's rights (Bernstein 2013, pp. 220–21; Uzlaner 2014). This event catalysed legislative changes in 2013, instituting criminal penalties for actions deemed to offend the religious sensibilities of believers (Novikov 2015, pp. 194–95; Shilin 2016). The biased nature of this legislative enactment is apparent in its failure to extend similar protections to non-religious individuals (Skladanowski 2022).

Concomitantly, under Putin's governance, the ROC has conspicuously amplified its focus on identity politics. Following the disintegration of the USSR in the mid-1990s, Russia embarked upon a quest for a renewed national identity, wherein the ROC has assumed an increasingly prominent role. Legislative articulations, such as the 1997 federal law, further entrench this by drawing a distinction between 'traditional' religions and new religious movements, despite the formal preservation of religious freedom (Hämmerli 2017, p. 49). As posited by Semenova (2013), the ROC sacralises Russia, envisaging it as the 'Holy Rus,' a fulcrum of Eastern European Christian civilisation endowed with a profound spiritual legacy and rich cultural heritage. The ROC promulgates a slew of values—including patriotism, familial cohesion, the sanctity of labour, honesty, communal harmony, justice, forbearance, and historical reverence—aimed at consolidating societal unity and prioritising the community (state) over the individual (person).

In Putin's Russia, nationalism and Orthodoxy have become increasingly intertwined. This symbiosis extends even to groups that, whilst invoking Orthodox rhetoric, maintain tenuous affiliations with the ROC but exploit religious discourse to advance xenophobic, Islamophobic, or homophobic agendas (Mitrofanova 2016, p. 126). This intricate relationship has not escaped the attention of state authorities, particularly in the wake of the so-called 'conservative turn'. By affording preferential treatment to the ROC in the public sphere, the government envisages its active participation in implementing social and demographic policies, particularly those pertaining to familial and marital matters (Patriarchia.ru 2015).

4. Concern for Marriage and Family According to Patriarch Kirill and Other ROC Representatives

According to The Bases of the Social Concept of the ROC, the Church is duty-bound to collaborate with governmental bodies and relevant societal groups to foster an understanding of national health care that enables each individual to exercise their right to spiritual, physical, and mental well-being, alongside maximum life expectancy (Osnovy sotsial'noy kontseptsii 2008, sec. XI.3). Within the same document, the ROC articulates its apprehensions concerning the extant demographic crisis affecting the communities it serves (Osnovy sotsial'noy kontseptsii 2008, sec. XI.4). Hence, the Church perceives itself as authorised to endorse protective measures aimed at motherhood and childhood and implores the state to enact corresponding policies.

Intriguingly, pressing questions arise regarding the congruence between the ROC's discourse and state policy priorities. Further enquiry is warranted into the extent to which the ideological tenets embedded in Putin's post-2007 pronouncements—particularly during periods of heightened geopolitical tensions with the West—find resonance within the ROC's public positions. To address these interrogatives, we will initially explore (1) key areas of pastoral interest and concern of the ROC and (2) the responsibilities undertaken by the ROC

in buttressing families, before identifying (3) principal threats to the stability of marriage and family as articulated by the Church. Subsequently, an evaluation will be undertaken to (4) ascertain the extent to which the ROC's stances are politically inflected and correlate with the prevailing state ideology of Putin's Russia.

4.1. Key Areas of Pastoral Interest and Concern

Central to the ROC's social teaching are the concepts of marriage and the 'traditional family', largely attributable to the Church's inherently conservative ethos. This stance is further contextualised by the demographic and societal transformations that have occurred in post-Soviet Russia. The election of Kirill Gundyayev as the Patriarch of Moscow marked an intensified period of pro-family activism within the ROC. From the outset, Kirill underscored the imperative for the ROC's augmented social engagement, with particular emphasis on fortifying the institution of marriage and the family unit (Kirill 2009b). Kirill places significant weight on ensuring that the trajectory of Russian societal development is predicated upon genuine spiritual and moral precepts, as opposed to merely the economic imperatives set forth by the state (Kirill 2010). It merits noting that Kirill, along with other ROC hierarchs, views marriage through an uncompromising lens as a covenant exclusively between a man and a woman. Attempts to recalibrate the definition of marriage are perceived by Kirill as an abomination antithetical to divine principles, rooted in the moral degeneracy of Western civilisation (Kirill 2015).

In order to bolster the initiatives of the ROC aimed at safeguarding familial institutions, a series of organisational shifts were initiated. The Patriarchal Council for the Family and the Protection of Motherhood was founded in 2011 (Patriarchia.ru 2011a). Subsequently, it underwent transformations, becoming the Patriarchal Commission for the Family and the Protection of Motherhood in 2012 and evolving further in 2013 to the Patriarchal Commission for the Family and the Protection of Motherhood and Children. By decision of the Holy Synod, Protopriest Dmitriy Smirnov assumed the chairmanship of the Commission, a role he maintained until 25 August 2020, when he was succeeded by Fedor Luk'yanov.

The Commission's seminal objective centred on countering the familial crisis while promulgating family values, endorsing large families, combating abortion, and assisting single mothers and orphans. During its inaugural meeting on 6 April 2012, the Commission adopted a resolution highlighting that Russia's prevailing social malaise is fundamentally attributable to the crisis engulfing the family unit. As underscored within the resolution, without overcoming this crisis, any kind of social stability is impossible: 'It is affecting all aspects of modern life: people do not want to get married, preferring the so-called "free life", the number of children killed as a result of abortion is approaching the number of newborns, almost half of young families are breaking up, and horrific examples of domestic violence, cases of children being murdered by their parents, are becoming more frequent. People do not know how to bring up their children, they do not know how to show them love properly. Children grow up in loneliness, because of which they suffer severely, despise their parents and do not find moral guidance in life' (Patriarchia.ru 2012). As emphasised, most of today's social problems such as drug addiction, alcoholism, social alienation and domestic violence are linked to the 'catastrophic situation of the family'. Consequently, it posits that support for families should ascend to the forefront of public priorities and governmental policy. Special attention, it contends, ought to be accorded to large families, elevating them to the status of a 'national asset'. Economic incentives, such as housing credit schemes, maternity grants, and employment programmes tailored for parents from large families, are deemed indispensable. There is an urgent requirement to shield families, particularly those expecting a new child, from the perils of indigence. Calls were made for the promotion of family values through public media, the institution of a network of family support centres, and the reform of extant state organisations focused on family welfare. Importantly, the ROC does not approach the subject of family merely through the prism of state welfare. Instead, it envisions the family as the epitome of the Gospel's ideals of mutual love and service, labelling family life a 'spiritual endeavour' (*podvig*) (Patriarchia.ru 2012).

In the ensuing years, the Commission's activities remained aligned with the critical issues outlined in its 2012 resolution. By 2015, these efforts culminated in the publication of a *Collection of Materials for the Protection of the Family, Motherhood, and Children*, encompassing key documents drafted by both the ROC and the Commission, as well as an assortment of pertinent public discourses on correlated topics (Patriarshaya Komissiya 2015).

4.2. Tasks of the Church and Cooperation with the State

In 2011, the ROC Council of Bishops adopted a document entitled *On the Principles of the Organisation of Social Work in the ROC*, which articulated the Church's dedication to offering both spiritual and material support to families (O printsipakh 2011). Under the aegis of Patriarch Kirill, various family support initiatives have been instigated, both at the national stratum and within individual eparchies (dioceses). These initiatives encompass the establishment of temporary shelters for expectant mothers and women with children, the operation of helplines and pre-abortion counselling services, as well as the provision of material, psychological, and legal support to pregnant women (Patriarchia.ru 2011c). Predominantly, however, the ROC's discourse concerning marital and familial support underscores the necessity of collaboration with state institutions, particularly those vested with the responsibility for the upbringing of children and adolescents. Patriarch Kirill advocates a fortified alliance between the Church and educational establishments, with the objective of inculcating moral principles into the education of younger generations, encompassing a traditionalist image of family life (Kirill 2009a). Moreover, the Moscow Patriarchate enjoins the Church to collaborate with healthcare providers, social welfare services, and civic organisations committed to family advocacy. Defined aims for this collaborative effort include the prevention of abortions and the provision of assistance to large families and those in precarious circumstances. It is further posited that family support centres be established within eparchies, providing a holistic suite of spiritual, legal, educational, material, and psychological support services. Eparchies are also urged to organise holiday camps and aid initiatives for orphaned children (Patriarchia.ru 2013b).

A salient concern perpetually manifested in the ROC's discourse is the mitigation of Russia's demographic crisis through the augmentation of birth rates. This sentiment has been echoed by ecclesiastical figures such as Patriarch Kirill (2020), Metropolitan Ilarion Alfeyev (2011), the former Chairman of the Moscow Patriarchate's Department for External Church Relations, and other high-ranking clergy (Shatov 2013). In numerous statements, representatives of the ROC employ a largely uniform line of argumentation, envisioning the Church as a bulwark that propagates a favourable perception of marriage and family life within societal discourse. This includes the promotion of Christian familial values, with a particular emphasis placed upon the concept of motherhood. The underlying ethos here is an encouragement for families to procreate expansively, contravening cultural norms that militate against larger family units. In this vein, the Church bears the responsibility of amplifying the social stature of large families and illuminating the intrinsic value of human life as a strategy for reducing abortion rates. In its endeavour to preserve the family structure, the ROC identifies this as indispensable for safeguarding the future of the Russian populace.

4.3. Church-Identified Threats to Marriage and Family in Russia

The ROC's articulation on the safeguarding of marriage and familial institutions is framed principally within a contextual backdrop of existential threats. The disintegration of traditional family structures in Russia is ascribed to a confluence of adverse social changes, encompassing a predilection for smaller family units, a diminished inclination to formalise relationships, and an emergent crisis of Christian values within the societal fabric (Patriarchia.ru 2011d). According to representatives of the Moscow Patriarchate, the erosion of the family institution, in its traditional sense, is the cause of contemporary societal maladies (Shatov 2013). In addition to the aforementioned demographic crisis that delineates post-Soviet Russia, the threats are predominantly external, often attributed

to the acculturation of foreign—primarily Western—values, lifestyles and, ostensibly, a de-Christianised cultural milieu.

4.3.1. Western Liberal Culture

Firstly, the jeopardy to the integrity and sustainability of the family is ostensibly rooted in secularisation, which is perceived to undermine traditional values and obfuscate the ontological understanding of human existence (Alfeyev 2009). The incorporation of alien cultural paradigms is purported to catalyse scepticism regarding traditional family constructs and propagate the ascendance of non-committal relationships. This trend manifests in the depreciation of erstwhile values such as fidelity, mutual respect, and responsibility, whilst simultaneously amplifying the salience of hedonism and egoism within individual lived experiences (Alfeyev 2014). This trajectory, in turn, culminates in the diminution of the spiritual sanctity of marriage, a decline which is also ostensibly anchored in secularisation currents infiltrating Russia from abroad (Kirill 2015).

A parallel critique of what is perceived as the moral deterioration of Western societies can be discerned in the pronouncements of Patriarch Kirill during international engagements. On 12 February 2016, a joint declaration was signed by Pope Francis and Patriarch Kirill, wherein the subject of family and its requisite protection commanded substantial attention. Specifically, both ecclesiastical leaders articulated a shared apprehension concerning the crisis engulfing family structures across numerous nations (Patriarchia.ru 2016b). For Patriarch Kirill, the source of spiritual decline in the West, as well as the concomitant threat it poses to Russian society, can be directly traced to secularisation, a phenomenon he interprets in unequivocally negative terms (Patriarchia.ru 2016a). As Monge (2017) observes, according to Alfeyev, '(s)ecularisation is... the liberation of the modern liberal democratic state from the checks to its power that Christianity has to offer'. Secularisation thus implies an inevitable moral decline of a nation.

According to Kirill (2020), Russian society is experiencing 'increasing pressure on the traditional institution of the family in Russia. The very idea of family life is often discredited in the public space, in the pages of colourful publications, and in social networks that focus on the fact that family life allegedly reduces the level of comfort and consumption. It is proposed to replace the family as the cradle of life with new reproductive technologies'.

Subsequent to the onset of Russia's full-scale military aggression against Ukraine, Kirill asserted that Russia was engaged in a struggle against externally imposed visions of a global order that contravene its core religious convictions. Western socio-cultural shifts—including the advancement of social equality for non-heterosexual individuals and evolving definitions of marriage and family—are perceived as manifestations of this antithetical order, which Russia is obliged to resist (Kirill 2022a). Kirill posits that Russia must endure as a fortress of traditional Christian values, repudiating external ideologies incongruent with the Orthodox understanding of family life. In this vein, the Patriarch advocates for the state's cooperation, in particular by introducing legislation that would restrict patterns of marriage and family life other than those recognised as 'traditional' by the ROC (Kirill 2022c).

4.3.2. Non-Heterosexual Equality

Secondly, the Moscow Patriarchate identifies an erosion of traditional matrimonial frameworks emanating from what it perceives as the identity-debilitating redefinitions of marriage within liberal Western societies. Such redefinitions are construed as potentially deleterious to the established conservative conceptualisation of marriage in Russia. An examination of discourses emanating from the ROC hierarchy on matrimonial and familial constructs—especially in the context of the escalation of the Russian–Ukrainian conflict from 2014 onward—reveals an augmenting emphasis on critiques of non-heterosexual individuals. These critiques are concomitant with the formulation of a narrative depicting Western society as inherently flawed and unsustainable. Legislation recognising the marital rights of non-heterosexual individuals in various countries has elicited pronounced censure

from the Russian ecclesiastical establishment (Kirill 2015). Furthermore, legislative shifts towards equality in foreign jurisdictions serve as an impetus for the ROC to vociferously oppose any manifestation of non-heterosexual equality or visibility within Russian societal confines, predicated ostensibly on concerns for the continuity and integrity of traditional familial structures in Russia.

Thus, ROC hierarchs extend beyond merely endorsing the traditional doctrine stipulating that marriage constitutes a union between a man and a woman, endowed within ecclesiastical contexts with spiritual, or sacramental, significance. Against this backdrop, the ROC categorically repudiates legislative amendments facilitating marriage and child adoption for non-heterosexual couples as symptomatic of a profound familial crisis, objectification of children, and an abrogation of their rights to mature within a conventionally configured familial environment (Alfeyev 2013; Patriarchia.ru 2013a). Metropolitan Ilarion discerns an existential crisis of the West, evidenced by educational curricula in numerous liberal democratic nations incorporating content respecting sexual minorities and endorsing their societal equality. Such content is characterised by Ilarion as ‘propaganda of an unnatural lifestyle’ that undermines familial structures (Alfeyev 2022).

The ROC exhibited unequivocal endorsement for the 2022 intensification of the 2013 law proscribing ‘LGBT propaganda’. In justification of this legislative retrenchment, Patriarch Kirill analogised initiatives advocating sexual identity self-determination and expression to an ‘ideology of dehumanisation,’ entailing a detachment from an ontological understanding of human sexuality. According to Kirill, the amplification of discriminatory statutes signifies a confrontation with a ‘civilisation of death’, embodies an ‘ideological struggle’, and manifests concern for the ‘spiritual and corporeal well-being of the nation’ (Kirill 2022d). He posits that this legislative manoeuvre serves to buttress conventional familial values within Russia and, by extension, fortify the national ethos. Furthermore, he believes that the new legislation makes Russia ‘more and more an island of freedom, because we are defending the values that ensure true freedom. (...) It is important to emphasise the value of family relations, the value of the traditional family, to talk about the traditional family so that young people see its true beauty, the joys that loyalty gives, the service of the family and children’ (Kirill 2023).

4.3.3. Availability of Abortion

As a third existential menace to the Russian familial structure, the ROC identifies the prevalence of abortion utilised as a contraceptive measure. Remarkably, the ecclesiastical discourse abstains from engaging the subject in the broader contexts of women’s rights or the social and economic underpinnings that precipitate abortion. The focus predominantly remains on demographic implications—namely, the exacerbation of an already declining population within the Russian Federation. While Patriarch Kirill has alluded to the potential establishment of robust social support mechanisms for larger families (Kirill 2011), ecclesiastical communiqués more frequently espouse the need for societal endorsement of large familial units, rather than a nuanced exploration of the causative factors contributing to the high incidence of abortions in Russia.

The ROC presents itself as a proponent of the social value and respectability of women’s roles as wives and mothers (Kirill 2009c), while simultaneously advocating for curtailment of abortion access as the primary strategy for demographic augmentation. Acknowledging the unparalleled magnitude of abortion incidence in Russia and other post-Soviet states, the ROC doctrinally condemns abortion as an anathema to the sanctity of life, corrosive to familial integrity, and an existential peril to both national and state futures (Chaplin 2010). Although the Moscow Patriarchate has inaugurated social initiatives designed to furnish psychological and social support for expectant mothers as a deterrence against abortion (Patriarchia.ru 2010), the ecclesiastical institutions have more vigorously lobbied state authorities for the implementation of legislative measures circumscribing access to abortion. This legislative activism has found expression in proposals and advocacies

(Patriarchia.ru 2011b), and has been crystallised in Patriarch Kirill's call for the cessation of state funding allocated for abortion procedures (Kirill 2022e).

Further legislative propositions aimed at restricting access to abortion were advanced by the ROC in 2023. In January, Fedor Luk'yanov, the Chairman of the Patriarchal Commission for the Family and the Protection of Motherhood and Children, recommended the incorporation of a legal framework mandating the consent of the child's father as well as obligatory psychological consultation as prerequisites for an abortion procedure (Voroshilov 2023). Subsequently, in September, the same Commission advocated for the reduction of the permissible gestational age for abortion from twelve to eight weeks (TASS 2023). Although the Ministry of Health expressed its concurrence in July 2023 with proposals by representatives of United Russia in the State Duma to limit the availability of early abortifacients (Interfax.ru 2023), this development should not be conflated with a comprehensive legislative effort aimed at curtailing abortion. Indeed, as observed by Kolstø (2023, p. 164), the majority of initiatives championed by the ROC with the intention of limiting abortion have encountered failure in the State Duma. This phenomenon underscores the pre-eminence of political calculus in the authorities' ideological policymaking over the comparatively limited influence wielded by the ROC, particularly on issues of social sensitivity such as abortion.

4.4. Ideological and Political Aspects of the ROC Position

In summary, the delineation of threats to matrimonial and familial integrity within the Russian context, as articulated by Patriarch Kirill and other representatives of the ROC, evinces a discourse that, while preserving the fundamental tenets of traditional Christian teaching on marriage and its concomitant moral imperatives, is inexorably shaped by political and ideological considerations. Several manifestations of this politicisation and concomitant alignment with state policy merit attention.

Firstly, there is an unmistakable accentuation on extrinsic threats to the Russian family, principally emanating from Western liberal culture. The ROC's critique of the West intensifies commensurately with the escalation of state-sanctioned anti-Western rhetoric (Curanović 2019, pp. 67–69). Significantly absent from the ecclesiastical analysis are reflections on Russia's internal socio-political conditions—most notably, the structural inadequacies and social pathologies—that adversely affect the viability of marriages and the quality of familial life.

Secondly, the framing of marital and familial issues predominantly within the schema of Russian–Western confrontation foregrounds axiological considerations, thereby relegating these issues to a battle of values. The ROC imputes to the West the degradation of the family institution by espousing values and lifestyles antithetical to what is traditionally upheld in Russia (Morozov 2017).

Thirdly, the ROC discourse relating to marriage and family focuses—in line with the rhetoric of state authorities—on their importance for the state and society. This is due to the appreciation of community and state inherent in Orthodox anthropology, which also leads to the marginalisation of issues of individual human rights and the importance of personal life choices. The weakening of the traditional family is, therefore, to be associated with the weakening of the state. The problem of human rights and the adoption of a Western understanding of them in post-Soviet Russia, including their inclusion in Russian legislation, was of concern to the ROC. In particular, it was difficult to link human rights with so-called liberal values, placing the individual above the community and recognising the subservient role of the community (state, society, Church) to the individual.

Thirdly, the ROC's discourse conspicuously echoes the state's rhetoric in emphasising the instrumental value of marriage and family for societal and state coherence. This perspective aligns with the communitarian ethos embedded in Orthodox anthropology, resulting in the marginalisation of individual human rights and personal autonomy. The erosion of traditional familial structures is consequently framed as synonymous with the weakening of the state apparatus (Morozov 2017, p. 144). The ROC has expressed

trepidation over the infiltration of Western conceptualisations of human rights into Russian jurisprudence, perceiving it as a disruptive force that elevates individual autonomy over communal obligations and subverts traditional hierarchies (Deklaratsiya 2006). The ROC expressed opposition to the Western concept of human rights, seeing it as a manifestation of Western secularism and anthropocentrism (Osnovy sotsial'noy kontseptsii 2008, sec. IV.7; Osnovy ucheniya 2008, sec. III.2). As noted by Stoeckl (2017, p. 18), 'Social Concept presented human rights as the product of a Western secular legal positivism, which started to influence the Russian legal space after the breakdown of the Soviet Union, but was essentially alien to the national legal culture'.

5. Conclusions

An examination of statements by Patriarch Kirill and other figures within the ROC, particularly when juxtaposed with pronouncements by President Putin and actions of the Russian state, allows for several salient observations.

(1) The ROC's discourse on marriage and family unambiguously mirrors the key themes prevalent in the state-controlled political narrative. This correspondence is partly attributable to a shared recognition, between state authorities and the Moscow Patriarchate, of the acute societal challenges besetting contemporary Russia—chief among which is a demographically precarious situation portending population decline (Lisitsyna 2021; Plamenev 2023). In a multi-ethnic and multi-faith country such as the Russian Federation, these demographic issues disproportionately impact the Slavic Orthodox populace, thereby compounding the ROC's anxieties. The escalation of these demographic challenges in the aftermath of Russia's military aggression against Ukraine on 24 February 2022 has been palpable, exacerbated by elevated casualty rates among Russian military personnel and migration propelled by conscription fears. Notably, the repercussions of the war on Russian families are conspicuously absent in ecclesiastical discourse, mirroring their marginalisation in official state propaganda.

(2) The ROC adopts a conservative doctrinal stance in its conceptualisation of marriage and its advocacy for the family institution. It eschews any redefinition of marriage or the legitimisation of non-traditional family structures. Consequently, the ROC consistently rebuffs legislative or social shifts in other countries that redefine the foundational constructs of marriage and family.

(3) Although the ROC largely adheres to traditional Christian tenets concerning matrimony, it is evident that demographic concerns in Russia are both heavily ideologised and securitised in ecclesiastical discourse. This is most discernible in the precedence accorded to pro-natalist policies. While low birth rates constitute merely one facet of Russia's multi-faceted social conundrum, they attain a disproportionate emphasis both in state actions and in church rhetoric. This aspect of the ROC's discourse is most strikingly aligned with Putin's policy objectives, particularly in framing Western culture and democratic values as existential threats to Russian matrimonial and familial integrity. Such stances also extend to unambiguous endorsements of state-sanctioned discrimination against non-heterosexual individuals, rationalised as a defence of the traditional family.

In this way, the ROC's commitment to safeguarding marriage and family serves to fortify the state's portrayal of contemporary Russia as a bulwark of conservative values and traditional familial paradigms. This, in turn, enables the denigration of the West in the ongoing geopolitical and ideological confrontations as morally insolvent and destined for inexorable decline.

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Article

The Role of the Virtue of Religiosity in the Experience of Engagement

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Abstract: For believers, a decision to enter sacramental marriage is one of the most important steps in their lives. They prepare for it over the engagement period. This is a time of personal formation open to further improvement, in which religion plays an important role. Religiosity is the moral virtue by which man honours God. The bride and groom-to-be bring the experience of their own religiosity to the relationship, which allows for mutual enrichment and positive confrontation. The aim of this research is to show the influence of religiosity on the building of the engagement bond and its subsequent impact on the nuptial community. The paper is of a theoretical and empirical nature and belongs to the area of moral theology. This research includes the conclusions of empirical studies conducted in Poland. The method of source material analysis applied in this paper allows for a synthesis that shows the complexity of the phenomenon, with special attention paid to the aretology of the analysed issue. The synthesis offers concrete solutions for future brides and grooms, as well as those responsible for preparing for the sacrament of marriage. It reaffirms the need to form a mature religiosity during the engagement period. It encourages certain religious forms that serve to build a relationship with God and enable the bride and groom to better relate to each other. An important dimension of properly experienced religiosity is its formative character that enables one to make appropriate moral choices.

Keywords: engagement; religiousness; virtue



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1. Introduction

Pope Francis, when addressing young people, emphasizes that preparation for marriage should include the development of the best virtues (Francis 2019, no. 295). One of these is the virtue of religiosity, which allows for building a relationship with God and having a proper attitude towards other people.

Despite the possibility of preparing for the sacrament of marriage through various forms of pastoral assistance, many people enter married life without being aware of God's support. Engaged couples who begin preparation for marriage often approach their pastors just to meet the requirements of canonical law, without being aware that the sacrament of marriage implies the presence of God and His grace. This is the result of weak faith, as well as improper experience of religiosity. Therefore a deeper commitment to preparing for marriage is necessary. What is most important is the development of the virtue of religiosity, which enables a deepening of one's relationship with God, establishes friendship with Him, and draws from the source of Love in order to fulfil the tasks drawn from the sacrament of marriage in following the path of holiness (Głód 2008, p. 106)

This study is intended to show the virtue of religiosity during the period of engagement. First, the virtue of religiosity will be presented, which, in the Catholic theology, is an expression of justice towards God and other individuals. Next, the essence of engagement will be offered as a state of preparation for sacramental marriage. Later the author will describe the positive impact of the implementation of the virtue of religiosity during the period of engagement, as well as the most common flaws that result from the poor implementation of this process. The source material analysis method used in this

study, as well as the author's research, will contribute to a synthesis that will illustrate the complexity of the phenomenon. Special attention shall be given to the aretological aspect of the discussed issues. The theological perspective presented in this study addresses brides and bridegrooms-to-be who are preparing to receive the sacrament of marriage in the Catholic Church, although it is not entirely limited to this perspective.

2. The Virtue of Religiosity as an Expression of Justice to God and to Others

According to the definition of the specificity of man, he is a religious being (*homo religiosus*), meaning that he has a personal and individual attitude to laws and truths that stem from religion that he or she adopts (Makselon 1995, p. 255).

This attitude is known as 'religiosity', and is expressed by fulfilling specific acts through which a person turns to God, involving his entire personality, that is both soul and body. Thus, on the religious level, one can speak of internal and external acts that are performed by a person which are mutually dependent and are expressed by one another. From a Christian perspective, internal acts are more perfect than external ones and, at the same time, closer to God, who wants to be worshipped in spirit and truth (Wichrowicz 2002, p. 131).

Thus, taking into account the Catholic Church's teaching on acts of religiosity, it should be noted that the Catechism lists the acts without differentiating between internal and external ones. According to the catechism, religiosity is expressed by "adoring God, praying to him, offering him the worship that belongs to him, fulfilling the promises and vows made to him" (CCC/Catechism of the Catholic Church 2003, no. 2135). At the same time, acts of religiosity have both individual and communal dimensions (CCC/Catechism of the Catholic Church 2003, no. 2136).

Interpreting the rather general indications provided by the Catechism, Catholic moral theology offers precise methods through which man's religiousness is expressed. They are as follows: piety, as the first act of religiosity; prayer; sacrifice; adoration; almsgiving and all kinds of tributes or contributions; vows, both public and private; reception of the holy sacraments; and the observance of holy days by worshipping God in a community (Ćmiel 2008, p. 240).

All of these acts are intended to worship God both directly, when the acts are directed at the individual Persons of the Trinity, and indirectly, through creation (saints and blessings). In addition to the vertical dimension realized in the relationship to God, acts of religiosity have a horizontal dimension concerning the proper attitude towards other individuals, for "religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to care for orphans and widows in their affliction and to keep oneself unstained by the world" (James 1:27). Properly experienced religiosity presupposes, apart from an encounter with God, a relationship with neighbours that is expressed by helping the other, having concern for those in need, and performing acts of mercy.

In Catholic terms, the attitude of religiosity is a virtue that stems from a theological virtue of justice. The third section of The Catechism of the Catholic Church devoted to moral issues states that "justice is the moral virtue that consists in the constant and firm will to give their due to God and neighbor. Justice toward God is called the virtue of religion" (CCC/Catechism of the Catholic Church 2003, no. 1807).

Religiosity is, therefore, a moral virtue, not a theological one; that is, its direct object is not God as man's ultimate goal, but the created reality that is a means to the ultimate end, which, in the Christian understanding, is God and the relationship with Him. The relational character of the virtue of religiosity is emphasized by Piotr Roszak and Tomasz Gutowski, who stress the fact that the Thomasian understanding of religiosity goes beyond the duty deriving from justice, but leans towards a purposive understanding of the relationship with God, thanks to which every action and choice gains meaning in relation to God as the ultimate goal (Roszak and Gutowski 2021, p. 96).

This created reality is composed of various acts of internal and external worship, through which man honours God. St. Thomas Aquinas distinguishes between God, to

whom the virtue of religiosity is directed, and the acts through which God is worshipped. Religiosity belongs to the latter domain (Thomas Aquinas 1971, p. 179).

While realizing the virtue of religiosity, one should be aware that this virtue evolves and changes with a person, his or her personality, and existential orientation. Regarding religious development, an important role is played by intellectual, emotional, and volitional processes, as well as religious experience or participation in worship. Religious maturity is achieved in the process of adolescence, while such factors as environment and upbringing affect the development of religiosity, positively or negatively. Positive family experience and regular participation in divine worship are opportunities to acquire positive religious experience that fosters the deepening of religious experience. Having negative community experience, a poor family example, an environment hostile to religion, and withdrawal from religious practices may be causes of the crisis of religiosity that can occur at different stages of life (Kraśniński 2002, pp. 142–14).

3. Engagement as a Stage in Preparation for Marriage

Preparation for marriage is a gradual and continuous process composed of three characteristic phases: pre-preparation, close preparation, and direct preparation. Pre-preparation begins in childhood and is accomplished through proper pedagogy that shows human life in the marriage and family community. Close preparation begins at an appropriate age and is realized through religious formation, especially at the level of catechesis. It is meant to lead to a deeper understanding of the sacraments, the relationship between man and woman, and responsible parenthood. The next step is direct preparation, which is exercised during the months and weeks preceding a wedding and is carried out by a prenuptial exam as required by canon law. Moreover, direct preparation covers the content that deepens the understanding of married life in the community of the Church (John Paul 1981, no. 66).

An important moment on the road of preparation for marriage is the engagement stage, which should be experienced in a spiritual way. The stage starts with an official engagement or declaration of intention to marry made before a competent pastor. Although engagement has no legal consequences, it binds the bride and groom-to-be in their conscience and opens the way to sacramental marriage (CIC/Code of Canon Law 1998, no. 1062; Pyżlak 2013).

It is important to distinguish between a marriage proposal and an engagement. A proposal is the moment of final decision and declaration. The act is usually followed by an engagement. Depending on tradition, engagement has different levels of formality (Grzybowski 2006, p. 269).

Engagement has a long tradition dating back to the beginning of the institution of the Church. The Church adopted this custom for pastoral reasons in order to emphasize its deep spiritual and community-forming sense. Nowadays, reviving the tradition of ceremonial engagement that emphasizes these two dimensions seems desirable. Engagement is meant to become a family event, which is not an empty ritual, but, above all, a religious act. The religious nature of this act emphasizes its community dimension. If possible, engagement should take place in the family circle. This will help to build good relationships between the families of the bride and groom-to-be and allow one to see the value of the “domestic Church” that the family is meant to become. A significant element of the engagement that emphasizes its spiritual nature is the blessing of the engagement ring (or rings), which, under canon law, may be performed by lay people (usually parents). An engagement ring makes a statement that, from now on, a man and a woman consider themselves an engaged couple (Polish Episcopal Conference 1998).

This is because brides and grooms-to-be very often prepare themselves for the moment of engagement for a long time. However, they pay attention mainly to the external experience, while the consequences of this event are not duly acknowledged. Research emphasizes that, nowadays, the ritual of engagement has become an empty gesture that does not entail specific changes. Engagement is not treated as a rite of passage that changes

the identity of those who go through it, for it is not always the case that what follows expresses the proper meaning of this rite (Ukleja 2018).

Thus, the recognition of the religious character of this event seems necessary. This is what Pope Francis means when he says that “at times, the couple does not grasp the theological and spiritual import of the words of consent, which illuminate the meaning of all the signs that follow. It needs to be stressed that these words cannot be reduced to the present; they involve a totality that includes the future: “until death do us part”. The content of the words of consent makes it clear that freedom and fidelity are not opposed to one another; rather, they are mutually supportive, both in interpersonal and social relationships” (Francis 2016, no. 214).

Both the engagement ceremony and the entire period of engagement should be experienced by believers in a spiritual way. This is a condition for a similar experience in marriage. Alaine Quilici emphasizes that “the time of engagement can only be defined with respect to the time of marriage. The former precedes the latter. The time of engagement prepared the time of marriage. However, the said times do not intertwine. Thus, in order to recognize the spiritual meaning of engagement, we must discover the spiritual meaning of marriage” (Quilici 2009).

Thus, the engagement of believers is meant to have a spiritual character that enables one to experience God through prayer and a deeper understanding of the sacraments and truths of faith. Moreover, it is a time for being with each other and getting to know each other, especially with respect to one’s religious life. The period of engagement goes beyond an individualistic view of the world and creates a vision, which we refer to as a personalistic one. In the personalistic school, a person never exists for himself or herself, but lives in relation to others. This relationship gives birth to a community in which the well-being of each other counts. It is the other person who matters. “To be” is far more important than “to possess”. This logic of gift initiated in the period of engagement allows this kind of thinking to be transferred into the nuptial relationship and create the “*communio*” of the nuptial community in which the other person is the highest good (Quilici and La Balme 2003).

The creation of ‘*communio*’ today faces a number of difficulties that are linked to the negative understanding and promotion of individualism. This involves breaking ties and running away from the social and even family communities. This attitude makes it difficult to discover one’s own identity, which is learned through narration and communication with others. Entering into fiancéhood in such a state does not allow for the proper development of the fiancé community and then the marriage community. To counteract this, the positive dimension of individualization should be recognized. It will allow one to see one’s own value, uniqueness, or potential that one brings to the marital community and then to develop it in that community. Individuality does not disappear in the communion of persons, but perfects itself and can become a gift for others (Tykarski 2019, pp. 591–92).

An important part of the spiritual experience of the time of engagement is a proper experience of the virtue of chastity. The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World urges the betrothed “to nourish and develop their wedlock by pure conjugal love [...]” (Second Vatican Council 1965b, no. 49).

Maintaining chastity during engagement is the path to true happiness in marriage, for sexual purity allows for the full acceptance of the dignity of a human person. Today, when permissiveness in the field of sexuality grows, Christian engagement should be a sign of properly experienced purity. Despite dilemmas that emerge in this area, the betrothed are called to live in chastity by exercising abstinence and to cherish the gift of sacrificial love that should be present in their relationship (Pyżlak 2022).

Premarital chastity is more than abstinence from sexual intercourse. Its implementation points to the true meaning of sexuality, which is subordinated to building unity. Purity has nothing to do with limitations. On the contrary, it is focused on liberation. It enables a person to see the other not only as an object of desire, but as an individual perceived by God in his or her fullness (West 2018, pp. 54–55).

Therefore, if it is important to nurture the spiritual element in a properly experienced period of engagement, in the course of further consideration, we should emphasize the role of religiosity in which spirituality is expressed and deepened.

4. Positive Impact of the Realization of the Virtue of Religiosity on Engagement

The mature religiosity of the betrothed is a factor that has a positive impact on the quality of future marriage, as well as on experiencing the engagement. Research shows that links between the religiosity and dimensions of the life of the betrothed are few, yet one can find a positive impact of religiosity on an engaged couple and their subsequent marriage in such areas as nuptial satisfaction, commitments, and conflict prevention.

In the social dimension, nupturients' religiosity can be an interfering factor, while in the personal dimension, it may have a stabilizing function for many areas of life and motivate further development, which is highly important for future spouses (Bukalski 2016, pp. 257–59).

The virtue of religiosity experienced and exercised during engagement has many dimensions. Some of its acts allow for concrete implementation. For those preparing to enter into sacramental marriage, it is important to worship God in the first place.

Undoubtedly, this is how faith can be deepened. John Paul II states that “the very preparation for Christian marriage is itself a journey of faith. It is a special opportunity for the engaged to rediscover and deepen the faith received in Baptism and nourished by their Christian upbringing. In this way they come to recognize and freely accept their vocation to follow Christ and to serve the Kingdom of God in the married state” (John Paul 1981, no. 51).

Worshipping God does not stem solely from faith, but is justified by natural law. The Council's “Declaration on Religious Freedom” confirms this truth, stating that the right to religious freedom has its foundation in the very dignity of the human person, as this dignity is known through the revealed word of God and by reason itself (Second Vatican Council 1965a, no. 2). It follows that the document is addressed not only to Catholics, but to non-believers as well. It focuses on the need to worship God as something present in the very nature of man. The easiest way to meet this need is through specific acts of religious worship (Ćmiel 2008, p. 242).

First, the sacraments are the essential form of Christian worship, and their task is to sanctify people. The sacraments were instituted by Christ the Lord and entrusted to the Church to be signs and means that express and strengthen the faith, render worship to God, and effect the sanctification of humanity (CIC/Code of Canon Law 1998, no. 840).

As Ursula Dudziak notes, the religiosity of a believer permeates his or her entire life and is expressed in the celebration of the sacraments, of which there are seven in Catholicism. Their purpose is as follows: baptism begins the journey with Christ; confirmation strengthens the baptized in daily life, especially the life of faith; penance and reconciliation strengthen a believer on his or her path of life; the Eucharist gives strength; the anointing of the sick provides health of soul and body; and the sacraments of priesthood and marriage help to build community. It is significant that marriage begins with the reception of the sacrament to show a believer that he or she will not be able to fulfil his or her vocation without God's help (Dudziak 2022, pp. 128–29).

Among the seven sacraments that the Catholic Church celebrates, it is the Eucharist that is exceptionally important on the path of engagement. Experiencing the Eucharist offers a variety of spiritual goods for the betrothed. In the first place, it is love expressed in full communion between spouses. The Eucharist is an unsurpassed model of such love, for it reveals the mysteries of the communion of the God of Love and constitutes a model for spousal love. Moreover, the Eucharist reveals the bond of unity that occurs in marriage through God, who unites them by the grace of the sacrament. Thirdly, experiencing the Eucharist lets the betrothed have a deeper understanding of the covenant that is present in God's relationship with man and should exist between future spouses. Finally, the Eucharist reveals the mystery of the gift. In this sacrament, God offers himself to man while

showing the logic of the gift, which should characterize spouses on their way to becoming a gift to each other (Krajczyński 2009).

Thus, anything that prevents the full participation of the betrothed in the Eucharist should be avoided and removed. Nowadays, a burning issue is the betrothed who live together before they get married or live in free unions, which, for them, makes the graces of the sacramental life unavailable. This applies especially to the sacraments of penance and reconciliation and the Eucharist (CCC/Catechism of the Catholic Church 2003, no. 2390).

Today, there is a growing acquiescence to such practices. The reasons for such a state of affairs are the consumerist lifestyle imposed by mass culture as well as permissiveness in the area of sexual morality. It is also related to the rejection of the Catholic concept of marriage and family (Pokrywka 2012, p. 106).

To prevent such phenomena, it is necessary to show the Catholic vision of marriage and family, as well as offer spiritual guidance, to those who have already chosen this form of relationship. One should also be made aware of the risks related to this form of relationship, especially the difficulties in maintaining a future marriage and the greater risk of divorce and separation (Axinn and Thornton 1992).

The betrothed emphasize the importance of the sacrament of the Eucharist by participating in other forms of Eucharistic devotion, such as the adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, eucharistic blessing, and visitation of the Blessed Sacrament. In this respect, the adoration of Jesus present in the Eucharist is exceptional. It is extremely helpful in building community and liberating from egoism. This form of devotion shows the value of abiding by the other person, which is necessary in married life. It can be noted that, in families in which one of their members adores Jesus in the Eucharist for one hour per week, interpersonal relations improve. Moreover, one experiences an atmosphere of security, greater kindness, and peace (Celary 2005, p. 165).

Prayer is essential to implementing the virtue of religiosity in the period of engagement. Prayer is an authentic act of religious man, which is present not only in Christianity, although Christian prayer has its own characteristic features. Prayer, understood as a conversation with God, is a very complex act that is designed to ask for God's assistance, give thanks, or offer praises to the Lord (Ćmiel 2008, p. 271).

A survey conducted among the betrothed showed that 58.2% of the surveyed practiced a prayer of request, 50.9% practiced a prayer of thanksgiving, and a prayer of dialogue was practiced by 31.8% of the surveyed. It is in prayer that the betrothed seek support, seek help in difficulties, and thank God for the gifts they have received from Him. The frequency of prayer of the betrothed varied from 37.1% of the respondents who prayed daily to 17.4% who prayed a few times a week (Głód 2008, pp. 118–20).

For the betrothed, prayer is an important part of experiencing religiosity. Pope Francis points out that prayer is a convincing testimony that shows kindness and love. In both liturgical and private prayer, God comes to dwell among the betrothed and prepare them to receive His grace. The prayer of those preparing for marriage has a practical dimension because the betrothed who engage in prayers grow in love, which, in turn, helps them to prepare for their beautiful wedding celebration in a Christian way, instead of a worldly one. It is through prayer that a unique initiation of the betrothed to receive spiritual gifts and grow in openness to receive God's blessing takes place (Francis 2015).

The prayer the betrothed experience together has exceptional value. It lets them deepen their love, tame temptations, and strengthen their relationship. Prayer experienced together allows them to discover the intimacy of the relationship, for the introduction of the other person into one's most intimate sphere, which is the relationship with God, is evidence of great trust and honesty shared by the betrothed (Timmel and Timmel 1994).

The obligation to pray is related to another act of religiosity, which is a celebration of the Day of the Lord, which is Sunday. Every Catholic is obliged by Church law to celebrate this day in a special way since "Sunday, on which by apostolic tradition the paschal mystery is celebrated, must be observed in the universal Church as the primordial holy day of obligation" (CIC/Code of Canon Law 1998, no. 1246). Moreover, the faithful

are obliged to participate in the Mass. They are to abstain from those works and affairs that hinder the worship to be rendered to God, as well as the use of spiritual and physical rest (CIC/Code of Canon Law 1998, no. 1247).

The celebration of Sunday by the betrothed plays an extremely important role in the preparation for marriage. Apart from the fact that it is their duty as Catholics, attending the Sunday Eucharist allows them to develop and strengthen their faith. Also, it has a formative dimension that allows for a better understanding of the signs and symbols used in the Mass. This knowledge becomes useful during their wedding ceremony since, in the majority of cases, the sacrament of marriage is celebrated during the Eucharist. Understanding the signs and gestures of the liturgy, as well as appropriate postures during the Eucharist, is a part of liturgical formation, which helps to develop the ability to celebrate and is an important factor in creating every community, including the bridal one (Arbaszewski 2010, p. 129).

Celebrating Sunday together has another important dimension for the betrothed, namely that it allows them to spend their free time with each other. Nowadays, it is extremely difficult to find some time for oneself. Leisure time is becoming a mosaic-like space as the boundaries between leisure and work blur. There are new trends in the consumption of leisure time that make spending time together difficult (Mokras-Grabowska 2015, p. 20). The religious experience of Sunday is an opportunity for the betrothed to find time for themselves, build a relationship, and get to know each other in different circumstances of life.

People, when they get engaged, bring their own experience of religiosity into their relationship. On one hand, this is an extraordinary richness that makes better integration and work on building a family community possible. However, the process is sometimes reversed, and the holistic, as well as spiritual, growth of the betrothed becomes impossible. The phenomenon is caused by a lack of realization of the virtue of religiosity in preparation for marriage.

5. Lack of Realization of the Virtue of Religiosity in the Period of Engagement

A factor that blocks the integral development of the community of the betrothed, especially on the spiritual level, is a lack of realization of the virtue of religiosity. This phenomenon takes place due to defects that are opposed to religiosity. A traditional moral doctrine speaks of defects that arise from excess and insufficiency in the realization of this virtue. These are: godlessness understood as an attitude without God close to atheism, superstitions, and other attitudes that oppose religiosity, such as atheism, blasphemy, faithlessness, and cursing (Wichrowicz 1996, p. 143).

When it comes to the life of the betrothed, the first of the defects on the level of religiosity that hinders the proper experience of engagement is godlessness. It is manifested in the rejection of God in spite of one's baptism, abandoning God's principles, especially those concerning morality. Janusz Mariański points to the separation of faith from morality. He claims that this attitude is a result of the formation of modern and postmodern societies, in which distancing from institutional religiosity is quite frequent. This in turn entails a departure from morality associated with this type of religiosity (Mariański 2014, pp. 334–37).

It leads to a rejection of moral norms by young people who are about to decide to get married and start a family. According to Urszula Dudziak, the attitudes of young people are influenced by a pluralistic society, which leads to a re-evaluation of values, moving away from the obligation values present in religion and turning to self-development values that assume self-fulfilment. Young people, including the betrothed, give themselves a right to create moral norms at their own discretion, without due reference to the universal principles that stem from religion (Dudziak 2017, p. 234).

Such detachment is a sign of individualistic morality, which is far from properly understood religiosity, in which reference to God is expressed in the realization of specific moral principles given by God. John Paul II explains that "the religious impulse is the highest expression of the human person, because it is the highpoint of his rational nature.

It springs from the profound human aspiration for the truth and is the basis of the human being's free and personal search for the divine" (John Paul 1983).

Another expression of a defect in the betrothed's understanding of religiosity is disordered worship of the true God. This attitude covers distortions of true worship manifested in liturgical actions filled with worldly acts that have nothing to do with the official liturgy of the Church. Such an attitude stems either from an erroneous attitude of faith or from misinterpreting sacramental signs, symbols, or attitudes (Ćmiel 2008, p. 351).

According to Dariusz Kwiatkowski, it is caused by a lack of faith, religious ignorance, and the commercialization of life, which affect the experience of the liturgy of the sacrament of marriage, which is sometimes contaminated by non-Christian components. Moreover, it leads to a reduction of the sacrament solely to a ceremonial form, in which the most important items are a place of wedding, inappropriate decorations, non-religious songs and chants, and the presence of cameras and media that reduce the religious event to a secular event created on the basis of the sacrament (Kwiatkowski 2020, p. 36).

Departure from true religiosity manifests itself through the cultivation of various superstitions concerning the time of engagement by the betrothed. The list of such superstitions is quite long and depends on latitude, culture, and customs. In Poland, for example, there are superstitions that concern a wedding dress and a veil. According to the first superstition, a bridegroom should not see his bride wearing her wedding dress before a wedding ceremony. The bride should not do this since it is supposed to bring disagreement to her relationship. Another superstition has it that if a wedding dress gets torn while being put on, it should not be sewn together, but can only be fastened with safety pins, for this is the way to avoid unhappiness and tears in marriage. There are also superstitions concerning a bride's veil. One of them has it that a bride should not turn around on her way to the altar to check whether the veil is fitting well, for if she does, it means that she is dwelling on the past and her married life will be a disappointment (Wiącek et al. 2015).

Superstitions assume that mere contact with certain items may bring happiness or misfortune to someone. These items can be either of daily use or specially prepared for this purpose. Sometimes, specific events can be carriers of luck or misfortune. Not only are such practices offensive to mature religiosity, but they are also a sign of disbelief in God's providence (Ćmiel 2008, p. 355).

6. Materials and Results

Surveys on religiosity among the betrothed were conducted within three months, from June to August 2023. A questionnaire of 19 questions in Polish was used for the study. They have been published online on social media and were designed for users preparing for the sacrament of marriage. The survey was anonymous. Logging in was not required, and participants were not asked for their personal data.

There were 40 individuals who took part in the survey, including 75% women and 25% men. A total of 55% of them were rural residents; 20% lived in a city of less than 20,000 residents; and 25% were residents of a large city. The vast majority of the respondents were Roman Catholics (97.5%); the remaining 2.5% declared another religion; and none of the respondents declared affiliation with any Protestant denominations. As far as age was concerned, the respondents were diverse. The oldest respondent was 56 years old, while the youngest ones were 20. In the majority of cases, the respondents were under 30 (77.5%).

Among the surveyed betrothed, 65% declared that they were believers, 20% declared they were firm believers, 10% were uncertain in terms of faith but attached to religious tradition, and 5% were indifferent to faith. However, the way the betrothed perceive one another differed. A total of 25% of them perceived the other person as a firm believer; 45% saw his or her partner as a believer; 22.5% of the respondents saw their partner as religiously undecided but attached to religious tradition; and 7.5% perceived their partner as indifferent to religious issues. Thus, one can conclude that people who define themselves as believers are not perceived as such by their partners. It appears that the signs of faith are not clear enough to point to a relationship with God or the fact of practicing religiosity.

It may also mean that respondents assessed their faith on the basis of their conscience. This knowledge made them think they could not consider themselves firm believers, e.g., due to their sins. A total of 60% of the respondents declared themselves believers, while only 20% declared themselves firm believers. At the same time, 40% of those surveyed in the past year prayed daily, and 55% attended Mass every Sunday and Catholic holiday, which may indicate strong faith.

Moreover, it appears that a declaration of faith does not correlate with practicing it, especially with daily prayer. When asked about the frequency of prayer over the past year, only 40% of those surveyed declared daily prayer, while another 40% prayed from time to time. A total of 15% of those surveyed prayed very rarely, and 5% prayed in times of difficulty.

The practice of prayer, which is a clear sign of religiosity, was neglected by 60% of the betrothed, which may impact on neglecting other religious practices, especially participation in the Sunday Eucharist. Over the past year, only 55% of the betrothed attended the Eucharist every Sunday and holiday of obligation, while 30% of those surveyed attended the Eucharist “almost” every Sunday. A total of 2.5% of the respondents attended the Eucharist only on the occasion of a wedding or funeral, whereas 5% did not attend the Eucharist at all, and 7.5% attended Mass only on “major” holidays, i.e., Easter and Christmas.

From the point of view of the statistics, the mutual impact of the betrothed on religiosity is worth noting. For 67.5% of the respondents, religiosity had not changed over their time of engagement. For 15% of those surveyed, engagement had had a positive impact on religious observances, because they would participate in religious celebrations more often. However, it is worrying that, for 17.5% of the respondents, the period of engagement had a negative impact on religiosity because they participated in religious celebrations less frequently.

The reason may be that only 29.3% of the respondents encouraged their partners to participate in religious celebrations. Of those surveyed, 4.9% encouraged their partners to skip religious celebrations, especially the Sunday Eucharist. The majority of the respondents, which was 65.9%, had never discouraged their partners from practicing their religion.

When asked about the impact of religiosity on moral choices, 75% of the surveyed respondents declared that they experienced their engagement in accordance with the teachings of the Church. A total of 20% of the respondents did not pay attention to the moral principles of the Catholic Church, or they were indifferent to them, while 5% of the respondents did not follow the principles of the Church and had no intentions to do so. These results are related to the willingness to baptize the children of the betrothed. Almost all respondents (92.7%) declared their willingness to baptize their children. The remaining ones chose the “I suppose” answer (4.9%), and only 2.4% of the respondents would have liked their children to decide whether they wish to be baptized when they grow up.

The respondents’ declaration that 75% of them followed the moral teachings of the Catholic Church may be surprising. It is quite inconsistent when we juxtapose this declaration with the betrothed’s choice to live together before marriage. Only 36.6% of the respondents declared firmly that they did not live together, while 31.7% lived together occasionally, and 31.7% of the respondents had lived together for several months and even several years.

Therefore, it can be concluded that the respondents treated Catholic morality selectively; that is, they chose particular moral principles and declared that they accepted them, thinking that they followed the teachings of the Church in its entirety. It well might be that the betrothed did not know the teachings of the Church well and were convinced that cohabitation is was a problem for Catholic morality.

The difficulties of contemporary times should be taken into account while analysing the way the betrothed experience religiosity. Fundamental reasons include the situation within the Church (19.5%), political involvement of the Church (17.1%), attitudes of priests in the parish (9.8%), compulsion to religious observances (2.4%), and a bride

or a bridegroom-to-be (2.4%). A total of 48.8% of the respondents declared that nothing hindered their experience of religiosity.

7. Conclusions

The virtue of religiosity, which is expressed through the realization of concrete attitudes and actions rooted in a reference to God, becomes quite vital. In Catholicism, religiosity is a virtue, that is, a constant inclination to do good. It is an attitude that changes just as individuals change. It can be neglected or developed. The time of engagement should be a period for developing this virtue and deepening the relationship with God and one another.

Developed religiosity has a positive impact on the betrothed. Owing to this virtue, comprehensive and complementary development on a personal and community level is possible. As far as a personal level is concerned, religiosity carries out stabilizing functions for both religious and personal relations. In the community dimension, virtue has an impact on proper integration between the betrothed and other members of the family community.

Among the essential acts of the virtue of religiosity performed by the betrothed is worship of God expressed in reception of the sacraments, attendance at the Eucharist, prayer, and celebration of Sunday as the day of the Lord. Appropriate experience of these practices helps in the development of faith and relationships with God. It forms a conscience and helps build a family community.

The religiosity of the betrothed faces certain defects, too. The most common ones are: godlessness, disorganized worship of the true God, superstitions that affect the experience of engagement and future marriage, and weakened faith, leading to individualistic morality.

This research shows that the period of engagement calls for supporting the betrothed not only in their preparation for marriage in legal or organizational aspects, but also in the area of their religious knowledge and relationship with God. Apart from marriage preparation courses, the evangelization of the young becomes indispensable. Moreover, it is necessary to offer the betrothed pastoral measures that contribute to deepened catechesis and religiosity.

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Article

Religious and Moral Attitudes of Catholics from Generation Z

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Abstract: This paper discusses findings of studies concerning religious attitudes of Polish Catholics belonging to the so-called Generation Z, i.e., people born during the digital revolution. The authors present religious attitudes of Generation Z representatives against the background of other European states relating to religious practices and opinions concerning the acceptability of abortion, euthanasia, divorce, contraceptives and other conduct not consistent with the Catholic Church teachings. The findings prove that even though the Polish society, including those of Generation Z, is distinguishable from European countries with its high percentage of people engaging in religious practices, the observed trends and the dominance of attitudes contrary to the teachings of the Catholic Church indicate the possibility of maintaining a downward trend in the number of Catholics in Poland.

Keywords: religious attitudes; Catholicism; Generation Z; Poland

1. Introduction

The generation gap caused by different factors affecting contemporary societies at different stages of history can be seen in many aspects of social life. People born in a specific period face the same global or regional problems, which impact their way of thinking and functioning. However, their children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren have their own experiences that may shape their value systems or ways of thinking. Important factors for contemporary generations may be the globalization processes, Digital Revolution or COVID-19. However, an experience may have different impacts on the representatives of generations brought up after World War II, their children and grandchildren and people born during the Digital Revolution. The latter is the generation that the authors of this paper are interested in. The problem of values shared by the representatives of the youngest generations has already been discussed in numerous publications, but it seems crucial to narrow this group down to Catholics who are obliged to follow specific principles and values.

The research perspective relating to the assessment of religious practices of the youngest generation of adult Poles adopted in this paper covers the group termed Generation Z in reference works (e.g., Lissitsa et al. 2022; Szromek et al. 2019). Usually, eight generation groups are listed, which are communities of people born in a specific period sharing the same specific social and cultural conditions and, consequently, a similar perception of reality. This division also means that there are specific differences between generations or at least the properties characterizing members of a generation. Reference works mention three prewar generations, i.e., the Lost Generation (1883–1900), Greatest Generation (1901–1927), and Silent Generation (1928–1945) (Arsenault 2004; Dolot 2018) and five post-war ones. The latter include Baby Boomers (1945–1964), Generation X (1965–1980) and Millennials, termed Generation Y, as well (1981–1994). The youngest generation, composed mostly of young adults, is Generation Z, born in 1995–2010. Some authors mention the generation born after 2010 (Generation Alpha), although its representatives are underage now.



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In this article, the religious observance of Catholic Gen Z members seems interesting. An important aspect describing this generation is the fact that its members were born during the Digital Revolution and advanced globalization processes. Hence, this is a generation strongly attached to communication tools developed using a digital approach, including but not limited to using social media, that are considered more important than face-to-face interactions (Szromek et al. 2019). There are also perceptible differences relating to their approach to careers and social life. An interesting research problem and the objective of this paper is to identify features and behaviours related to the religious beliefs of the representatives of this generation, which is mostly composed of adults who face the longest perspective of life. Because of the predominance of Roman Catholics in Poland, the studies were limited to Catholic university students.

2. Review of Selected Studies and Reports

The religious structure of the contemporary world proves that Christians are predominant. Although their number has increased three times during the last one hundred years, the dynamics of the religion's structural changes are the same as they were one century ago, meaning that every third human on Earth is a Christian (Liu 2011). This results from a simultaneous three-fold growth in the number of people on Earth. However, significant changes in the religious structures on specific continents can be seen, including but not limited to Europe. In 1910, 66.3% of Europeans were Christians, while one hundred years later, in 2010, the number fell to just 25.9%. The largest of all Christian denominations is the Catholic Church, to which 51.1% of all Christians belong (Liu 2011).

Religious attitudes of the youngest adult Catholics seem to deviate from those of the older generations. This can be seen in numerous reports concerning the Catholic Church. According to Statistics Poland (Statistics Poland 2022), in 2021, 92.2% of the population of Poland was Roman Catholic Christians, but this percentage was adjusted based on the National Census of 2021 (Statistics Poland 2021). According to that census, 89.8% of people who responded to the question concerning religion declared they were Roman Catholics, which is 71.3% of the whole population of Poland. This makes it the predominant religion. The Catholic Church in Poland has 10,263 Catholic parishes and 29,638 priests (data as of 2021 (Statistics Poland 2021)). The changes in the percentage of people above 16 years of age points to a decreased percentage of Catholic Church members in the population of Poles: in 2000: 95.7%; in 2005: 95.6%; in 2010: 95.9%; in 2015: 94.3%; and in 2020: 92.6%. In 2018, the structure of the religious attitudes of Poles aged 16–24 comprised 4.8% firm believers, 70.2% believers, 12.5% undecided, 7.3% indifferent and 5.2% non-believers (Statistics Poland 2018). However, the subsequent five years brought about significant changes relating to the religious beliefs and involvement of young people, which is confirmed by the growing number of apostasies and the reduced numbers of secondary-school students declaring the willingness to attend religion classes that are discussed in public. Those phenomena seem to corroborate the thesis concerning the religious belief crisis of the young generation of Poles even though Polish society did not conform to the European secularization tendencies in late 20th century (PORC 2021a). This suggests that Polish society may undergo that process in a different way than France or Ireland.

It is worth reflecting, however, on what religious crisis is encountered by contemporary young people most often. Reference works mention numerous classifications of religious crises. Laskowska (2009) enumerates 10 types of religious crises, which makes it easier to understand the person undergoing the crisis. However, Stochmiałek (2021) quoted another crisis classification suggested by J. Makselon, which fulfils the needs of the analyses better, suggesting their causes at the same time. He listed the following four types of religious crises, including:

- Type A crisis is intense and increases fast, as it pertains primarily to young people. This is usually a short-term state with reduced frequency of religious practices that stems from the processes of secularization and loss of faith in love and human honesty.

- Type B crisis is also characterized by reduced frequency of religious practices but is slow. Its symptoms include difficulties praying and participating in Sunday Mass, which is perceived as a manifestation of empty traditions. It results from deteriorated morality or traumatic experiences.
- Type C crisis is connected with reduced intensity of participating in religious practices and a weakened emotional relationship with God. This type of crisis is caused by traumatic life circumstances, the influence of a secularized environment and neglecting religious practices.
- Type D crisis comprises all the major components of a religious crisis, including doubts, reduced frequency of religious practices, a deteriorated relationship with God and an adverse attitude to the Church as an institution. This usually stems from the fascination with life and a new environment.

Reference works discuss the problems of young people's religious beliefs covering an extremely broad range. In 2020, Zaręba and Choczyński (2020) carried out similar studies among Polish students. Their studies revealed that one half of students (51.7%) participated in religious practices, although not always on a regular basis. Only every third respondent did so on a regular basis (30.1%). Two out of three respondents considered themselves a believing Christian.

Similar studies were carried out by Sobotka (2016) in 2016 on a small and non-representative sample of Pedagogy students. Her findings confirm that the percentage of students attending a Mass at least once a week is 34.1%, while every fifth of them (20%) does it once a month.

Kopaniecka and Karakiewicz (2022) in their studies identified the relationship between the religious attitude intensity and the personality and education of Christians in Poland. On the other hand, Hutchinson et al. (1998) surveyed 249 students of various religious backgrounds and demonstrated that the internal religiousness is a prognostic factor of the Catholics' proneness to obsessive-compulsive behaviours. Interestingly, this is not the case for non-religious persons and Protestants.

Jonason et al. (2022) surveyed 255 people in Poland in 2020. Their studies referred to the response to restrictions concerning abortion. They proved that the prohibition is advocated by religious believers (primarily Catholics) and those following moral values.

The fact that this is an incredibly important problem is demonstrated by the studies by Hornung et al. (2023), as well. Based on the studies of Muslims, they noticed that religious life is made easier by shaping social capital and social identity, which, in turn, fosters learning outcomes. In turn, Kirchmaier et al. (2018), using the data from the LISS panel (Longitudinal Internet studies for the Social Sciences) managed by CentERdata, comprising ca. 7000 people, studied the relationship between religion and behaviours and moral attitudes. They demonstrated that religious people are less prone to accept unethical business conduct and help others more often. Moreover, the decrease in the number of church members has a significant impact on the social fabric of the society. Religious people display different social behaviours than non-religious ones, as they rely on the state to a lesser degree when implementing social goals.

3. Materials and Methods

The concept of research resulting from the needs indicated in the literature review indicates the need to observe the religious practices and moral principles of the youngest adult Poles. It seems particularly justified to formulate research hypotheses that seem to be in a mutual relationship.

First, an important research issue is to identify the structure and frequency of religious practices undertaken by representatives of Generation Z, especially participation in the sacraments. In terms of research assumptions, this aspect was limited to the frequency of participation in religious services. Additionally, it seems interesting to determine whether the level of religious practice measured by the percentage of people regularly participating

in religious services in accordance with the teachings of the Catholic Church differs from that observed in European societies in general.

The second issue is the structure of the declared moral principles regarding the admissibility of abortion, euthanasia, divorce, sexual intercourse before marriage and in vitro fertilization. Similarly, in this case, no partial hypotheses were formulated, but the issue was defined collectively, pointing to the moral values for which the teachings of the Catholic Church are defined by the Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC). The third aspect concerns the mutual relationship of the two above phenomena to the declarative assessment of the depth of faith. Therefore, by analysing the previously cited reports and literature, the following hypotheses can be formulated (Figure 1):

H1: *A minority of Generation Z members declaring affiliation with the Catholic Church participate in religious services in a manner consistent with the teachings of the Catholic Church.*

H2: *A minority of Generation Z members belonging to the Catholic Church profess moral values related to the admissibility of abortion, euthanasia, divorce, sexual intercourse before marriage and in vitro fertilization in a manner consistent with the teachings of the Catholic Church.*

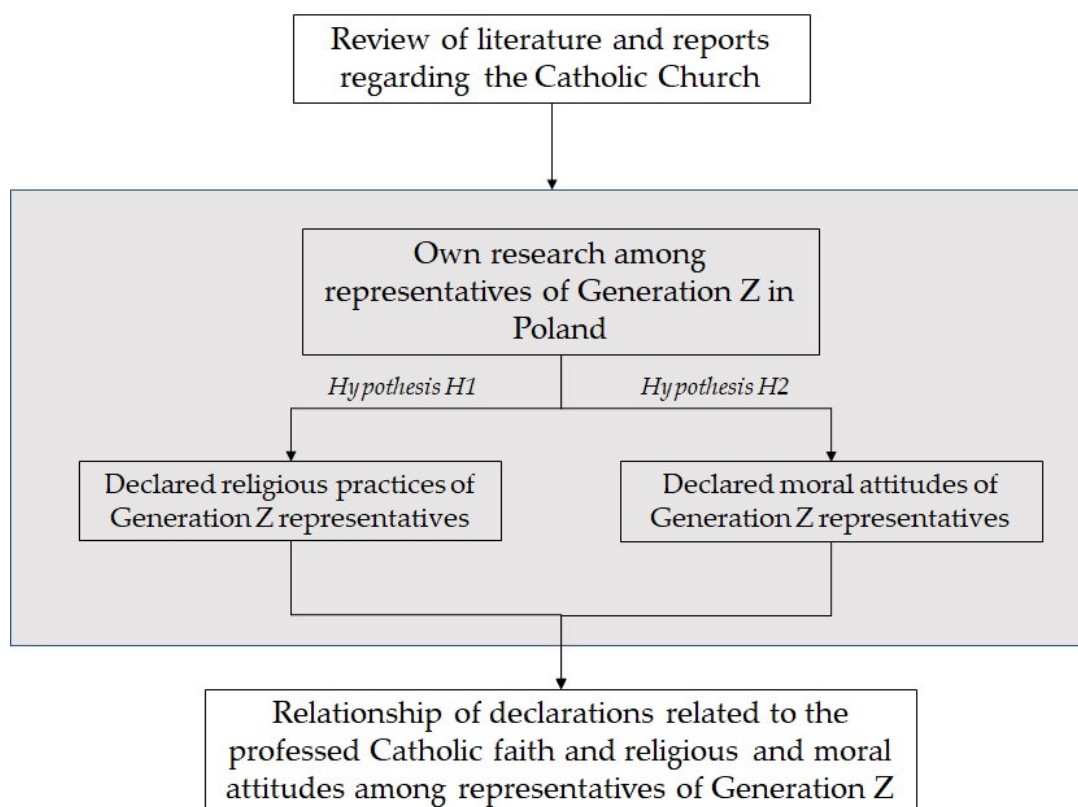


Figure 1. The concept of the research process.

Although this issue is interesting, it is also very difficult to research because the construct resulting from the assessment of the level of faith is difficult to measure. Therefore, the research was limited to the direct opinions of the respondents, who are students at Polish universities. The research is therefore a diagnostic survey in which answers to basic issues are formulated using the structure of answers to questions asked in an anonymous survey. The studies carried out by the authors in 2021 at over a dozen Polish universities consisted of a diagnostic survey of 1134 students using CAWI (Computer Assisted Web Interviewing). The snowball method was used here to reach the respondents through their lecturers and social media. The survey comprised respondents belonging to many generations and religions, which is why the database was restricted to Gen Z Catholics for this

paper. Consequently, a database comprising responses of 732 Gen Z Catholics was obtained. The respondents were asked to fill in an anonymous online survey composed of 35 questions divided into 3 sections. The first part of the survey comprised questions diagnosing the respondents' attitudes to the key problems of their religious beliefs. In the second part, questions concerning religious practices were asked, and in the third part, the respondents answered questions concerning their demographic and social profiles. Because of the extensiveness of the study, this paper will discuss solely the aspects related to the topic. The other aspects will be discussed by the authors in subsequent publications.

Referring to ethical issues, it should be emphasized that the research questionnaire did not discuss sensitive issues, and the respondents answered only in a subjective way, independently assessing their faith. In all cases, these were adults that voluntarily agreed to participate in the research.

4. Results

According to the results of the surveys, it was determined that the selected sample was composed of 71.4% women and 28.6% men. Most respondents were unmarried (79.1%), and 1.6% were married. In this group, close to every fifth person (19.2%) declared being in an informal relationship. The place of origin structure was balanced, with 31% of respondents living in the village, 25.6% in a medium-sized town (20–100 thousand inhabitants), 31.1% in a large city (more than 100 thousand inhabitants) and 12.3% in small towns (up to 10 thousand inhabitants). The respondents were mostly students at the following universities: University of Economics in Katowice, University of Silesia, Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw, Silesian University of Technology, Medical University of Silesia, Academy of Physical Education in Katowice and University of Szczecin. A total of 86.2% of respondents came from those universities, whereas the remaining 14.2% of respondents studied at other universities, with the share not exceeding 1% in the study.

The respondents assessed their belief in God using a 7-point verbal scale reduced to a 3-point one, combining some evaluative statements selected by respondents. In this way, it is known that 60.7% of the people in the studied group declared that they are religious believers (including 7.9% who are firm believers). Almost every third one identified themselves as a doubter, looking for faith and undecided (30.2%). Close to one tenth of respondents (9.1%) identified themselves as nonbelievers or indifferent.

However, the respondents were also asked about the direction of changes taking place in their religiousness. The majority of respondents (55.3%) declared that they are becoming less and less religious over time. Their number is close to four times higher than those declaring the growth of their beliefs (14.6%) when compared to the past. The others (30.2%) did not observe any change.

The respondents pointed to tradition and upbringing (36.7%) and their personal beliefs and experiences (32.6%) as the key sources of religious beliefs. The family example was selected by every fifth person (21.6%), whereas 3.4% of respondents indicated the religious community as the source of their religious beliefs (3.4%) and 5.7% mentioned other aspects. The respondents were also asked to evaluate their religiousness when compared to their parents' attitudes. Then, 23.7% and 17.7% of respondents believed that their religiousness was higher than that of their father and their mother, respectively, whereas 31.1% and 42.4% claimed that their religiousness is lower than that of their father and mother, respectively. According to 29.7% of respondents, their religiousness was the same as the that of their father, whereas 30.8% indicated that it is the same as that of their mother.

The distribution of individual religious practice frequency (prayer) was even, with a predominance of everyday prayer (28.5%), where 15.3% of respondents practice it several times a week, 14.3% of respondents pray at least once a week, and 9.5% at least once a month. Every fifth respondent (19.5%) declared that they prayed several times a year, whereas 12.8% of respondents do not pray at all.

Of the Catholic respondents, 91.7% declared Mass attendance, although the frequency differed. Most of them (36.7%) attended Mass every Sunday and holiday, 6.0% of respon-

dents attended more often than once a week, which results in 42.7% of the Gen Z Catholic respondents altogether. 12.8% of respondents declared that they attend Mass once a month, whereas 36.2% of respondents do so solely during holidays or on family occasions.

Holy Communion received at least once a month is declared by 28.5% of respondents, with most of them (15%) participating every Sunday. Every fourth (23.7%) respondent declared receiving the Holy Communion several times a year, and 16.4% of respondents participate solely during holidays. Of the Catholic respondents, 11.9% receive the Communion every few years, whereas every fifth surveyed Catholic (19.5%) does not receive it at all.

Attending confession at least once a year is declared by 55.1% of respondents, with 35.7% of them participating several times a year, whereas 9.3% participate every month. Close to one tenth (9.1%) of respondents attend confession once every few years.

Of the respondents, 62.3% declared that they do not read the Bible, whereas every fourth (24.3%) reads it several times a year. The others read the Bible at least once a month (13.4%).

The respondents provided responses concerning their attitudes relating to the acceptability of specific behaviours. This was connected with sexual relations before marriage, acceptability of divorce, using contraceptives, abortion and in vitro fertilization as well as euthanasia of terminally ill patients. The results of the survey using a four-point verbal scale are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Distribution of acceptability scores for specific behaviours.

Behaviour Acceptability Score	Non-Acceptable	Depending on the Circumstances	Acceptable	Hard to Say
Sexual relations before marriage	8.6%	13.1%	68.5%	9.8%
Divorce	10.6%	39.4%	44.9%	5.2%
Using contraceptives	5.5%	12.4%	77.4%	4.8%
Abortion	25.6%	42.9%	25.5%	5.9%
In vitro fertilization	13.3%	21.6%	55.0%	10.1%
Euthanasia of the ill	27.1%	35.0%	25.6%	12.1%

5. Discussion

The changes observable in Polish society seem to be similar to the ones taking place in previous generations, as well, although the intensity may be different. The trends discussed earlier relating to the decrease in the percentage of people who declared themselves as Catholics (in all age groups altogether) indicated a moderate falling tendency from 95.7% to 92.6% in 20 years (2000–2020). In the averaged long-term trend, this is a mean decrease of 0.31% a year. However, in 2021, it became much more extensive, decreasing by 0.4% in a year, reaching 92.2%. Based on long-term summaries of reports by the Public Opinion Research Center (PORC) ((PORC) 2022), it may be expected to be even lower in subsequent years following the COVID-19 pandemic.

The presented study results enable one to observe changing attitudes of young Gen Z Catholics when compared to other studies. They confirm as well that adverse religion-related changes are taking place in the youngest generation. The studies carried out by PORC in 2021 (2022) concerning the group of people born in 1997–2001 also confirm that 71% of them declared that they believed in God, although regular religious practices were undertaken by 23%. According to our studies, the percentage of respondents engaging in regular religious practices is higher among Gen Z Catholics. Of the respondents, 42.7% declared Mass attendance in accordance with the Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC 1993) (2180–2182), i.e., at least once a week (at Sunday Mass). However, considering all the surveyed students (including those from other generations and declaring other religious beliefs), the percentage is 30.5%. This finding is corroborated by the PORC survey (CCC 1993) of 2022, where the percentage was 32% in all age groups jointly. This means that young Poles do not significantly deviate in this respect from all the citizens of Poland.

It seems interesting that just 60.7% of Gen Z Catholics consider themselves believers. Their distanced approach to participation in sacraments and religious practices is also easily observed. Although they are obliged to attend Holy Communion at least once a year (CCC 1993, 1382–1389), this religious practice is declared by 68.6% of them. The percentage of people attending confession at least once a year is even lower (55.1%), although Catholics are obliged to participate by the Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC 1993, 1422–1470) and the Code of Canon Law (CCL 1983) (§2, 989).

Considering the obtained results, a positive aspect of the religious life of Gen Z representatives is the fact that most of them participate in sacraments and engage in various religious practices. Just 9.1% of the surveyed Catholics consider themselves nonbelievers or indifferent, and 8.3% do not attend any Mass at all. Additionally, 12.8% do not pray and 19.5% do not attend Holy Communion.

It should be claimed, however, that most people declaring participation in the sacraments and engaging in religious practices do so without following the guidelines of the Church. With respect to the frequency of sacraments received by the surveyed Gen Z Catholics, it may be claimed that they usually participate in or receive the sacraments more rarely than they are obliged to by their religion (CCC 1993). This refers both to Mass attendance and the sacrament of penance, as well as to the Holy Communion. Individual religious practices, e.g., prayer or reading the Bible, are usually rare, although these are also what Catholics are obliged to perform by the CCC (101–135) (CCC 1993).

According to the report called *Polska—Europa* presenting the results of the European Social Survey for 2002–2019 (Sztaniński et al. 2020), the Polish religiousness is significant, or even distinguishable, when compared to other European states. Stachowska (2019) quotes the comparison of selected European states' religiousness using the percentage of people aged 15–24 who declared participating in religious practices once a week or more often in the European states' populations in 2002 and 2016. For Poland, in 2002 this coefficient was 56.6%, whereas in 2016, it was 45.1%, which is confirmation of a downward trend. In the study by this paper's authors, it was 42.7%. However, for all the other states, this percentage was much lower than in Poland. In Italy, it was 27% (in 2002) and 13.3% (in 2016), and in Portugal, 15.6% and 14%; in such states as Spain, France, Belgium and Austria, it was below 10%. Against this background, the Polish religiousness, even that of Gen Z, looks really good, although the decreasing number of believers is a clear sign of a slow crisis, most probably of type D. There is a clearly noticeable downward trend in receiving the sacraments. It occurs at the same time as a growing trend of loud media declarations of apostasy, especially by artists and celebrities who have a strong influence on young people. It is therefore a form of crisis, comprising all the major components of a religious crisis (doubts, reduced frequency of religious practices, a deteriorated relationship with God and an adverse attitude toward the Church). In the case of believers from Poland and other European countries, this may be due to the rising standard of living. In societies characterized by prosperity, social bonds weaken, and individualistic orientations and consumer attitudes become more important. Religious practices take the form of consuming the service provided in churches (Orzeszyna 2013). Another reason may be the influence of various social ideologies, which more easily penetrate societies with satisfied basic needs.

At the same time, it seems that the slow downward trend relating to religious practices has an adverse influence on the moral attitudes of Catholics, although this interdependence is likely to be bilateral. Even though, according to the Catholic Church teachings, sexual relations before marriage are a sin (CCC 1993, 2350), the opinions displayed by most surveyed Catholics in this respect differed from the Church teachings. According to Table 1, as much as 68.5% of Gen Z Catholics accept sexual relations before marriage, and another 13.1% of them make them conditional on specific circumstances. Just 8.6% of respondents do not accept any sexual relations before marriage.

It is similar for the acceptance of divorce (in the sense of civil law), which is not possible in the Catholic Church because marriage is an indissoluble sacrament (CCC 1993, 2382). Every tenth respondent does not accept any possibility of divorce, but 84.3% of respondents

declare unconditional or conditional acceptance of divorce. The percentage of people declaring unconditional acceptability of divorce is lower (44.9%) than in the group of respondents who accept sexual relations before marriage unconditionally (68.5%). Even more respondents accept contraceptives (89.8%), with as much as 77.4% of them accepting their unconditional use, although their acceptability is also stipulated in the CCC (CCC 1993, 2366–2371). The conditional acceptability of such a protection is declared solely by 12.4%, and just 5.5% of respondents believe that this is not acceptable in any circumstances.

The attitudes are a bit different when it comes to abortion, which is considered to be a grave evil according to the Catholic Church (CCC 1993, 2258 and 2270–2275). Every fourth respondent does not accept such an option. However, considering the fact that the survey was carried out among Catholics, it is highly surprising that the opponents of abortion are less numerous than those who accept it. Their number is 68.5%. Every fourth respondent (25.5%) admits that they accept abortion unconditionally, and 42.9% make it conditional on the circumstances. The numbers of in vitro fertilization (76.6%), although Catholics must not engage in it according to the CCC (CCC 1993, 2373–2379) and conditional and unconditional euthanasia (60.6%), which is a mortal sin, like abortion, (CCC 1993, 2276–2279) supporters are even higher.

It is highly interesting that the findings do not change much when the group of respondents is restricted to those who undertake religious practices according to the Church teachings. Among those who attend the Holy Mass at least once a week (on Sunday), as the Catholics are obliged to do by the CCC (2180–2182), as much as 64% accept sexual relations before marriage, 74% accept divorce, and 80% contraceptives. In such cases, regular Mass attendance reduces the percentage of supporters of attitudes inconsistent with the Church teachings by 10% on average compared to the total percentage of respondents. It is a bit different for abortion, as 45% of respondents accept unconditional or conditional abortion, and 48% oppose it. The acceptability of in vitro methods is declared by 59% of respondents, with 28% being opposed to them. This group includes 50% euthanasia opponents, but also 39% euthanasia advocates.

In the group of Gen Z Catholics who attend Sunday Mass differently than taught by the Church or do not attend it at all, the findings are significantly higher than those recorded for the preceding group. A total of 94.5% of them accept sexual relations before marriage, 91.9% accept divorce, and 96.7% accept contraceptives. In the group of people who do not attend the Sunday Mass on a regular basis or do not attend it at all, the percentage of supporters of attitudes inconsistent with the Church teachings is 10% higher on average compared to the total percentage of respondents. It is similar for abortion, as 85.7% of respondents accept unconditional or conditional abortion, and just 9% oppose it. The acceptability of in vitro methods is declared by 89.7% of respondents, with 2.6% opposed to them. This group includes 10.2% euthanasia opponents, but also 76.6% euthanasia advocates.

The findings may signify the religious belief crisis of Gen Z representatives, which, although not well visible in the context of religious practices, is related to moral attitudes. Objectivity, to which everyone who undertakes scientific reasoning is obliged, does not allow for the assessment of this phenomenon from the point of view of morality, which is why the authors do not attempt to assess even these declared attitudes. However, their relationship to the teachings of the Catholic Church, to which the respondents declared their affiliation, should be emphasized. One can, of course, discuss whether the declared ‘Catholicism’ of respondents results from being baptized or from consciously accepting the teachings of the church to which they belong, but this issue was not the subject of our research. We limited ourselves only to observing the declared attitudes.

In an attempt at explaining the religious belief crisis of young Catholics, Portal Misyjne.pl (2023) remarks that we could even speak of the breakdown of the intergenerational communication of religious beliefs, which used to be natural in Poland. In older generations, the family was the major place of religious belief communication. At present, it has remained so, but to a much more limited degree. According to the studies by the authors presented here, the family example is a source of religious beliefs for only every

fifth young Catholic (21.6%). Most (36.7%) Catholic respondents from Generation Z indicate tradition and upbringing as the source. The others indicate personal opinions and experience (32.5%) and the religious community influence (3.4%) as the source of their religious beliefs.

A strong factor differentiating the scope of opinions and values is the political affiliations of respondents. In Poland, it is connected with membership in the most popular political parties (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość and Koalicja Obywatelska, Konfederacja, Polska 2050, and Lewica), which have discrepant programmes. The survey by PORC of 2021 (PORC 2021b) demonstrated that 88% of respondents who were followers of Prawo i Sprawiedliwość had a favourable opinion on the Church, and 7% had an adverse opinion, whereas 75% of the followers of Koalicja Obywatelska and 85% of Lewica followers had adverse opinions regarding the Church. Of the Konfederacja followers surveyed, 32% have favourable opinions about the Church and 57% have adverse opinions, whereas those numbers are 21% and 69%, respectively, for Polska 2050.

Such a social stratification in Poland may stem from the polarity of opinions pertaining to abortion, homosexual relations, the role of the Church in the state, etc. Benagiano and Mori (2007) describe three postulates defended by the Catholic Church as the natural and God's law, which constitute important discussion topics in the above-mentioned conflicts between political parties and, consequently, the dividing lines. They include protection of life in all its stages, from the moment of conception until natural death; recognition and promotion of the natural structure of the family, as a union between a man and a woman, based on marriage; and protection of the right of parents to educate their children. A response to the abortion regulation restrictions in Poland was described by Jonason et al. (2022) as well.

To conclude this discussion, it is worth mentioning a prophetic assessment of changes phrased by Bagrowicz (2000) (following Rynio (2002)) who foresaw the postmodernist wave covering the political sphere, the family, young people, culture, morality, religion and science in 2000. He also foresaw its effects in the form of extreme individualism not reckoning with any common good and materialism, as well as moral relativism, which results from a pre-assumed rejection of popular moral standards.

6. Conclusions

The presented findings provide a highly complex image of religious attitudes of young Catholics in Poland. Even though the number of people engaging in specific religious practices is significantly higher than in other European states, the predominance of attitudes contrary to the Catholic Church teachings among young Catholics displays the absence of any attachment to the said teachings, which is true even for Catholics participating in practices on a regular basis. This leads to an intensifying downward trend relating to the percentage of people identifying themselves as Roman Catholics, which is a sign of a slow religiousness crisis in Poland.

It can only be confirmed that the declared religious practices among Generation Z, although undertaken more often than in other European countries, are comparable in relation to the general Polish society. Hypothesis H1 was confirmed, because despite the high percentage of declarations related to belonging to the Catholic denomination, it turns out that only a minority of Catholics from Generation Z are people who regularly participate in religious services (42.7%). Similarly, in the case of moral principles regarding the admissibility of abortion, euthanasia, divorce, sexual intercourse before marriage and in vitro fertilization, only a minority declares to act in accordance with the teaching of the Catholic Church, and the majority is against it. This therefore confirms hypothesis H2. In this context, the mutual relationship of these conclusions is worth noting—while the declaration of defining oneself as a believer or a deeply religious person is very high in the society of Polish representatives of Generation Z (60.7%), neither the religious practices nor the moral attitudes in the majority of representatives of this generation are consistent with their religion.

Fast information transfer via social media, including but not limited to any information arousing many emotions, may contribute significantly to this trend's solidification, particularly when the content refers to extreme cases of breaching religious standards by both lay people and the clergy, which are considered extremely interesting. Polarity of the Polish society, consolidated by political parties with extremely opposing programmes, comprising, e.g., the problem of abortion and same-sex relationships, may increase the percentage of Catholics whose moral attitudes, at least the declared ones, will depart from the teachings of the Church in the years to come.

This paper was not aimed at determining the reasons for this situation but just at identifying the attitudes, which is why the causal relationships were not analysed here. However, it seems inevitable that the Church will be abandoned by some Generation Z religious believers in the years to come. This is demonstrated by the discrepancy between the relatively high percentage of people engaging in religious practices and their opinions and moral values relating to abortion, euthanasia, contraceptives, divorce, in vitro fertilization and sexual relations before marriage. Another reason may be the breakdown of the intergenerational communication of values and the cases when the clergy violate their religious commandments, which are not without effect. It seems reasonable to initiate studies to explain both the reasons for the observed dissonance and the phenomenon that Sunday Mass is attended by people with opinions conflicting with the ones of the Church.

The scientific research discussed in this article also has certain weaknesses and research limitations, because, as indicated above, our article does not diagnose the causes of this situation but only shows a picture of reality limited to one generation of Poles. Another limitation is the limitation of the research to university students, as students from all over Poland were the respondents and not all representatives of Generation Z. Therefore, the study does not include representatives of Generation Z who did not undertake higher education. Therefore, it is not justified to generalize about the entire generation, but only about those who are studying and therefore are the best educated.

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Article

Factors Influencing the Choice of a Child's Name and Its Relationship with the Religiosity of Interfaith Marriages: Orthodox (Slavic) and Muslim (Turkish)

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Abstract: Names symbolize an individual's identity, highlighting their unique attributes and representing their religious and cultural background. Names often serve as initial indicators of individuals' cultural identities and beliefs. In the context of interfaith marriages, the names given to children can offer symbolic insights; however, a comprehensive exploration of the religious, national, and cultural factors underlying such naming choices is required. In many cases, the social environment of interfaith couples exerts pressure on the couple to choose a name aligning with their religion and identity, whether willingly or unwillingly. Antalya, a Turkish province that initially attracted a substantial Slavic population for tourism but subsequently witnessed a significant influx of permanent residents due to the ample employment prospects in the tourism sector, is notably distinguished by its increased Slavic demographic relative to other Turkish urban centers. In this context, Antalya garners notice because of the prevalence of interfaith marriages. This study investigates the preferences of Orthodox (Slavic) and Muslim (Turkish) couples within the region in terms of how they name their children and the factors influencing their preferences. This study systematically gathers and assesses the factors influencing the naming choices of children of these interfaith couples, particularly their correlation with religiosity. To accomplish this, a semi-structured interview prepared by the researchers was employed for data collection, and the data were subsequently analyzed using document analysis.

Keywords: interfaith marriages; interreligious interaction; naming tradition; anthroponomy; onomastics



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1. Introduction

The contemporary landscape of population movements has witnessed a surge in interfaith marriage, driven by economic incentives, conflicts, climatic conditions, educational pursuits, and tourism-related travel. Such unions pose multifaceted challenges, with a central issue being how religions approach marriages with individuals of differing faiths. Even when religious disparities do not hinder interfaith marriages, these couples frequently encounter social hurdles and exclusion in their daily lives. Families and social circles, often contingent on their religiosity, are resistant to and ostracize those who enter such unions. Couples in interfaith marriages grapple with dilemmas concerning their children's religious affiliations and where and how they will receive religious education. The process of making these choices typically starts with the fundamental inquiry of which party will be responsible for selecting the child's name and the extent to which the chosen name should reflect religious and cultural affiliations.

To discern the factors shaping the naming choices of couples in interfaith marriages, a comprehensive understanding of the rationale behind these choices is critical. Naming is a tradition. As the names given to children in interfaith marriages may, at first glance, give a symbolic idea of the child's religious and cultural background, the religious, national, and

cultural reasons underlying the choice of the name should be examined in detail. However, the impact of interfaith marriages on the customary practice of naming children is an area that remains relatively unexplored in the literature. This domain falls under the purview of anthroponomy, the study of personal names¹.

Names often serve as initial indicators of individuals' cultural identities and beliefs. A crucial aspect of the naming tradition is its connection to religion and religious practices. The relationship between naming and religiosity is evident in almost all cultures. Celaledin Çelik particularly emphasizes the collective significance of individuals joining a community through birth, especially in more traditional societies, reinforcing the community's historical and cultural identity (Çelik 2005, pp. 32–33). Hence, the naming of a child is far from a straightforward or routine procedure.

Names, in addition to accentuating an individual's unique characteristics, serve as emblematic representations of religious and cultural identity. Antalya, a province distinguished by a heightened Slavic population compared with other Turkish urban centers, is notable for the prevalence of interfaith marriages. This study investigates the factors underlying the naming customs of interfaith Orthodox Slavic and Muslim Turkish couples, with a focus on religious factors, along with social and cultural determinants. The findings regarding the factors influencing the selection of names for the children of these Orthodox Slavic and Muslim Turkish couples and their relationship with religiosity have been collected using semi-structured interviews prepared by the researchers and evaluated through document analysis.

In this context, it is critical to underscore the significance of ascertaining the extent to which participants are swayed by their respective religions and cultures in naming their children, the reception they encounter from their social circles, both before and following the naming process, and whether the geographical region in which they reside influences their naming choices, which are all in line with the research objectives. In many cases, the social circles of these couples exert pressure, whether willingly or unwillingly, for them to choose a name that aligns with their own religion and identity. The repercussions of such pressure may include exclusion from family and social circles; the fear of these repercussions may also significantly influence the naming decisions.

This study focuses on the naming preferences of the children of Orthodox Slavic and Muslim Turkish couples, refraining from delving into the theological stances of Christianity and Islam regarding interfaith marriages, as this is a distinct, comprehensive subject. Nevertheless, it is a reasonable presumption that couples from diverse religious backgrounds, irrespective of their degree of religiosity, may be influenced in their choices of names for their children. For individuals who identify as religious or devout, the religious perspectives of their respective faiths on these marriages hold particular significance. Hence, this study highlights the imperative of considering the varying viewpoints of different religions on marriages involving individuals of differing faiths². In this vein, to clarify the factors influencing the naming choices of couples in interfaith marriages, an introduction of the broader naming traditions prevalent among Slavic and Turkish cultures is essential. This examination will provide context for the interpretation of the data in terms of the continuity of cultural traditions.

2. Tradition of Naming

The inclination to comprehend and designate entities is inherent to human nature. This process necessitates the identification of connections, commonalities, and disparities among the persons or objects subject to comprehension and nomenclature. Neglecting these disparities often leads to the use of species names as a means of expounding on the existence of entities. Similarly, human names serve to accentuate the distinguishing characteristics of individuals. Names serve as integral indicators of the proclivities, inclinations, religious convictions, worldviews, social structures, traditions, and customs of the name-givers.

The names employed to express an individual's existence are laden with religious, national, and cultural connotations that are emblematic of the individual's position within

the social milieu (Örnek 1995, p. 148). Names mirror the sociocultural context of the name-giver. An examination of the historical tradition of nomenclature within Slavic and Turkish communities reveals the influence of diverse belief systems, such as Paganism or Shamanism, on the selection of names, irrespective of the individuals' religious affiliations. Notably, this influence has not remained constant over time; naming customs have evolved in tandem with evolving belief systems and the religions embraced by societies. From the standpoint of religious faith, it is feasible to distinguish the naming proclivities shaped by Turkish culture with reference to Shamanism, Buddhism, Manichaeism, and the Islamic period. Parallely, among Slavic communities, distinct periods can be discerned, marked by shifts in the influence of Paganism, Christianity, and the church, all playing a role in the evolution of naming practices in the community.

One noteworthy aspect is the pronounced influence of ancestor veneration, a significant element within Turkish Shamanism, on the tradition of nomenclature. Small figurines, referred to as "töz" or "tözler", discovered in the tents of the Altai people, symbolize the spirits of ancestors (İnan 2000, pp. 2, 42). Turkish Shamanism is deeply influenced by animism, specifically, the belief in spirits. This belief manifests itself in everyday religious and folklore-based rituals, rooted in a conviction that shamans derive their powers from their deceased ancestors and various assisting spirits. Consequently, a comprehensive understanding of the genealogies of the members of these communities is imperative to the nomenclature. According to Altai beliefs, Shamanism preaches unwavering loyalty and obedience to God and spirits (Hoppal 2012, p. 21; Potapov 2012, pp. 13, 100). Even in contemporary times, the imperative of recognizing the seven ancestors persists, underpinned by the aspiration to harness the powers of these spirits (Yeşildal 2018, p. 53). During the Uyghur period, the Turkish populace adopted religious belief systems such as Buddhism and Manichaeism, evident in the personal names used, which predominantly carried religious connotations. This evidence indicates that Shamanism continued to have an influence over the culture despite the introduction of new religious paradigms³.

During periods of close interaction with China, the names of Turkish rulers gradually took on Sinicized attributes, although such a transformation was not widespread among the general populace. However, the advent of Islam exerted a significant influence on Turkish naming conventions, with Arabic influences becoming conspicuous (Rásonyi 1963, p. 66; Acıpayamlı 1992, p. 2). In one of the earliest Islamic-era texts, *Dîvânü Lugâti't-Türk*, approximately 20% of the names from a roster of 110 individuals had origins in Arabic (Amanoğlu 2000, pp. 12–13), demonstrating the substantial impact of Islam on Turkish naming practices.

Acıpayamlı posits that in Turkish naming customs, it is significant to name individuals after deceased family elders, religious leaders, the prophet, their spouses, offspring, and the four caliphs (Acıpayamlı 1992, pp. 6–7)⁴. Recent data from the General Directorate of Population and Citizenship Affairs reveal that in 2022, the most prevalent names given to Turkish infants include Alparslan, Yusuf, Miraç, Göktuğ, Ömer Asaf, Eymen, Aras, Ömer, Mustafa, Ali Asaf, Zeynep, Defne, Asel, Zümra, Elif, Asya, Azra, Nehir, Eylül, and Ecrin, which predominantly have religious connotations (T.C. İçişleri Bakanlığı—Nüfus ve Vatandaşlık İşleri Genel Müdürlüğü 2022). The preference for religiously grounded names among male children may be attributed to the pre-eminence of male religious leaders. However, whether these names are preferred because they were the names of family elders or due to religious reasons cannot be determined from these data. Even though it is not difficult to assume that naming preferences were influenced by religious reasons during a certain period among older generations, to ascertain this, parents need to be asked about the reasons behind their name choices.

In Turkish communities where Islam failed to establish a profound presence, a predilection for Slavic names has been observed since ancient times. This can be traced to the practice of christening children with the name of the first person to enter the child's room, as documented in Altai (Radloff, *Lose Blötter aus Sibirien I*, 337 as cited in Rásonyi 1963, p. 73). Furthermore, the influence of Christian Slavic names has permeated the nomenclature cus-

toms of select Central Asian Turks in recent history (Rásonyi 1963, p. 73). It is noteworthy that this influence, as mentioned by Rásonyi, primarily affects individuals who, despite their faith, do not prominently manifest their religious beliefs in their everyday lives.

Historical texts have statistically analyzed the influence of Slavic beliefs on naming practices. B. D. Bondaletov undertook an examination of the distribution of pagan and baptismal names within the Laurentian Chronicle, and the analysis revealed a transition from predominantly pagan names before the 10th century to a noticeable surge in Christian names as time progressed. In the 11th century, non-Christian names accounted for 77.4% while Christian names constituted 22.6% of the total. In the 12th century, these proportions had shifted to 68.9% non-Christian names and 31.1% Christian names. By the 13th century, the balance had tilted further, with 39.3% non-Christian names and 60.7% Christian names, and by the 14th century, non-Christian names had diminished to 9.6%, while Christian names dominated at 90.4% (Bondaletov 1983, p. 105).

The conversion of populations in urban areas such as Kyiv and Novgorod to Orthodoxy through mandatory baptism ceremonies was accompanied by the adoption of Christian names sourced from Byzantine tradition. Following the canonization of certain Knyazs (princes) and ascetics as saints, their original pagan names were reconfigured as calendar names. Thus, Slavic names such as Boris, Boyan, Vladimir, Vsevolod, Vyacheslav, Gorazd, Kuksha, Lyudmila, Mstislav, Rostislav, Svyatoslav, Yaropolk, Yaroslav became calendar names. Later, Bogolep, Vladislav, Vadim, Vera, Nadezhda, Lyubov, Zlata, Lyudina, Militsa, Razumnik, the Varangian names Gleb, Igor, Oleg, Olga, and the Lithuanian name Dovmont were added to the roster (Dianova 2019, p. 74).

Subsequent to the adoption of Christianity, a convention was established wherein names were selected from a roster of saints' names. Nevertheless, this convention did not entirely supplant Slavic names, as some remained within the calendar. New names typically emerged upon the canonization of new saints. The names of the earliest Christians were derived from the names of the places they came from. To ensure that the origins of their ancestors were not forgotten, names of this nature were advised. Not only their names but also the lives they led were preserved in the collective memory of the people, particularly through hagiography, hymns, iconography, and during religious services held on the days dedicated to them. The practice of giving canonical names originated from the belief that the names of saints were protected by God; these names were given to gain the protection of the corresponding saint. This tradition became more prevalent with the acceptance of Christianity in Russia (Duka 2011, pp. 170–71).

All historical calendar names, regardless of their origins in the Russian language, bear cultural and historical significance within the Russian context⁵. The third stage in the development of Russian names, which persists to the present day, commenced with the decree issued by the RSFSC Council of People's Commissars on 23 January 1918. This decree marked the formal separation of church and state, with civil registration of births replacing traditional church baptism. Consequently, numerous foreign names have been integrated into Russian nomenclature, including names such as Zhanna, Inessa, Eduard, and Timur. Furthermore, the revolutionary period brought about changes in traditional beliefs and lifestyle, giving rise to the emergence of new Russian names (Suslova and Superenskaya 1991, p. 62).

In the immediate aftermath of the October Revolution, a substantial number of children were named after historical figures. Even within prominent families, it is documented that grandmothers clandestinely arranged church baptisms for their grandchildren. Nevertheless, the influence of active anti-religious propaganda was discernible; some individuals refrained from bestowing names associated with particular saints. Consequently, new names were devised and foreign names were incorporated, often without an awareness of their similarity to established Russian names in a different linguistic guise. The practice of inventing names first took root in urban centers where revolutionary ideologies began to influence people's beliefs. Specialized studies and literary works have provided informa-

tion regarding the names introduced during this period (Suslova and Superenskaya 1991, p. 63)⁶.

3. Name Choices of Orthodox Slavic–Muslim Turkish Couples/Data Collection

The study was conducted with members of the Başkent Culture and Arts Friendship Association, who are Orthodox Slavic and Muslim Turkish individuals in interfaith marriages living in Antalya. Ethical approval for the study was granted via Akdeniz University Social and Human Sciences Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Board. Semi-structured interviews were used as the data collection tool. The information addressed in the study was obtained from interviews conducted with 30 participants. 5 of the participants were male and 25 were female. This section of the study will focus on the factors that influenced the choices of names based on the interviews and presents the reasons why couples chose names and the data regarding this question. These data will be evaluated in relation to Slavic and Turkish naming traditions when necessary.

3.1. Reasons for Selection

The participants were asked about the reasons for their name choices. They were asked if their name choices were based on personal preferences, family traditions, popularity of names, etc. When multiple factors influenced the name choices, all of them were expressed by the participants. The main factors that stand out among the reasons for name choices are personal preferences; cultural, national, and religious values; using international names; and the popularity of the names. The proportion between the reasons for the name choices and the whole are as follows:

Family tradition: (1.8%) Veysel.

International names (easy pronunciation for both languages): (18.5%) Alina, Artur, Asya, Aylin, Buse, Derya, Dilara, Elisa, Lina, Timur.

Name popularity: (16.7%) Adelina, 2 × Alisa, Asya, Berk, Emir, Melissa, Mira, Selin.

Personal preferences (liking the sound or meaning): (24.1%) Alara, 2 × Alisa, Asya, Batuhan, Buse, Dilara, Elisa, Giray, Lorin, Mina, Sergen Mete.

Desire to choose unpopular names: (5.5%) Mina, Sergen Mete.

Lack of a religious reference: (1.8%) Armin.

Cultural, religious, and national values: (22.2%) Ali, İlhan, Kuzey, Mehmet Salih, Melisa Meryem, Mikail, Mustafa Kemal, 2 × (name not specified).

Ideological and political views: (3.7%) Deniz, Helin.

Preferences of family and close circle: (5.6%) Ahmet, İlayda, Milena.

This question regarding the reasons for the name selection aims to understand the reasons for choosing religious names. It can be understood from the responses that the name Veysel, an Islamic name chosen for the child of one of the couples who had an interfaith marriage, was not chosen for religious reasons. This name was selected by the Muslim Turkish father based on family traditions. Here, we see a traditional name selection based on culture and the Turkish understanding of lineage. Although the name is religious, the family defines itself as secular, and religious factors were not predominant in the choice of this name. Similar finds are observed for the name Ahmet. Ahmet is also an Islamic name, but the participant stated that this name was chosen based on the preferences of the extended family and close circles, emphasizing that the religious context did not affect the name selection. Ali, İlhan, Mehmet Salih, Meryem, Mikail, and Mustafa Kemal are names that reflect “cultural, religious, and national values”, as expressed by the couples who chose these names. Mustafa Kemal is the name of the founder of the Republic of Türkiye, one of the most important leaders in Turkish history. A participant’s statement that they made the name choice based on “cultural, religious, and national values” is meaningful in this context. Meanwhile, the name Armin was chosen due to the “lack of a religious reference”, making it a reconciliatory option for families in interfaith marriages. Deniz is a name that came to the forefront in Turkish political history in the late 1960s, representing

left-wing ideologies; the couple that chose this name indicated that the choice was “based on ideological and political views”.

3.2. Who Made the Name Choice?

In the study, participants were asked who selected the name. This question aimed to determine whether there is a traditional understanding that prioritizes giving a name approved by the community when naming the newest member of the family. In traditional societies, the process of naming a child is not left solely to the child’s biological parents, and close relatives of the child’s biological parents may be involved in this process. This traditional understanding of naming a child was observed among a few participants in interfaith marriages. In 4 of the 48 names given by the participants, the opinion of the extended family, namely, close relatives of the child’s biological parents, was considered. Names were primarily selected through the joint decision of the mother and father; 30 names (62.5% of all names in the study) were chosen in this manner.

Mother (Slavic-Orthodox): (14.6%) 2 × Alisa, Artur, Asya, Aylin, Dilara, Meryem.

Father (Turkish-Muslim): (14.6%) Alara, Elisa, İlhan, Melisa, Mustafa Kemal, Veysel.

The parents together: (62.5%) Adelina, Ahmet, Ali, 3 × Alisa, Armin, Asya, Batuhan, Berk, Buse, Deniz, Derya, Emir, Giray, Helin, İlayda, Kuzey, Lina, Lorin, Mehmet Salih, Melissa, Mikail, Milena, Mira, Selin, Timur, 2 × (name not specified).

With the extended family: (8.3%) Elisa, Mina, Sergen Mete.

3.3. The Impact of Religious Beliefs on Daily Life Choices

During the interviews, the participants were asked the extent to which their religious beliefs influenced their daily life choices. As naming children is one of these choices, the information about whether religious beliefs had an impact on individuals’ decision-making process was considered important. The participants described themselves as believers, religious, or secular. When participants define themselves as ‘religious’, it means that they fulfil all the requirements of their religion. Defining themselves as ‘believers’ means that their religious beliefs influence their daily life choices to a certain extent. For the most part, the participants expressed that their religious beliefs did not influence their daily life choices. One participant (Muslim) identified as “a religious”, 10 participants (6 Orthodox, 4 Muslim) as “believer”, and 19 participants (18 Orthodox, 1 Muslim) as “secular”. Below, the total percentage of how participants described themselves in terms of religious beliefs and the names they chose for their children are listed to observe the impact of participants’ descriptions of their religious beliefs on their name choices.

Religious (3.3%) Mehmet Salih, Mikail.

Believer: (33.3%) 3 × Alisa, Ahmet, 2 × Asya, Berk, Dilara, Elisa, İlayda, İlhan, Milena, Mira, 2 × (name not specified).

Secular: (63.3%) Adelina, Alara, Alisa, Armin, Artur, Aylin, Batuhan, Buse, Deniz, Derya, Elisa, Emir, Giray, Helin, Kuzey, Lina, Lorin, Melisa Meryem, Melissa, Mina, Mustafa Kemal, Selin, Sergen Mete, Timur, Veysel.

Of the 30 participants, only one identified as religious. Among those who identified themselves as believers, two people chose religious names (Ahmet, Elisa). One chose a name based on “being an international name”, and the other based on “the preferences of family and social circles”. These participants did not directly relate their name choices to their beliefs. Among other religious individuals, 80% chose non-religious names for their children. Given that participants who identified themselves as secular chose religious names (Emir, Meryem, Mina, Mustafa, and Veysel) based on reasons such as “being popular names, adhering to family traditions, and being associated with religious, national, and cultural values” (see Section 3.1), it can be said that there is often no direct connection between definitions of religious beliefs and the tendency to choose religious names.

3.4. Impact of Birthplaces on Name Selection

Choosing a name appropriate to the geographical location where couples from different cultures plan to live together can be preferred, as it may facilitate the cultural adaptation of children. Based on this, it was thought that the birthplaces of the children might influence the selection of names. The birthplaces of the children and the associated name choices are as follows:

Türkiye: (68%) 3 × Alisa, Armin, Artur, 2 × Asya, Batuhan, Berk, Buse, Deniz, Dilara, Giray, Helin, İlayda, Kuzey, Lina, Lorin, Mehmet Salih, Melisa Meryem, Melissa, Mikail, Mina, Mira, Mustafa Kemal, Sergen Mete, Veysel, (name not specified).

Russia: (21.3%) Adelina, Alara, Ali, Alisa, Aylin, 2 × Elisa, Emir, İlhan, (name not specified).

Ukraine: (4.3%) Milena, Selin.

Belarus: (6.4%) Ahmet, Derya, Timur.

Of the 32 names given to children born in Türkiye, 7 are associated with Slavic culture (3 × Alisa, Armin, Artur, Lina, Melissa), while Lorin and Mira are rarely preferred in Slavic culture. Therefore, 28.1% of children born in Türkiye were named in accordance with Slavic preferences. Meanwhile, of the 10 names given to children born in Russia, half (Alara, Ali, Aylin, Emir, and İlhan) are suitable choices from Turkish culture. Of the participants' children, two were born in Ukraine. One of them was given a name suitable for both cultures (Selin), while the other was given a name suitable for Slavic culture (Milena) (33.3%). In Belarus, one of every three children born was considered to have a suitable name that can be preferred in both cultures (Timur), accounting for 33.3%. The other Belarus-born children were given names (Ahmet, Derya) that were suitable within the Turkish cultural context (66.7%). As can be seen, it was not possible to establish a direct relationship between the names chosen for children and the place of birth for children born in Türkiye, Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine.

3.5. Disagreements in Name Selection

During the interview, the participants were asked whether there were any disagreements between spouses or with their close social circles during the naming process. The study found that couples who chose religious names for their children did not experience disagreements either among themselves or with their social circles. Therefore, there does not appear to be a direct relationship between the choice of religious names and conflicts with the social environment and family members in this study. However, one participant mentioned that their Orthodox spouse's grandmother did not like the name they had chosen for their children and raised objections. However, they resolved this issue internally and it did not affect the naming process. Another participant mentioned that their Muslim spouse did not want the name they chose for their child because it was considered a "Christian name". This disagreement was resolved by giving the child two names. Overall, couples reported a high level (86.7%) of agreement and a low level (13.3%) of disagreement during the naming process. The fact that naming did not lead to a high level of disagreement could be attributed to the mutual respect of spouses for each other's religious and cultural values. Further, the high rate of international name preferences may have contributed to fewer disagreements in naming choices.

4. Conclusions

The study gathered data from 30 participants via semi-structured interviews. An examination of the data regarding naming practices reveals that participants prioritized names that were easily pronounceable in both languages, with no specific phonetic features exclusive to either language. While some participants favored names with associations to Slavic culture, such as Adelina, Alina, Alisa, Armin, Artur, Elisa, Lina, Lorin, Melissa, Milena, Mira, others leaned toward names with Turkish cultural connotations, like Ahmet, Ali, Aylin, Batuhan, Berk, Derya, Dilara, Emir, Giray, İlhan, Kuzey, Mehmet, Melisa, Mete, Mina, Salih, Selin, Sergen, and Veysel.

Participants predominantly self-identified as secular, suggesting that their religious beliefs had minimal influence on their daily life decisions, including naming practices. The reasons that participants expressed as prominent factors in their choice of names, such as personal preferences, cultural, national, and religious values, international name preferences, and popular name choices, are parallel and significant. In the case of four children, the parents opted for double names. In the case of one of these double names, namely “Meryem”, which was regarded as a Christian appellation, a disagreement was observed with the Muslim spouse, necessitating the selection of an alternative name to resolve this dispute. No rationale was proffered for the selection of the three other double names, namely, “Mehmet Salih”, “Mustafa Kemal”, and “Sergen Mete”. Notably, all these instances of double naming conform to the conventions of Turkish culture and do not involve the fusion of names from distinct cultural backgrounds. In this regard, there is no substantial evidence to suggest that giving double names is related to the interfaith nature of the marriages. It can be argued that the adoption of double names primarily hinges upon individual preferences and choices.

In the study, a total of 48 names were documented, with two names not being disclosed by the participants. Among these names, 12 exhibited religious connotations, constituting 25% of the total. However, upon closer examination of the motivations behind choosing these religious names, it was observed that the name “Veysel” was selected by parents who identified themselves as secular and was described as a choice aligned with “family traditions” stemming from the influence of the Muslim spouse. The other seven religious names were given by individuals who self-identified as secular, while two were chosen by individuals who identified as believers. The rationale for these religious names was articulated as “religious, cultural, and national values” in three instances (Ali, Meryem, Mustafa), one was selected for its popularity (Emir), and another was based on the opinions of their families and close circles (Ahmet). One parent, who named their child “Elisa”, identified as secular and mentioned that their choice was based on “personal preferences”. Notably, “Mina”, a name linked to a Sahaba (companion of the Prophet), was chosen by a parent who identified as secular, citing their decision as being influenced by “personal preferences” and the fact that it was “not a popular name”. The three names with religious connotations in the study were chosen by parents identifying as religious. Two of these names possessed Islamic qualities (Mehmet Salih), while the third (Mikail) was a commonly recognized religious name in both Islamic and Christian contexts. One of the participants who identified as religious selected “Elisa” due to its ease of pronunciation in both languages. Meanwhile, the other religious participants chose the name Ahmet based on the preferences of their parents and close circles.

Within the scope of the study, it was hypothesized that naming choices might influence the cultural integration of children in the geographical region of their birth. Consequently, the birthplaces of the children and the compatibility of the chosen names with the prevailing religion and culture in these regions were examined. However, no data emerged to suggest a direct correlation between the names assigned to children born in Türkiye, Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine and the geographical contexts of their birthplaces.

The analysis reveals that naming preferences are predominantly influenced by contemporary trends that do not conform to any specific religious criteria. Some of these names include Dilara, Helin, İlayda, Mira, Melisa, and Selin. Names such as Timur, which exhibit commonality in naming traditions in both cultures, and names derived from geographical locations (Alara and Asya) can also be included in this category. In the context of interfaith marriages, the inclination toward these modern and fashionable names is perceived as a significant factor in fostering harmony among couples, their families, and social circles. Remarkably, 86.7% of participant couples affirmed that they encountered no challenges with their spouses or social networks during the naming process. In this respect, choosing names that can prevent disputes is a reasonable outcome, especially in interfaith marriages.

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Notes

- ¹ In this branch of onomastics, proper names are examined concerning their historical development and various language and culture issues (Aksan 2009, p. 32). This research field falls within the purview of not only linguists but also anthropologists, sociologists, folklorists, and legal and religious scholars.
- ² Studies pertinent to interfaith marriages and the approaches of religions to these unions include the following: (Locke et al. 1957; Heiss 1961; Hepps and Dorfman 1966; Yinger 1968; Rosenbaum and Rosenbaum 1994; Call and Heaton 1997; Birtwistle 2010; Suomala 2012; Çiğdem 2015; Ciocan 2016).
- ³ In Uyghur texts, names carrying the meaning of “hazret”, along with adjectives such as “tengri” and “tengrim”, are found. These names are derived from nature and are related to the Shamanistic beliefs of ancient Turks. Among these names, some names symbolize strength and durability, such as “Temür” for “iron”, as well as cosmic (astral) designations often used for women, such as “Ay” for “moon”, “Kün” for “sun”, and “Tolun” for “full moon”. Positive connotation adjectives such as “Arıç” for “clean” and “Bilge” for “wise” are also observed, along with protective names that may be explained by naming taboos, such as “Kiçig” for “small”. Peter Zieme mentions the name “Sevindi”, a verb meaning “rejoiced”, while examining the names in a document registered under the number U 1568 in the Turfan Collection of the German Academy of Sciences. A similar usage is observed among Uyghur names. Some examples provided by Zieme include “Kondi”, meaning “he/she arrived”, “Turdi”, meaning “he/she stopped/stayed”, “Keldi” meaning “he/she came”, and “Yandibay” meaning “he/she turned”. Zieme draws attention to a name that lacks traces of ancient Turkish beliefs and is clearly influenced by Buddhism from China: Tayşingdu. This name is formed by combining the words “Tayşing” and “tu”. “Tayşing” is borrowed from the Chinese, meaning the “Great Vehicle” doctrine in Buddhism (Sanskrit *Mahāyāna*). Meanwhile, “Tu” is an abbreviation of the nickname “Tutung” (Zieme 1977, pp. 81, 83).
- ⁴ Other striking elements of the naming traditions among the Turks are as follows: In Anatolia, to prevent new pregnancies, the last child born is given names such as “Yeter”, “Yetişir”, or “Kâfi” (Acıpayamlı 1974, p. 24). Families with a succession of daughters who now want to have a son give their last born child names such as “Döne”, “Döndü”, and “Yeter”. Families whose children do not survive give names such as “Dursun”, “Durmuş”, “Yaşar”, “Baki”, “Yeter”, “Durali”, “Durhasan”, “Duran”, “Durdu”, and “Hayati” to their last born children. Names such as Hüdaverdi and Allahverdi are also preferred by families who have a child after a long time. Further, during the pre-Islamic period, families whose children did not live preferred names such as İt, İtbaba, İtbarak, İtbey, İtkulu, Yılan, Şeytan, and Sarikine to protect them from evil spirits and the evil eye and in the Islamic period, as Azrail. Names such as Satılmış, Ökkaş (the name of a bed), Süppü (the name of a garbage dump) originate from the tradition of selling the child that arose due to death (Schimmel 1989, p. 37; Acıpayamlı 1992, pp. 8–9; Düzgün and Yeşildal 2023, pp. 15–30) are also in this direction.
- ⁵ The rules for selecting and giving names vary according to different ethnic, religious, and local traditions. The most common practice is naming newborns after a saint associated with the nearest holiday to the child’s date of birth. It was traditionally avoided, and in some cases forbidden, to give a name associated with a holiday occurring before the child’s birthday. In Polish belief, it was thought that giving a name that was associated “backward” with the calendar would hinder the child’s growth. This belief is also found in Ukrainian and Serbian traditions. In all Slavic traditions, it is common to name children after their parents, grandparents, or with special rules and customs. In Western Bulgaria, giving children the names of their grandparents was rare, and it was even rarer to name children after their parents. In Russian tradition, it was a custom to name the first male child after the paternal grandfather, the second after the maternal grandfather, and the third after the father. Similarly, female children were named after their grandmothers and mothers. Unusual, rare, or forgotten names were believed to have the power to prevent the death of a newborn in a family where other children had passed away (Petruhin et al. 1995, p. 203).

- ⁶ During the mid-1920s, there was a significant surge in efforts to introduce new names. Among the names that emerged during this period are Gomer “Homer”, Goratsiy “Horace”, Garibaldi “Giuseppe Garibaldi”, Zhores “Jean Jaurès”, Kromvel “Oliver Cromwell”, Amper “Ampere”, Volt “Volt”, Devis “Davis”, Bosfor “Bosporus”, Volga “Volga”, Yevraziya “Eurasia”, Kolhida “Colchis”, Volya “Volition”, Duma “Duma”, Nauka “Science”, Partiya “Party”, Komissara “Commissioner”, Mopr “abbreviation of International Organisation for Assistance to Fighters for Revolution”, Lunachar (is derived from the surname of the Russian Marxist revolutionary Anatoly Vasilyevich Lunacharsky), Natsional (is formed from the word international), Proletkulta “a portmanteau of the Russian words ‘proletarskaya kultura’, proletarian culture”, Radishcha (is derived from the surname of the Russian poet and philosopher Aleksandr Nikolayevich Radishchev), and Tribun “Tribune”. In the 1920s many names were created in honour of Vladimir Lenin: Vladlen/a and Vladilen/a (from the first syllables of Vladimir Lenin’s name), Vilor/a (from the initials of Vladimir Ilyich Lenin and “Oktyabrskaya Revolyutsiya October Revolution). However, by the 1940s, there was a noticeable transition toward older, more traditional Russian names. Although, some names introduced in the 1920s persisted and became deeply ingrained in everyday life, numerous other names introduced during that period fell out of favor and ceased to be commonly used (Suslova and Superenskaya 1991, pp. 64–65).

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Article

The Role of Religion in the Family Life of People with Disabilities: A Legal and Social Study

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Abstract: The family holds a special place in human life. Given the importance of marriage and family for the welfare of people, the Catholic Church strives to protect these values. The Church's stance towards people with disabilities is unequivocally protective and inclusive, but it also recognises that the right to marriage and family life is not absolute. Not all people with disabilities are able to start a family or fulfil the obligations of marriage and family life. In canon law, the Church sets forth certain conditions for contracting a valid marriage, taking into account the human resources that make a person capable of such a commitment. This article examines the narratives of people with disabilities who participated in a study on religiosity, faith, and prayer, and how these can provide meaning to disability in the context of marital and family life. The research findings confirm our hypothesis that faith and religious practices provide people with disabilities with a sense of meaning in life and help them stabilise difficult moments and experiences; prayer is a source of peace, patience, and gentleness, and it improves the quality of life of both people with disabilities and their families; faith and religious practices help people with disabilities make sense of everyday difficulties, gain perspective, and overcome their weaknesses or egocentrism; religiousness is a source of meaning in life. Faith and religion play an important role in participants' efforts to accept their lives, provide care, and show love. Moreover, they have a positive impact on the rehabilitation process.

Keywords: religiosity; faith; disability; person with disability; family; marriage; canon law



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1. Introduction

People with disabilities are defined as those whose abilities and functions are impaired, which may affect their physical, mental, psychological, social, and professional performance (Wyszyńska 1987, p. 7). Disabilities may be congenital, acquired, or caused by illness or ageing. The family is the most important source of inspiration and enrichment for people with disabilities, and the attitude of family members largely influences their quality of life. The family can provide a sense of security, recognition, love, and self-esteem (Borowski 1999, pp. 111–15).

The late twentieth century saw a significant increase in interest in religion as an important factor in treatment and coping with stress and difficult situations. Moreover, the positive impact of religion has been noted by scientists, medical professionals, and rehabilitation specialists. As has been pointed out, people with disabilities and their families most frequently turn to religion to find the meaning in life-changing events that they have experienced. Man finds many situations incomprehensible and hard to explain, hence his focus on religion to seek the meaning of current events from the perspective of ultimate matters (Clark 1958, pp. 143–47). Faith appears to play a key role in helping people make sense of their lives. It is not simply a projection of their own shortcomings, but rather a fundamental life force that can help find meaning in their everyday lives and fulfil important

human needs, such as the need for security, support, and spiritual solace (Janocha 2008, p. 149). This is supported by research that shows a close correlation between religious involvement and the meaning and purpose of life (Rubin and Peplau 1975, pp. 65–89; Sorrentino and Hardy 1974, pp. 372–80; Jones et al. 2018, 2022; Wilson et al. 2017). Studies by Aydoğdu (2019, pp. 181–93) have shown that religiosity is an important factor that supports adaptation to disability and provides a mechanism for coping with difficulties. It can also facilitate a constructive change in attitude towards life. A religious perspective on disability can affect people’s emotions, activities, and how they think about their disability. Longitudinal studies by Peter et al. have shown that religiosity and the meaning of life were potential determinants of adapting to disability in the long term (Peter et al. 2012, pp. 188–201). It is noteworthy that proposals for multidimensional support systems for people with disabilities are increasingly emphasising the need for spiritual support (Harris 2006, pp. 393–411; Jones et al. 2022, pp. 1409–18).

Love and strength that are based only on human will often seem insufficient. Caring for a person with a disability and a person who suffers cannot be motivated by pity or be only “task-oriented”; it must be an expression of love that has its source in the cross of Christ (Chudy 1988, p. 124). Likewise, Kawczyńska-Butrym (1994, pp. 62, 77) lists faith in God as one of the key factors motivating people to care for a family member with a disability. The importance of faith and religion for married couples in which one of the spouses suffers from a disability is a topic that has received scant attention in the literature so far. Our research fills this gap.

The relationship “disability—family—religion” is a triad that can be a strong foundation for selfless love, acceptance, and unity in the family. The family’s task is therefore to nurture these values so that they are not lost, but rather strengthened.

The purpose of the research described in this article was to examine the role of religion in the family life of people with disabilities from a legal and sociological perspective, based on our own studies. Participants were asked the following questions: “What role does faith in God and religion play in your life?”; “What does prayer give you?”; and “What is the role of religion and faith in your marital and family life?”. We selected the responses that related to the issue of religiosity, faith, and prayer, and that gave meaning to disability in relation to the family life of people with disabilities.

2. Marriage and Family of People with Disabilities in Canon Law

On 22 June 2022, Pope Francis addressed the families gathered for the 10th World Meeting of Families with an important message about marriage: “In marriage, Christ gives Himself to you, so that you can find the strength to give yourselves to one another. So, take heart: family life is not ‘mission impossible’! By the grace of the sacrament, God makes it a wonderful journey, to be undertaken together with Him and never alone. The family is not a lofty ideal that is unattainable in reality”.

In his address, the Pope directly referred to the sad testimonies shared by participants of the meeting who had been rejected by the Church community. He pointed out that we humans can have the loftiest ideals and may think we can overcome all our limitations on our own, but this is not true. Only when we admit our limitations do we open ourselves to God’s help in the sacraments of baptism and marriage (Francis 2022).

One of the duties of parish priests is to take care that their ecclesiastical community offers the Christian faithful the assistance by which the matrimonial state is preserved in a Christian spirit and advances in perfection. This assistance should be offered by appropriately prepared catechesis, personal involvement in preparing future spouses to enter into marriage, liturgical celebration of marriage, and help offered to those who are married (Can. 1063). Although the Canon does not refer specifically to disabled people, it draws attention to different needs that the faithful may have and the necessity for the priest to adapt to these needs. Preparation for marriage involves premarital catechesis, which is traditionally divided into proximate and immediate catechesis. Proximate catechesis, which should take place in all parishes, is important because it allows the priest to teach

young people about the importance and role of marriage. This is the right time to shape certain behaviours and prepare young people for the challenges associated with marriage.

Proximate catechesis, which is conducted in parishes, is particularly important, as the priest can provide more individualised marital catechesis tailored to specific needs. Immediate catechesis begins when a couple declares their intention to marry, no later than three months before the planned wedding date. This is an important moment, as it allows the priest to determine whether a couple is eligible to be married. The Polish Episcopal Conference has recommended that prenuptial interviews be conducted with sensitivity and discretion. A sincere conversation with the priest during the canonical examination is essential, especially if there is any reason to believe that one or both parties may be incapable of entering a valid marriage. The primary goal of the canonical examination is to prevent contracting an invalid marriage (Konferencja Episkopatu Polski 2019).

Disability is not a barrier to marriage, but not all people with disabilities are able to enter into or sustain marriage. According to canon law, the following conditions are necessary for a valid marriage: the ability to enter into a lasting partnership, the ability to fulfil the purposes and essential properties of marriage, and the ability to assume marital rights and duties (Ioannes Paulus II 1983, *Codex Iuris Canonici*, Can. 1055). The canon law legislator enumerates three grounds for incapacity to enter into marriage: lack of sufficient use of reason, grave defect of judgment, and the inability to assume essential marital obligations (Ioannes Paulus II 1983, *Codex Iuris Canonici*, Can. 1095).

The first ground is based on the need for future spouses to exercise their mental faculties, as the source of marriage is a validly expressed consent to enter into marriage. It is noteworthy that the legislator does not require that spouses are able to use their reason fully, but only sufficiently, meaning that they must have enough mental capacity to understand the importance of marriage. The way the legislator formulated this ground indicates that each case that raises doubts about someone's capacity should be considered individually, and that Church authorities have the exclusive right to make a decision in this matter.

A serious lack of capacity for judgment concerning the essential marital rights and obligations that the spouses mutually transfer and accept is another ground for incapacity to enter into marriage. Future spouses must have the capacity to understand, critically evaluate, and freely express their consent to marriage. The third incapacity occurs when, despite the sufficient use of reason and possession of the necessary discernment, the future spouse is unable to express valid marital consent. This happens, for example, in a situation when at the time of expressing marital consent, the person was incapable for some reason of a mental nature, to undertake and fulfil important marital obligations. Essential marital obligations concern the good of the spouses, their children, and the sacrament itself (Góralski 1996, pp. 26–31).

There are some doubts concerning the capacity of people with physical disabilities to enter into marriage, but it must be emphasised that being in a wheelchair does not automatically rule out marriage. However, it is important to determine whether mobility disability also affects the ability to have sexual intercourse. For impotence to prevent marriage, it must be certain and permanent. Any doubts should be dispelled by presenting medical test results. As Pope Francis said to young people with disabilities, even though they may not always be able to have the same experiences as others, they possess amazing resources and abilities that the Lord Jesus grants them, often far above average (Francis 2019, no. 149).

3. Methodology

In 2020, a nationwide qualitative study that used focus group interviews (FGIs) and purposive sampling was conducted among people with disabilities. The study included individuals with mobility impairments, hearing impairments, the blind and visually impaired, and those with intellectual disabilities. It was preceded with a pilot survey, the aim of which was to develop the final version of the scenario to be used during the interviews. The qualitative research was designed to capture the maximum variability and diversity in

the sample. This allowed us to learn about the religious life of people with disabilities of different types and degrees, living in a variety of communities. Given the subject of the research, only individuals who identified as Roman Catholic were invited to participate. However, participants' level of religiosity was not assessed at the time of recruitment for interviews, as the degree of religiousness was to be examined during the study.

The research material contains transcripts of 49 individual in-depth interviews conducted in five groups of participants: individuals with hearing impairments (7 interviews), those with mobility impairments (4 interviews), blind and visually impaired (5 interviews), those with intellectual disabilities (24 interviews), and carers of people with disabilities (9 interviews). The interviews were used to elicit how participants perceived the issues under study and enabled them to present these issues from their own perspective and in their own words. The analysis of the interviews involved reconstructing the information from participants' statements on the issues specified in the scenario. This analysis was not quantitative in nature but focused on the meanings expressed by participants. The following central topics were identified in the interviews: faith in God, prayer and Holy Mass, sacraments, involvement in liturgical ministries, involvement in parish groups, attitudes of other parishioners, expected attitudes of parishioners and priests, and barriers to participating in religious and parish community life. While transcribing the interviews, we developed a detailed description that included qualitative differentiation, such as the different types and specific characteristics of phenomena, as well as new information in the description of a given phenomenon. The following research operations were used in the analysis: coding of meanings, condensation of meanings, and categorisation of meanings. The categories were developed in two ways: (1) in connection with the central topics of the interviews, and (2) ad hoc during analysis.

The limitations to data collection and analysis arose from the specific context of the study (a diverse group of respondents with disabilities). These limitations included: the need to develop specific communication relationships and adapt questions to each respondent; the difficulty in assessing the range of spontaneous, cognitively rich, specific, and adequate responses of interview participants with disabilities; the occurrence of statements that were logically unrelated to the topic of the interview, inaccurate, brief, or prompted or suggested by the interviewer; the involvement of third parties in the interviews (e.g., mother or carer).

The interviewer's development and explanation of the thematic threads obtained in participants' responses, as well as the quality of the transcript, were satisfactory (with some minor stylistic and typographical errors, and occasional gaps in the transcripts with the annotation: incomprehensible).

4. Results

G. Kehrer (1997, p. 17) points out that religion and religiosity, in addition to other fields of science, are also of interest to sociology. Sociologists are particularly interested in human behaviour, both in terms of religious phenomena and social behaviours (Dobbelaere 2012, p. 167). For the purposes of this article, religion is understood as "a set of beliefs, norms, and explanations that regulate the relationship between man and God" (Golan 2006, p. 71), while religiosity "refers to man's subjective relation to the reality that religion describes and explains" (Golan 2006, p. 71). As Golan notes, religiosity is incorporated into all "the contents and dynamics that constitute human personality" (Golan 2006, p. 72). Religious practices are the most visible components of traditional religiosity. From a sociological point of view, religious practices are understood as religious behaviours performed by members of a religious group. Some of these behaviours are public and collective, while others are individual and personal (Janocha 2003, p. 24). Obviously, Church membership is not defined solely by religious practices, but religious practises can make people's membership of the Church more visible, enable them to meet with other believers, strengthen their sense of belonging, and deepen their motivation. Additionally,

participation in religious practices helps people solidify their beliefs and reinforces certain values-based traditions that can outlast their visible religiosity.

4.1. Sacraments

Research participants emphasise that the holy sacraments are important in their lives (“We struggled for a long time to find a priest who would marry us, but it was important to us that God bless us and be a witness”—a couple with hearing impairments; “I cannot always be in church, it’s difficult for me, our church is old, there is no wheelchair ramp, sometimes my son helps my wife to carry me, sometimes a stranger helps me. It’s difficult, but how can you skip Sunday Mass? It’s like water for me”; “Our child is intellectually disabled, there was no one to prepare him for confirmation, we did it ourselves, sometimes we went to see a priest we know, he lives far away, but we didn’t want to give up, it’s important for our son, he really understands it all. It is also important for us that he can receive the sacraments”; “If I cannot go to church, I call a priest and he usually comes. Then I confess and receive the Communion. Actually, we have Mass only for ourselves at home, because both my wife and children join in, and sometimes my wife also goes to confession. Such a home church”; “When I was little, my parents always made sure that I went to Mass, they didn’t go without me, now I don’t go without them, even though I don’t hear anything. But usually my dad signs me the readings beforehand at home, or I read them myself. The most important thing is that I can go to the Communion. If I want to go to confession, we travel to a city, even though it’s far away; our priest does not know sign language. But my parents travel with me, or sometimes I go on my own”. Participants see religion and faith as a gift and grace that must be sought after and appreciated because it makes a person feel happier, stronger, and more peaceful. In the case of people with intellectual disabilities, their cognitive ability is generally proportional to their overall intellectual development level. However, more advanced forms of understanding religious issues can also be observed, reflecting the specific experiences of those people. They talk about religious issues in a very spontaneous, emotional, and illustrative way. The research participants with mental disability could not relate faith, religion, and prayer to marriage because none of them was married. However, the context of family life certainly concerns them. Participating in religious practices is not only a source of joy for people with disabilities, but it is also associated with their mental and social well-being. Moreover, it helps them cope with difficulties in their lives. Also noteworthy are the responses that highlight the vital role that prayer and religious involvement play in providing comfort, support, and hope to families with disabled members. They demonstrate that prayer helps family members realise that a person’s existence is more important than their usefulness (“I know I’m not very helpful, but when I hear my wife and children praying for me, I see that I am still important to them”; “My mother always fights to make me feel good, she even argued with our priest to allow me to receive confirmation and she would arrange for someone to prepare me, she never gave up. I am very grateful to her, because today I feel that I am her child just as I am, normal, not worse”; “I need constant care, and I am still important to my husband, when I hear that he thanks God for me, I feel like crying”). The research participants firmly believe in the truth of their faith.

4.2. Prayer

The majority of participants pray with varying frequency, but prayer is present in their lives (“I pray at home”; “I say prayer every evening”; “I pray, I pray that God help me”). They are also aware of the obligation to pray (“You have to pray not to lose contact with God”; “If you don’t go to church, if you don’t participate in Mass, it’s as if you liked someone but never visited him, and that person was waiting”; “When I pray, our children pray, when I go to church with my husband, our children go too”) and above all, they are aware of the meaning and importance of prayer (“When I pray, it’s easier for me, and when we pray together we feel better”; “Prayer keeps us together, I make a real effort to ensure that my husband can go to confession, because it is important to him”; “If I hadn’t

trusted my life in Our Lady and Our Lord, it would be really hard for me to live and understand what is happening in my life. What is good and what is not good. Five years ago, I experienced a great deal of stress. Being close to God helps me a lot". Although participants sometimes understand prayer in a less traditional way ("I pray in my own way"; "I don't pray rosaries, but I often talk to God the way I feel like and when I feel like it"; "I just like telling God how I feel, what hurts me, that it's hard, it's like a prayer for me"; "When I lie down, when I'm alone, I think about God, sometimes I scream something in my mind, sometimes I boast, sometimes I complain, and He listens to me like this. And I feel better"), their relationship with God is always very personal and conscious. They feel they have Christian duties, such as helping and supporting others ("Sometimes when I see my sister crying, I hug her"; "I know that even though I am in a wheelchair, I have to help my mother; I have two hands, she has so much trouble with me anyway"; "My husband does a lot for me, that's why I always help him as much as I can, disability is not an umbrella, and I also want to be good to him"; "My siblings are always on my side, they pray for my health, I hear it and I'm happy, so I always help them as much as I can, even though I don't have legs").

4.3. Religious Practices and Christian Attitude

Participants often indicate that faith is related to specific behaviours. Faith and religion are not limited only to practicing rituals, but also have a practical dimension; it is alive and present in everyday life, behaviour, attitudes, and decisions. There were some responses which confirmed that prayer and faith in general give life a sense of purpose ("I pray, but only God knows what is good for me"; "He knows whether to give me something or not"; "If God has some plan, it's probably better this way. I wouldn't have chosen the accident myself, but probably there is <something> behind it"; "Thanks to faith we are still together, God watched over us and thanks to Him we can carry this cross"; "After the accident, faith gave me the strength to stay with my wife and children, faith that it all makes sense and that we can deal with it keeps me with them"; "We believe in God, we pray and that saves us, because it was really hard. But we see God's grace working all the time, it helps our family and our marriage"; "It is thanks to God that we are still together, as a married couple and as a family". The research findings most frequently included responses that confirmed the reflective nature of religious activity in both general and family contexts. The responses also confirmed the importance of being close to God and of religious practices, and their visible correlations with marital and family life. ("But I feel good with God. Or even very good. I am calmer. I hope all this has some purpose. I thank God for what I have, for my wife, children, and home. And I also thank for my disability, because it also serves some purpose"). The research participants had a strong sense of God's presence and involvement in their family life. Sample answers include: "I feel Him every day, when I lose something, when I feel bad, when we quarrel and He works, gives me strength, some wisdom that one of us will give in, that I see that she loves me that the children support me, that they are not ashamed of me"; "When He hears my prayer, when I ask Him for help, when I am helpless and people don't understand me, it makes my prayers heard, it makes me feel better"; "It is God that gives my mum strength, she prays a lot"; "yes, my family is good to me and that is probably because God is present in it"; "I know that God always watches over us. As soon as we distance ourselves from prayer, from going to church, things get worse for us, we argue more often, we don't understand each other, and we even get fed up with each other": "I wasn't always close to God, but my wife encouraged me, in fact she taught me how to pray, she took me to church. She makes sure I always go to Mass on Sunday. It's important to me now, too. This is uplifting for us. There was no problem for her to take me there, once she asked our neighbours to help with that. Today I am taking an effort to be in church, because God gives me a lot, I don't know if I would still be alive without Him"; "My children look at me and say that if I pray, they will too, but if I stop praying, they will stop it as well. So I fight for faith, for them and for myself. But also for us, because without God our family would fall apart"; "My husband and I are blind; even

though it's often hard for us to go to Mass, we pray together because it is our salvation. Not only does it hold us together, but it gives us so much peace". In this context, it should be noted that emotions play a more important role than understanding in the religiosity of people with intellectual disabilities, even more so than in the case of other respondents. It can even be said that the religious experiences of people with intellectual disabilities are more intense than those of people who are intellectually sound but have other types of disabilities (Zasepa 2006, pp. 533–45). Some responses confirm the above theses: "I pray for my mother and she has a lot of strength"; "I don't go to church very often, but I talk to God and He helps us. I even pray for my sister because she likes me"; "Yes, God always listens to me—even when I quarrel with my parents, He helps me. He sees everything. Then I hug my mum or dad and the argument is over"; "When my mother gets angry with me, I talk to God quietly, then she seems to calm down and we smile at each other". These responses illustrate the ideas that people with intellectual disabilities have about God's action and agency in everyday life and their simple gratitude for the help they receive: "I know that He can do everything, and He is always there for me"; "what would I do without God? We would probably beat each other up with my brother and sisters"; "He accepts me for who I am, I am the way He created me, so I'm probably good. My mother is not ashamed of me either, because she says that God created me this way". This faith is associated with a desire to respect others, forgive, love, and accept oneself and one's own life history.

The participants in each category of disability studied have a clear and precise definition of faith in God and prayer, and they understand their practical value. They see God, faith, and prayer as a source of understanding, wisdom, goodness, and strength in everyday life, in their worries, and in marriage and family life.

5. Conclusions

People with disabilities who declare themselves religious are guided by mature and altruistic motives in their lives. The existing literature confirms a positive correlation between the strength of religious faith and the acceptance of illness (Nowicki et al. 2020, pp. 131–37). Our findings are consistent with these conclusions. People who describe themselves as religious are largely motivated by discipline, order, and family. One possible explanation for the lesser importance that people with disabilities often place on independence and agency is their greater desire to be connected to God and to depend on Him. The conducted research provides answers to the questions posed in the Introduction of the article and indicates that in the case of surveyed people with disabilities:

1. Faith and religious practices provide people with disabilities with a sense of meaning in life, helping them cope with difficult moments and experiences;
2. Prayer is a source of peace, patience, and gentleness, and it can improve the quality of family life;
3. Faith and religious practices can help people with disabilities make sense of everyday difficulties, gain perspective, and overcome their weaknesses and egocentrism;
4. Religiousness can be a source of meaning in life, affirming the human person, strengthening acceptance, and promoting a sense of self-worth;
5. Religiousness helps people with disabilities have a better understanding of their disability and their place in life.
6. Religiousness is a source of social support and family unity, and participation and inclusion in religious life can satisfy people with disabilities' need for religious practices and provide them with a sense of belonging, brotherhood, and friendship.

The discernment of priests in the context of admitting a person with a disability to the sacrament of marriage should always have a very individual character. Canon law in this matter leaves a lot of space for the priest's own discernment. Taking into account the importance of religion, sacraments, and family in the process of comprehensive rehabilitation of a disabled person, the possibility of admitting the sacrament of marriage

should be approached with great care and the latest knowledge (including legal and medical knowledge).

The Church should provide comprehensive and inclusive pastoral care to married couples and families with disabilities, supporting them in all aspects of their lives. This is the task of both the parish and supra-parish ministry. Individual relationships with people with disabilities and their families can help them experience faith more deeply and become more involved in parish life. Special forms of pastoral care dedicated specifically to people with disabilities and their families can also be helpful for their spiritual development. However, the most important thing is to create an inclusive environment where everyone feels welcome. It is also vital that people with disabilities articulate their own needs concerning their presence and activity in the Church. Participants' responses clearly indicate that religion and religious practices significantly improve the quality of life for believers with disabilities and their caregivers in the context of marriage and family. In light of the above, it is worth asking the following questions: Does the level of activity and participation of people with disabilities in the Church community depend on the attitude and openness of the priest? Or does it depend on how people with disabilities themselves articulate their own needs and how much they are involved in becoming part of the Church community? Or does it depend on the initiative of the people who are close to the person with a disability? Should actions towards including people with disabilities come from the "bottom" (parish priest) or from the "top" (a person with a disability)? Dialogue and understanding on this issue seem to be the key to effective action for both the Church community and the presence of people with disabilities within it.

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Article

The Value of Old Age in the Teaching of Pope Francis

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Abstract: The demographic changes taking place before our eyes regarding the structure of our society show that the proportion of older people is increasing quite rapidly. Very often these are people who want to be involved in the life of the family, society, and the Church, although their presence and involvement is not always viewed positively by the younger generations. On the other hand, the time of old age is a difficult time with many challenges, such as loss of health, and consequently the elderly need the support of the younger generations. This reality is also recognised by Pope Francis, and it could be said that the problem of the elderly is close to his heart. An expression of the importance and value of older people is, for example, his frequent meetings with older people, the establishment of a World Day for Grandparents and Older Persons, or the series of catechesis on old age and the value of this time in people's lives delivered in 2022. Taking into account these aspects of social change and based on the totality of Pope Francis' teachings addressed to the elderly, we wish to highlight distinctive elements emphasising the value of the elderly in the life of the family, society, and the Church. Starting from the presentation of the family as the best and natural environment for living during the time of old age, these teachings highlight older people as "guardians" of roots and values, the importance of intergenerational dialogue and a type of "covenant of generations", and the importance of older people in the life of the Church. An important element of Francis' teachings on old age is to identify this period as a "time of grace", a time of looking at life from the perspective of the years and trying to take stock of it, and a time of thanksgiving. All of this is done to emphasise the importance and value of the time of old age and to see and appreciate their presence in the life of the family, society, and the Church.

Keywords: old age; grandparents; family; society; faith; Church; Francis



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1. Introduction

One of the important initiatives Pope Francis took in the Year of the Family that he declared was the establishment of the feast of the *World Day for Grandparents and the Elderly* (Pope Francis 2020c)¹. The Day was established and announced on the day preceding the liturgical *Day of the Presentation of the Lord*. Pope Francis emphasised it by saying "The Day of the Presentation of Jesus at the Temple when Simeon and Anna, both the elderly, enlightened by the Holy Spirit, recognised Jesus as the Messiah. The Holy Spirit still stirs up thoughts and words of wisdom in the elderly today: their voice is precious because it sings the praises of God and safeguards the roots of peoples. They remind us that old age is a gift and that grandparents are the link between generations, passing on the experience of life and faith to the young. Grandparents are often forgotten and we forget this wealth of preserving roots and passing on" (Pope Francis 2021a). Pope Francis wants the *World Day for Grandparents and the Elderly* to be celebrated throughout the Church each year on the fourth Sunday of July, around the time of the commemoration of Saints Simeon and Anna, the "grandparents" of Jesus (Pope Francis 2021a).

The predecessors of Pope Francis also emphasised the significance of this period of a person's life and pointed to the challenges and tasks facing grandparents and the elderly by holding meetings in retirement homes and care homes and addressing them with special teachings and guidance. The *Letter to the Elderly* by John Paul II (Pope John Paul II 1999)

as well as Benedict XVI's discussion of the topic of grandparents and the elderly during his meeting with families from all parts of the world in Valencia in 2006² are especially noteworthy in this context.

Given the presence of the topic of the elderly in the constant teaching of the Church in recent decades and the fact that nearly all countries celebrate Grandfather's Day and Grandmother's Day³ as secular holidays, we would like to reflect on why the announcement of the Day for Grandparents and the Elderly by Pope Francis was such an important part of the Year of the Family. He emphasised that he "wished to establish the feast of grandparents on the last Sunday of July. The covenant between the two poles of the generations of life—children and the elderly—also helps the other two—young people and adults—to bond with each other and make everyone's existence richer in humanity. Here is a need for dialogue between the generations: if there is no dialogue between young people and the elderly, if there is no dialogue, each generation remains isolated and cannot transmit the message" (Pope Francis 2022b). Has the situation of the elderly, as well as the tasks and challenges facing them in recent years, changed so much as to make this initiative necessary again? It seems so, as Pope Francis notes that "old age is one of the most urgent issues facing the human family at this time" (Pope Francis 2022a). Since this is the case, based on Francis' teaching, especially the cycle of catechesis on old age⁴, we would like to point out that despite the changes taking place in society, the elderly are valuable in family and social life and can still give much to society.

Using the method of analysing source texts of Pope Francis' teachings on old age as well as with reference to the literature on the subject (Brzeziński 2018; Kućko 2022; Ozorowski 2021; Szafulski 2020; Lewicka 2019), we aim to show the importance of older people in family and social life despite the spreading culture of utilitarianism and hedonism. The starting point will be to identify the family as an environment for experiencing old age and, at the same time, to show the importance of the presence of older people in family life as 'guardians of memory' and as transmitters of history, tradition, and values. Another element is to show the importance of intergenerational dialogue. In today's multicultural and pluralistic society, dialogue is increasingly becoming the basis for understanding others. Intergenerational dialogue can be the beginning of a path of mutual understanding and openness to others. Finally, we also want to show that the quality of life in society depends on the way older people are treated and received by society. We intend to achieve these goals by analysing Pope Francis' teachings on old age.

2. Family as the Environment for Experiencing Old Age

As we address the subject of the elderly in family and social life, we undoubtedly need to specify the place and environment in which old age is experienced. Pope Francis confirms John Paul II's suggestion that as the family is the primary place for the birth, growth, upbringing, and development of a human being, so is it the primary place for the experience of old age. The family home is where an old person is with his or her relatives, feels loved, and can give love to others (Pope John Paul II 1999, pp. 11–13; Cf. Ozorowski 2021, pp. 120–21). According to Francis, there is no better place, no better environment where a person can live their old age, as his words confirm: "Blessed is the home in which the elderly are cared for! Blessed is the family that honours the grandparents!" (Pope Francis 2022i). Caring for the elderly is, in Francis' opinion, a source of blessing for the family and the home that makes the effort to care for an elderly person, even though it often involves a lot of strain and hard work. This attitude towards elderly parents and grandparents is a fundamental way of expressing grateful love to parents for the gift of life, upbringing, and love they have received from them and to grandparents for supporting parents in their upbringing and creating an atmosphere of love and respect towards each individual. It is therefore necessary to "reawaken our collective sense of gratitude, appreciation, and hospitality that enable the elderly to feel like a living part of the community. The elderly are men and women, mothers and fathers who have walked the same road before us, in our house, in our everyday struggle for a dignified life" (Pope Francis 2016, p. 191). One can

say more that how the older generation is treated today will be how they will be treated in the future when they reach their old age (Pope Francis 2015a). Therefore, as we speak about the family circumstances of the elderly, we can still say today that “most families have great respect for the elderly, surrounding them with affection and considering them a blessing” (Pope Francis 2016, p. 48). However, Francis stresses that “in highly industrialised societies, where the number of elderly persons is growing even as the birth rate declines, they can be regarded as a burden. [...] care and concern for the final stages of life is all the more necessary today when contemporary society attempts to remove every trace of death and dying” (Pope Francis 2016, p. 48; Cf. Szafulski 2020, p. 97)). Moreover, family is the environment that helps to preserve the identity and sense of belonging of every person. Francis says: “Society benefits when each person and social group feels truly at home. In a family, parents, grandparents and children all feel at home; no one is excluded. [...] In families, everyone contributes to the common purpose; everyone works for the common good, not denying each person’s individuality but encouraging and supporting it” (Pope Francis 2020b, p. 230; Cf. Szafulski 2020, p. 98). It is especially important today, as there are cultures in the contemporary world that “in the wake of disordered industrial and urban development, have both in the past and the present set the elderly aside in unacceptable ways” (Pope John Paul II 1981, p. 27; Cf. Pope Francis 2016, p. 192), where the elderly become an “unnecessary burden” on society. Therefore, it becomes necessary to change this mentality and this way of treating older people. There is also an obligation to create the best conditions for older people to be able to, as far as possible, experience this period in life in an environment they know, with everyday friendships, in the family home, surrounded by loved ones. The family and home are the environment that makes the natural choice for every human being (Cf. Pontifical Academy for Life 2021; Cf. Lewicka 2019, pp. 102–4). It should be borne in mind, however, that in certain situations it is necessary to resort to hospitalisation or placement of an older person in a care facility in order to provide appropriate and high-quality care that cannot be provided at home. There is no way to deny that, while in the past, large and multi-generational families were able to organise the care for older family members at home, nowadays, the altered structure of family units and the complex demands of work that keep adults away from home, have caused the care for the elderly to become a completely new challenge. In some poor social contexts, the institutional solution can provide a concrete answer to the problem of having no home of one’s own. It is increasingly common for the elderly to decide to move to a retirement home in search of a company. Others do it because the dominant culture forces them to feel like a burden and inconvenience to their children or relatives (Pontifical Academy for Life 2021). There are certain family situations associated with the presence of the elderly at home that require solutions that make home care, placement in a care home, or even a hospice, likely. In some situations, being at home no longer offers sufficient possibilities of providing the elderly person with adequate care. In such cases, one must not allow oneself to become entrapped by the “throwaway culture”, which may manifest itself as laziness and a lack of creativity in seeking effective solutions at times when old age is associated with the loss of autonomy. Placing human beings, their needs, and rights at the centre is an expression of progress, civilisation, and authentic Christian conscience (Pontifical Academy for Life 2021). Placing an elderly person in a facility should entail maintaining that person’s sense of belonging in the family, the sense of being loved, ensuring regular contact, and visiting the person as often as possible. The family should not allow itself, for the sake of everyone’s well-being, to lose the spirit of human fellowship and human sensitivity; otherwise, it will lose the truth of humanity within itself (Cf. Pope Francis 2022e). Above all, the elderly need the care of family members, whose feelings cannot be replaced by the most efficient structures or the most competent and kindest health care professionals. The elderly who are not self-sufficient or who suffer from advanced or terminal illnesses can enjoy truly humane care and receive adequate responses to their needs thanks to palliative care offered as a supplement and support to the care provided by family members. Palliative care aims to alleviate suffering at the final stage of an illness and to provide the ill person with

appropriate human companionship (Cf. Pope John Paul II 1995, p. 65). This support is important, especially for the elderly who, due to their age, receive less and less attention from therapeutic medicine, and who are often abandoned. Abandonment is the most serious “disease” affecting the elderly and the greatest injustice they can experience. Those who helped us grow up cannot be abandoned when they need our help, our love, and our tenderness (Cf. Pope Francis 2015b). However, there are situations in which older people have no family where they can live out the last years of their lives. In such situations, retirement homes, homes for the elderly where they can live out the last years of their lives with dignity, become the solution. As Pope Francis emphasised, care homes and homes for the elderly should be, so to speak, the “lungs” of humanity, or “sanctuaries” of humanity, where elderly and frail persons are provided with care and nurtured like older brothers or sisters (Pope Francis 2014; Cf. Szafulski 2020, p. 98; Lewicka 2019, pp. 104–5). All this makes the need to support families even more apparent, as sometimes they are unable to cope with the exhausting responsibility of caring for a seriously ill person, which entails a high energy and financial cost. A wider network of solidarity becomes necessary. It does not have to be necessarily and exclusively based on blood ties, but it should be articulated according to friendship affiliations, shared feelings, and mutual generosity in responding to the needs of others. The breakdown of social relationships affects the elderly in particular; as they age and experience the onset of physical and cognitive fragility, they often have no reference data and no people they can rely on to solve the problems they face in their lives (Cf. Pontifical Academy for Life 2021).

3. “Guardians of the Roots”: The Elderly in Social Life

Another aspect of Francis’ teaching on old age is to see older people of value as transmitters of history, traditions, family, religious, and national values, in other words as ‘guardians of the roots’⁵ from which we have all grown. In his view of old age, Pope Francis points out that old age is a gift for all stages of life. It is the gift of maturity and wisdom arising from life experiences (Cf. Pope Francis 2015a, 2022a; Lewicka 2019, pp. 107–8). It is clear that, for the Pope, they are a gift to the family, society, and the Church as the very guardians and transmitters of what was, as the foundation of what is. As part of their history, they carry with them the history of the family, the community in which they have lived and live, the nation, and the Church. Hence, Pope Francis encourages the elderly, or even appeals to them, to be the “guardians of memory” (Pope Francis 2019, p. 196; Cf. Ozorowski 2021, pp. 120–21). Being “the guardians of collective memory”, transmitting history and faith, and caring for the young generation are also presented by Pope Francis as the special vocation and task of the elderly (Pope Francis 2021b). This is because the memory of people, events, and things of the past are, in a sense, the foundation on which the present and the future of humanity are built. The “wealth of years” is the wealth of all people who have lived a long life and who have experience and history. It is a priceless treasure that is formed during the life journey of every man and woman, regardless of their background, economic, and social circumstances. This is because life is a gift, and long life is a privilege for the person concerned and others (Cf. Pope Francis 2020a). If, therefore, the elders are a treasure trove carrying the riches of history, it is the responsibility of the young to make skilful use of this treasure of history and build on it for the present and the future.

It is also worth noting that Pope Francis sees the past, history, and roots from which we have grown not as “a nostalgic reminiscence of the past, or anchors chaining us to past times and preventing us from facing the present and creating something new. Instead, they are a fixed point from which we can grow and meet new challenges. They provide the courage to meet our culture with realism and love and fill it with the Gospel” (Pope Francis 2019, p. 200). Therefore, it would be a mistake to think that history and roots can be rejected with no detriment to the present. On the one hand, Pope Francis says that “the lack of historical memory is a serious shortcoming in our society”. On the other hand, “knowing and judging past events is the only way to build a meaningful future. [...] Listening to the elderly tell their stories is good for children and young people; it makes them feel connected

to the living history of their families, their neighbourhoods, and their country. A family that fails to respect and cherish its grandparents, who are its living memory, is already in decline, whereas a family that remembers has a future. [...] Our contemporary experience of being orphans as a result of cultural discontinuity, uprootedness, and the collapse of the certainties that shape our lives, challenges us to make our families places where children can sink roots in the rich soil of a collective history" (Pope Francis 2016, p. 193). Preserving memory is necessary for preserving the future of the family, as memory opens it to the future and "can help to build a more humane and welcoming world. Without memory, however, we will never be able to build; without a foundation, we can never build a house. Never. And the foundation of life is memory" (Pope Francis 2021b). For this reason, Pope Francis points out that the elderly "remind us that old age is a gift and that grandparents are the link between generations, passing on the experience of life and faith to the young. Grandparents are often forgotten and we forget this wealth of preserving roots and passing on" (Pope Francis 2021a). This is the task that the elderly are so keen to perform.

Rejecting the roots, ignoring history, rejecting experience, or even having contempt for the elderly and looking only to the future leads only to uprootedness, distrust of all that is past, and trusting only the future made up of promises and devoid of values. According to Pope Francis, this is the building of society along ideological lines, having the young generations reject spiritual wealth, human values, and history transmitted from generation to generation, to direct them and subject them to ideological assumptions (Pope Francis 2019, p. 181). Discarding values by rejecting history and roots inevitably leads to a lack of meaning that throws away all ethical responsibility and all attachment to true good. Thus, society becomes the "society of fatigue" that tolerates a "selective healthcare market" that leads to the "gentle" death of the elderly and ill, which denotes euthanasia but also abortion. The rejection of the elderly leads to the elimination of their life wisdom, which is a completely different thing than progress and scientific breakthroughs (Cf. Pope Francis 2022g; Cf. Szafulski 2020, pp. 98–99). The rejection of the elderly opens the way to relativising the value of human life; meanwhile, the contemporary world needs young people who are strong and older people who are wise (Cf. Pope Francis 2022c). Therefore, the care for preserving roots and for history, expressed in the care for the elderly and the remembrance of their experience, is necessary for the good of society and also ensures that the experience and history of the present generations are not wasted or lost (Cf. Pope Francis 2022e; Cf. Szafulski 2020, pp. 101–2). It is therefore clear from Francis' words that society can only build its future by building on the past, the values and traditions handed down by older people, and by drawing on their wealth of wisdom. Of course, the use of these assets must be prudent and adapted to the requirements of today's society. They are no less indispensable for preserving the identity of the family, society, and the human person.

4. The Importance of Intergenerational Dialogue

An important element in today's changing society and its development, as well as mutual understanding, is dialogue, including inter-personal dialogue, cultural dialogue, and inter-religious dialogue. The beginning of such a dialogue at the social level can and should be the dialogue born in the family home, especially through intergenerational dialogue. Different generations, with different views on the same or similar subjects, open themselves up to mutual understanding and acceptance by engaging in dialogue on the basis of love. Intergenerational dialogue taking place in the family can and should be the foundation of dialogue in social life. It is the conversations between grandparents and grandchildren as well as between parents and children. Intergenerational dialogue provides the basis for the transmission of history and values. Pope Francis has emphasised the need for this dialogue many times, on the one hand pointing to the responsibility of grandparents for the transmission of history, tradition, and values, and stressing that their very presence bears witness to the grandchildren that history does not begin with them, while, on the other hand, underscoring the need for the young to respect past events and

pointing to young people's responsibility in being the heirs of history, which implies the need to know and appreciate it. Intergenerational dialogue is essential in family and social life alike, as its breakdown will consequently entail a loss of the ability to build family and social relationships, let alone relationships of a lasting nature (Cf. Pope Francis 2016, p. 192). What is more, Pope Francis points out that a lack of attachment to one's roots, which are represented by grandparents and history, including the history of the family and nation, translates into a lack of the strength required for healthy development, due to the absence of valuable points of reference (Cf. Pope Francis 2022b). Therefore, "it is important for grandparents to meet their grandchildren and for grandchildren to meet their grandparents" (Pope Francis 2021a) in a loving and kind dialogue. The future of man and the nation by necessity presupposes the dialogue and meeting between the elderly and the young, for the sake of building a fairer, more beautiful, more supportive, and more Christian society. Young people are the strength of the human journey, while the elderly reinforce that strength with their memory and wisdom. The elderly and grandparents have an extraordinary ability to comprehend the most problematic situations; therefore, they are, in a way, entrusted with the task of passing on life experience and the history of the family and community (Cf. Francesco 2019). Therefore, one should not give in to cultural pressure and a certain "political correctness" of rejection of history and things of the past, as if a man was born yesterday, says Pope Francis (Cf. Pope Francis 2022d). History is important, as it allows one to understand who one is and how one has got to the present moment, what the content of one's present should be, and how one should shape one's future in order not to lose one's identity. Hence, it seems necessary to continually foster intergenerational relationships. The future of the nation and society requires an encounter between the young and the old, as the young represent their vitality on the journey, while the elderly strengthen that vitality with memory and wisdom (Cf. Francesco 2016). According to Pope Francis, walking this shared way in dialogue between the older and younger people allows for being "firmly rooted in the present, and from here, revisit the past and look to the future. To revisit the past to learn from history and heal old wounds that at times still trouble us. To look to the future to nourish our enthusiasm, cause dreams to emerge, awaken prophecies, and enable hope to blossom" (Pope Francis 2019, pp. 193, 199; Cf. Pontifical Academy for Life 2021). Therefore, the meeting and intergenerational dialogue serve the young as well as the older generations. It serves human and social development.

The testimony of grandparents "that it is possible to emerge renewed from an experience of hardship" (Pope Francis 2021b) is another important element of intergenerational dialogue. It is undeniable that every generation, and every person, goes through various trials and hardships related to personal, family, professional, and social life. It seems especially important to witness and experience the ability and skill to overcome trials and hardships, especially for the young generation of our time, which gets discouraged quickly and easily and surrenders to various difficulties, often without even attempting to overcome them. Therefore, "the young must converse with the elderly, and the elderly with the young. And this bridge will be the transmission of wisdom in humanity" (Pope Francis 2022a; Cf. Kućko 2022, p. 386). By witnessing the overcoming of trials and hardships, the elderly are also demonstrating that love is the force that enables them to accomplish these things and that life without love is meaningless, empty, and sterile. Therefore, they should not concentrate on themselves and on selfish taking, but on the skill of giving in love and on the ability to love others with actions, not just with words (Pope Francis 2019, p. 197).

Pope Francis also suggests that intergenerational dialogue provides an opportunity to overcome some social stereotypes about the elderly and the young generation. On the one hand, it enables young people to stop seeing the elderly from the perspective of their old age, illness, infirmity, dependence, or fear caused by the loss of their roles in society. It enables them to see the elderly not only in terms of the costs that society pays due to the need to care for them. It is worth remembering that the elderly had worked in their professions for many years to acquire family and social goods. That dialogue also enables the young to see that the elderly are not an obstacle to their own employment or

development. On the contrary, this dialogue makes it easier to discover that the human person is worth more than material possessions. This dialogue makes it easier to resist the throwaway culture, which leads to pushing the human being out of the centre of social life when that human being, due to age, illness, or loss of independence, can no longer participate in the life of the family and society the way he or she did before (Cf. Francesco 2019). The intergenerational dialogue opens up and helps to build a culture and society that has human beings in its centre, including human beings who are old, ill, and in need of support and compassion.

It is also worth noting that in building a culture of intergenerational dialogue, the ability to notice human weakness, including the physical weakness of the elderly, is an element of building a more humane society, one that is open to the human being who needs support. That support, understanding, and dialogue is needed not only by the elderly but also by young people affected by illness and suffering or threatened by exclusion for various other reasons, such as migration⁶. It is therefore worth noting that the weakness of the elderly is, in a way, a provocation. The elderly, who are often dependent on others, provoke the young to accept dependence on others as a way of coping with life. They also provoke them to help and take actions directed at the good of others. They provoke a change in the mentality that sees weakness as something that should be rejected. Meanwhile, weakness resulting from old age and illness enables one to touch the fragility of human life and opens one up to the understanding of its value and dignity. Therefore, a society that is able to receive the weakness and fragility of human life offers hope of a better future by respecting the value of every human life (Cf. Pontifical Academy for Life 2021).

The final element of intergenerational dialogue we would like to highlight is respect, especially the respect of the young generation for the older generation. To Pope Francis, respect becomes the basis of the truth of dialogue and mutual relations. As he said during a General Audience: “Where there is no honour for the elderly, there is no future for the young” (Pope Francis 2015a). Moreover, it can be said that the lack of respect for the elderly is a lack of respect for the young who fail to show it to the elderly (Cf. Pope Francis 2022f). Those who take advantage of the weakness of the sick and old (Cf. Pope Francis 2022h) and who fail to respect the elderly and the weak should feel ashamed. In the *Christus vivit* adhortation, addressed to young people, Pope Francis wrote, relating to the Biblical message: “The Bible never ceases to insist that profound respect be shown to the elderly since they have a wealth of experience; they have known success and failure, life’s joys and afflictions, its dreams and disappointments. In the silence of their heart, they have a store of experiences that can teach us not to make mistakes or be taken in by false promises. [...] It is unhelpful to buy into the cult of youth or foolishly dismiss others simply because they are older or from another generation. Jesus tells us that the wise can bring forth from their store things both new and old (cf. Mt 13, 52). A wise young person is open to the future, yet still capable of learning something from the experience of others” (Pope Francis 2019, p. 16; Cf. Pontifical Academy for Life 2021). Respect for the elderly, therefore, becomes an indicator of the wisdom gained by the younger generations; at the same time, it can become an assurance that, since the young treat the elderly with respect today, they will be respected by the young generations too once they reach old age.

At the end of this section, it is worth pointing to the basic component of the possibility of implementing dialogue between generations and ensuring that this dialogue is fruitful. It seems obvious, but in the modern “busy” world, where we constantly hear that time is short, Pope Francis points to the wisdom and skill of “wasting time”. This means finding time for conversations, finding time for other people and for loved ones, hearing their needs, and “wasting time” with them. One needs to spend time, “waste time” with other people, with loved ones, with children, and the elderly, as this seemingly wasted time makes a person adopt a different view of life, of oneself, and of another human being (Cf. Pope Francis 2013, 2022b; Cf. Kućko 2022, p. 391). Time is given to people so that it can be used in the best possible way, and one of the most precious gifts that we can give to others is precisely the time when we are with them and for them. Thus, the thing that

Pope Francis calls “wasting time” can become and becomes the gift of love. The challenge and duty to be met today in families, society, and the Church in building relationships, intergenerational dialogue, as well as social dialogue becomes the ability to find and offer time to others.

5. Old Age and the Quality of Society

In the space of family and social life, the topics of quality of social life and the factors that influence this quality are increasingly being addressed. Many of the aspects that speak to the quality of social life concern issues related to material matters, economic matters, or economic development. However, an extremely important element that affects the quality of social life is the quality of interpersonal relationships, including attitudes towards the elderly and sick.

For Pope Francis, it is fundamental to approach and point out that the quality of social life, as well as the value of social life, depends on how older people are treated by the rest of society. Following Francis’ thinking, we can also say that how older people are treated in society tells us what kind of society it is. So what does the Pope want to point out when he teaches about the quality of society and the relationship to older people?

The fundamental issue that, according to Pope Francis, informs us about the quality of a society is “sensitivity to the elderly as an essential feature of civilisation”. Analysing Francis’ teachings on the relationship that exists between the quality of society and the treatment of the elderly, it should be noted that for the Pope “sensitivity to the elderly is an essential feature of civilisation” (Pope Francis 2016, p. 192; 2015a). This sensitivity gives rise to, as it were, the social obligation to care for the elderly, who are more numerous and who, more and more often, are lonely and abandoned even by their closest relatives. Therefore, providing every assistance to the elderly and giving up on the so-called throwaway culture (Cf. Pope Francis 2022h) arise as social challenges crucial for the preservation of culture and respect for life. In one of his catecheses, Pope Francis recalls the statement made by Pope Benedict XVI during a meeting at a home for the elderly: “The quality of a society, I mean of a civilization, is also judged by how it treats the elderly and by the place it gives them in community life” (12 November 2012). Those who make room for the elderly make room for life! Those who welcome the elderly welcome life! (Benedict XVI 2012; Cf. Pope Francis 2015a) Thus, we can conclude that sensitivity to the elderly is an important feature of civilisation and that only the civilisation that shows respect to the elderly, protects them, and cares for them, will flourish. Meanwhile, a civilisation that has no place for the elderly or rejects them, will gradually collapse (Cf. Pope Francis 2015a). Therefore, Pope Francis says that the civilisation of life cannot be afraid of old age, hide it, or marginalise it (Cf. Pope Francis 2022h). Such behaviour towards the elderly opens the way to the “throwaway culture” (Cf. Pope Francis 2022i). The culture “coupled with contempt for old age, seen as frailty, as decay or disability, has been the dominant image of 20th-century totalitarianism” (Pope Francis 2022a). In the throwaway culture and in a society that accepts this culture, where the elderly are pushed to the margins and suffer because of this, there are also many who take advantage of the age of the elderly, cheat them, and intimidate them. Even in families, the elderly are thrown out and placed in homes for the elderly, and their children do not visit them there. To Pope Francis, the throwaway culture is a form of society’s cowardice (Cf. Pope Francis 2022h). Francis remarks that society has somehow grown “accustomed to throwing people away. We want to remove our growing fear of weakness and vulnerability; but by doing so we increase in the elderly the anxiety of being poorly tolerated and neglected” (Pope Francis 2015a; cf. Lewicka 2019, p. 101). This is fear and cowardice in the face of the challenge of caring for those who have built that society and whom we now want to throw away from it. This is why renewing “the alliance between generations, which restores all ages of life to the human” (Pope Francis 2022a) becomes a challenge to society today. To Pope Francis, this means not only some aid schemes and support but, above all, creating plans for older people that would let them “live to the full” (Pope Francis 2022a). This means that, at the level of society, the elderly should not

be regarded as a burden but as resources and wealth, which is what they really are. This is evidenced, for example, by their engagement in voluntary activities, which provide valuable opportunities to experience the dimension of selflessness. Voluntary service is a positive experience for those who benefit from it, as well as for those who provide it. In fact, being engaged in the work for others can counteract the sense of loneliness, improve cognitive abilities, and improve psychological well-being. Engagement in volunteering promotes “active ageing”, helps improve the quality of life (Cf. Francesco 2019), and makes the elderly feel useful to society, as they can still contribute to its development. The growing engagement of the elderly in volunteering and associations becomes the optimal ground for the development of a supportive community and the civilisation of life. It demonstrates that the elderly not only have needs but also contribute significantly to the quality of social life (Cf. Francesco 2019).

Therefore, considering what the elderly can still contribute to social life, for the sake of its good and development, it seems necessary to shape social attitudes and mentality, especially in the young generations, to be sensitive to the elderly, to value their lives, and to appreciate what the elderly have contributed and are still contributing to the life of society, thus improving its quality. It is thus not only a matter of placing them in care institutions but also of accompanying them, shaping and providing proper support in the family, social, and spiritual life to the elderly, while fully respecting their dignity (Cf. Pontifical Academy for Life 2021). It should be done so that the elderly can still feel loved and not become a burden to anyone, especially their closest relatives. Since the number of the elderly in society is growing, it is important to make sure that our cities are inclusive and welcoming to older people and all other forms of weakness (Cf. Pontifical Academy for Life 2021). Because the way in which older people are treated and related to says what kind of society it is, it is therefore necessary to shape social relations in such a way that older people are treated with the dignity they deserve and with the necessary care and concern, so that society can be said to be a society with a truly human face.

6. Conclusions

Based on the rich teachings of Pope Francis on the subject of old age and the goal set at the beginning of this article of showing the value and importance of the elderly in social life, this analysis of papal statements, especially his cycle of catechesis on old age, has made it possible to see some important aspects of this period of life and to appreciate the value of the elderly in family and social relationships, intergenerational dialogue, and the transmission of values as ‘guardians of the roots’. By addressing the theme of old age and establishing the Feast of Grandparents and the Elderly, Francis wants to draw our attention to several important aspects of this period of life. In the first place, the contribution of the elderly to the wider good of society should be highlighted and appreciated, starting with the primary community of the family, in which the old person should spend the last years and days of his or her life, through the community in which he or she lives. As Francis pointed out in his Message for the First World Day of Grandparents and Older Persons, it is important to be together in families, to visit (Cf. Pope Francis 2022b), to be with one another and for one another “to accompany old age until its end” (Pope Francis 2022a). Second is identifying the importance of intergenerational dialogue and of the values that older people can and should pass on to the young as the “guardians of roots”, history, and values. The need for that dialogue, according to Pope Francis, arises from the fact that “a society in which the elderly do not speak with the young, the young do not speak with the elderly, adults do not speak with neither the elderly nor young people, is a sterile society, without a future, a society that does not look to the horizon but rather looks at itself” (Pope Francis 2022b). The elderly are the presence of history and family, and, as Pope Francis says, it is a matter of honour to show the truth about life and its stages to the young. Love for the human person, which is common to all and includes the honouring of a lived experience, is not a concern for old people. It should rather be the ambition of the young to inherit the best traits, to live in the fullness of humanity (Cf. Pope Francis 2022f), and to be able to

respect its dignity at every stage, also in the weakness and disability associated with old age or illness. Finally, Pope Francis points out that the quality of society and civilisation in which we live depends on the sensitivity to the elderly and the weak while stressing, at the same time, that sensitivity to the elderly and the weak determines the quality of a society and civilisation. Pope Francis expressed it in the following way: “the challenge of humanity and civilisation requires our commitment and God’s help” (Pope Francis 2022a) in caring for the elderly. Therefore, it follows from Francis’ teaching that it is necessary to develop intergenerational dialogue in order to build a quality society.

An analysis of the texts of Pope Francis’ speeches on old age allows us to see other areas that are certainly also part of the content of the lives of the elderly, such as the issues of religion, faith, gratitude to God for the gift of life, life and involvement in the Church, and looking at old age as a time of recapitulation and a kind of examination of conscience. These, too, because of their importance in the teaching of Pope Francis and in the lives of the elderly, will be deepened, so that the joint effort of young and old will open up the building of a society with a human face.

As we recall Pope Francis’s words “the elderly are the messengers of tenderness, the elderly are the messengers of the wisdom of lived experience” (Pope Francis 2022f), it seems necessary to provide the elderly with proper conditions to spend the final years of their life in the family as well as in society, to appreciate their contribution to the development of the family and society, to respect their weakness, and to be sensitive to their needs for development and progress of the culture and civilisation of life. All should be done to build a civilisation of life open to every human being.

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Notes

- ¹ Pope Francis proclaimed the Year of the Family during his Angelus meeting on 27 December 2020, and it ran from 19 March 2021 to June 2022 and culminated at the World Meeting of Families in Rome.
- ² The topic of transmission of faith in the family was addressed during the meeting, with emphasis on the special role of grandparents in fulfilling this task. See <https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/it/travels/2006/outside/documents/valencia.html> (accessed on 23 November 2021); <http://www.laityfamilylife.va/content/laityfamilylife/it/sezione-famiglia/incontri-mondiali-delle-famiglie.html> (accessed on 23 November 2021).
- ³ In Poland, Grandmother’s Day has been celebrated since the second half of the 1960s on 21 January, while Grandfather’s Day has been celebrated since the 1980s on 22 January. See <https://wiadomosci.wp.pl/dzien-babci-i-dziadka-2021-kiedy-obchodzimy-swieto-dziadkow-6598843104844672a> (accessed on 23 November 2021); <https://www.mjakmama24.pl/mama/imprezy/kiedy-jest-dzien-babci-i-dziadka-aa-SwXG-QYYL-AHYZ.html> (accessed on 23 November 2021).
- ⁴ The cycle of 18 catecheses on old age was delivered by Pope Francis between 23 February 2022 and 24 August 2022.
- ⁵ In the *Letter to the elderly*, nn. 9–10, John Paul II called the elderly the guardians of collective memory. He wrote: “The elderly help us to see human affairs with greater wisdom, because life’s vicissitudes have brought them knowledge and maturity. They are the guardians of our collective memory, and thus the privileged interpreters of that body of ideals and common values which support and guide life in society. To exclude the elderly is in a sense to deny the past, in which the present is firmly rooted, in the name of a modernity without memory. Precisely because of their mature experience, the elderly are able to offer young people precious advice and guidance. In view of all this, the signs of human frailty which are clearly connected with advanced age become a summons to the mutual dependence and indispensable solidarity which link the different generations, inasmuch as every person needs others and draws enrichment from the gifts and charisms of all” (n. 10).
- ⁶ The topic of migration and the need to help migrants is very important to Pope Francis, who addresses it frequently.

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Article

The Impact of the Loss of a Child in the Prenatal Period on Marital and Family Life and the Religiosity of Women after Miscarriage

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Abstract: Experiencing the death of a child is one of the most difficult things a person can go through. The situation of parents who have lost a child during the prenatal period is burdened with a social taboo. In the public sphere, it is often referred to as the “secret problem of women”. The aspect of religiosity is extremely important in experiencing mourning after a miscarriage. The study is of a theoretical–empirical nature. The purpose of this text is to emphasize the value of human life at every stage, including in the situation of miscarriage. Online questionnaire research was conducted on a sample of 77 women, supplemented by content analysis of three of the most popular virtual support groups for parents who have experienced child loss in Poland. The aim of the conducted research was to attempt to illustrate how women cope with the experience of miscarriage and how this experience affects marital and family relationships. The issue of faith and the depth of religious life were highlighted as elements that provide support to parents after miscarriage at various stages of mourning.

Keywords: miscarriage; family life; religiousness



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1. Introduction

The conception of a child causes changes in marital and family life. A successful pregnancy and childbirth bring joy to parents and the entire family. However, not every pregnancy results in the birth of a healthy baby. There are often special situations, such as miscarriages or stillbirths. According to data published in the UNICEF report “A Neglected Tragedy: The Global Burden of Stillbirths”, “A stillbirth occurs every 16 s somewhere in the world. This means that every year, about 2 million babies are stillborn (...) in 2019, an estimated 1.9 million babies were stillborn at 28 weeks of pregnancy or later, with a global stillbirth rate of 13.9 stillbirths per 1000 total births” (A Neglected Tragedy 2020). In Poland, approximately 1700 women give birth to a stillborn child each year, and over 40,000 pregnancies end in miscarriage. Spontaneous miscarriage occurs in about 10% of all pregnancies that have been diagnosed, but the actual number of miscarriages is much higher than estimated (Chazan 2003, p. 90).

Among types of miscarriages, the most common is spontaneous miscarriage, which is defined as “(...) the expulsion or extraction from the mother’s body of a fetus that does not breathe or show any other signs of life, such as heart activity, umbilical cord pulsation, or clear voluntary muscle contractions, provided it occurs before the end of the 22nd week of pregnancy (21 weeks and 7 days)”, whereas stillbirth is defined as “(...) the complete expulsion or extraction from the mother’s body of a fetus, provided it occurs after the end of the 22nd week of pregnancy, and after such expulsion or extraction, the fetus does not breathe or show any other signs of life, such as heart activity, umbilical cord pulsation, or clear voluntary muscle contractions” (Journal of Laws 2022, item 1304). According to this provision, two conditions for miscarriage must be met: the appropriate gestational age and the expulsion or extraction of a dead child from the uterus (Guzdek 2023, p. 328).

Despite the passage of time and advancements in medicine, the death of a conceived child remains a socially indifferent fact: “the suffering of mothers who have lost their unborn baby is disregarded, the patients who lose a baby are treated like things, the experience of such a loss is totally dehumanized, and the loss and the associated problem are openly denied” (Guzewicz and Szymona-Pałkowska 2014, p. 79). According to Urszula Dudziak, the sadness caused by miscarriage generates a sense of homelessness for the child who has not become rooted in family structures yet, leaving no trace in their own home. The tragedy of this situation is intensified by the lack of mourning rituals and the avoidance of specialists from various fields in addressing this topic (Dudziak 2013, p. 184).

This text is intended to show how faith and religiosity affect marital and family life after the birth of a child in the prenatal period. The first part of the text presents the Christian dimension of the dignity of the human person from the moment of conception and what, in the understanding of the Catholic Church, the attitude of responsible parenthood is. Then, the issue of miscarriage is presented in medical and psychological aspects and, finally, the marital, family and religious aspects are emphasized. The third part of the text presents the methodology and results of the research. The final (fourth) part of the article presents the conclusions from the conducted research.

2. Life after Miscarriage

For parents, the loss of a child, regardless of the duration of pregnancy, is very painful. It becomes difficult to speak about the pain, sadness or grief following the loss of a no, that's the title of the blog posts. The bibliography includes the title along with a link to the page and the date of access. child during the prenatal period, as pro-choice communities regard pregnancy termination within the first 12 weeks as a “normal part of every woman’s life” and assert that abortion should be approached “with care and respect”. It is important to establish how to describe the void after a miscarriage, since, in the opinion of pro-choice supporters, we are dealing with a fetus or “very small cells connected to each other” (Rozmowa o aborcji z dzieckiem—jak to zrobić? 2023), which will only become a child in the perspective of time (though the timeframe remains uncertain) (Jak pisać o aborcji bez stygmy? 2023). This is why the Christian perspective on the value of human life in the prenatal period is extremely important and worth discussing.

2.1. Dignity of the Human Person from Conception

According to Christian ethics, human life is a fundamental value of a man as a person and occupies a central place in the entirety of goods, because “a person exists as a person, and if they were not a person, they would not be a human being. This means that being a person is not an additional quality to humanity, but an integral part of it” (Kieniewicz 2013, p. 26). The value of human life is not only an individual good but also the most valuable good of the entire human community. It should be remembered that a man is a social being and human social life is a corporate life. “Individuals are bound to families, social groups (...) leisure and school groups. Every person is born into a social group, acquires their first experiences there (...) and usually leaves this world in the context of collective experience” (Goodman 2009, p. 67). Human existence begins and develops in interpersonal relationships, within emotionally, socially and culturally close circles of individuals. From the moment of conception, a child should be identified as a member of a specific community and should be protected by that community, as “from conception, a child has an impact on the community to which it belongs” (Kornas-Biela 2002, p. 9).

The argument for the value and dignity of human life can be found in the Old Testament: in the Book of Genesis, in the commandment given by God to Noah’s descendants after the flood (Genesis 9:6), or in the story of the Israelites’ exodus from Egyptian captivity (Exodus 1:15–22), as “respect for life is, in a specific dimension, a sign of the absolute value of a man, who was created in the image of God” (Czym jest człowiek? 2019, p. 242). Concern for human life also stems from humanity’s origin itself, as God, by giving life, guarantees its inviolability, even through the fifth commandment: “You shall not murder”.

By endowing humanity with the dignity of God's Child and the prospect of eternal life, God reaches the pinnacle of the Christian truth about life (Ślipko 1995, p. 42).

In the encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*, Pope John Paul II recalls that "(...) Church has always taught and continues to teach that the result of human procreation, from the first moment of its existence, must be guaranteed that unconditional respect which is morally due to the human being in his or her totality and unity as body and spirit" (John Paul II 1995, p. 60). The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith states that man is entitled to a set of rights, including the first, the most important, constituting the basis and condition of the others, namely the right to life. "From the time that the ovum is fertilized, a life is begun which is neither that of the father nor of the mother, it is rather the life of a new human being with his own growth. It would never be made human if it were not human already" (Declaration on Procured Abortion 1974, p. 12). A human being, from the moment of conception, deserves respect for their dignity as an individual and for their sexuality (Donum Vitae 1987). While considering the dignity of the conceived child, two assumptions should be accepted: "firstly, that the child is a person, and secondly—the child is a person from the beginning of its existence, and therefore possesses human nature and dignity from the beginning, regardless of the phase of its development or health condition" (Imielska 2014, p. 53). From a Christian perspective, every human life is a gift and "it is perceived as a God's deposit placed in the hands of man, which should be given special care both in its beginnings and in its final moments of existence" (Stec 2016, p. 209).

2.2. Responsible Parenthood

In the Christian perspective, marriage is seen as a mutual self-giving of a man and a woman, and the act of marriage itself is treated as a way of mutual giving. The constitution "*Gadium et spes*" states emphatically that "children are really the supreme gift of marriage and contribute very substantially to the welfare of their parents" (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World 1965, p. 50). The encyclical "*Humanae Vitae*" introduces the term "responsible parenthood", which is defined through the prism of biological, emotional, economic and religious aspects (Paul VI 1968, p. 10) and signifies the undertaking of the vocation to transmit life and education with an awareness of responsibility before the Creator (Bohdanowicz 2016, p. 182). The aspect of marital relationships is particularly significant during pregnancy. Pregnancy is a unique state, and waiting for the birth of a child causes reorganization of the marital system in every perspective of functioning, starting from a change in social status, through defining new social roles, to ending with a change in relations between partners. The area of interest of prenatal psychology is the importance of social relations, especially marital and family relations, in shaping the bond between parents and children. Strong marital relationships have a profound impact on the development of emotional attachment between parents and the child (Kucharska and Janicka 2018).

The progress of medical knowledge and technology, especially in the field of ultrasound scan, allows parents to participate more consciously and with greater engagement in all stages of a child's prenatal life. Celebrating pregnancy in public has become incredibly popular and widely accepted by society. In the era of social media, expectant parents eagerly share ultrasound images of their babies at specific stages of development, organize commemorative pregnancy photoshoots (known as "baby bump" photography) and hold baby showers—celebrations in honor of the mother, usually planned in the later stages of pregnancy. Society provides pregnant women with various privileges, including fully covered healthcare services, priority in public spaces and dedicated parking spots in urban areas. Local support groups for pregnant women are becoming more active, childbirth classes are thriving and improvements in healthcare services are becoming more common.

2.3. Interrupted Anticipation

A pregnant woman, regardless of the stage of her pregnancy, is treated by society as a "national treasure", the heart of her family and is legally, morally and socially protected.

So, who is the woman who has lost her child during the prenatal period? Who does she become when she is no longer carrying a child, but grief (Mirecka 2017, March 7)? What do you call parents who have lost their child as a result of miscarriage? How can you assist a woman and a man who have experienced a miscarriage? It is impossible to put into words the pain that parents feel at the moment of losing a child during the prenatal period because a miscarriage is like childbirth and experiencing the death of a loved one at the same time. The loss of a pregnancy is a painful and traumatic experience for parents, and the fact that the child's death occurs at an early stage of fetal life does not diminish the pain.

Importantly, "(...) parents who have lost their children due to miscarriage (...) experience not only pain and grief but also encounter many external difficulties, largely resulting from a lack of understanding of this particularly challenging situation" (Nowicka 2017, p. 147). In the case of a child's death during the prenatal period, especially before the 22nd week, medical staff often use medical terminology that suggests that the child never existed. In hospitals, terms like "dead pregnancy", "miscarried fetus" or "expelled mass of cells" are used, even though just a moment ago, parents were saying, "We heard the baby's heartbeat" and "We felt the baby's movements" (Kłos-Skrzypczak 2016, p. 81). The loss of a child during the prenatal period is a surprise to parents, and their reactions to this situation are incredibly strong and dynamic on a cognitive, emotional and behavioral level. Many parents discover the "value of the child, a real person who changed the perspective of their own future", at the moment of miscarriage (Łuczak-Wawrzyniak et al. 2010, p. 375).

3. Emptiness That Cannot Be Described with Words

Culturally, we have become accustomed to associating femininity with motherhood. Still, in the prevailing belief, the ultimate confirmation of femininity is giving birth to a child. A woman who cannot bring a child into the world breaks away from the family tradition, feeling isolated and unfulfilled. Miscarriage is the ultimate evidence of "procreative failure", and it is the most common reproductive problem encountered. As such, this issue needs to be considered from medical, social, familial and psychological perspectives (Napiórkowska-Orkisz and Olszewska 2017, p. 530). Miscarriage also has a physiological dimension, often uncomfortable, involving blood loss, lower abdominal pain and uterine contractions (Guzdek 2023, p. 335). All these processes also occur during childbirth but with a vastly different outcome. In the case of miscarriage, it is difficult to articulate the extent of suffering endured, only to ultimately lose one's child.

3.1. Miscarriage in a Medical Context

The experiences of women who have miscarried are incredibly difficult and painful. The intensity of women's psychological reactions at the time of miscarriage resonates in the long-term perspective, affecting relationships with their closest environment. The loss of a child in the prenatal period often triggers shock, anger, denial, helplessness and feelings of guilt. If we also consider the lack of empathy or the "inability to communicate medical information while respecting the dignity of the patient and her lost child" (Konarska 2023, March 31), the loss of a child in the prenatal period becomes a traumatic experience. According to Dorota Kornas-Biela, "experiences related to child loss have a processual nature, developing slowly, deepening, and fading away" (Kornas-Biela 2020, p. 336). During a woman's hospital stay after miscarriage, two contrasting attitudes often emerge towards the loss of the child: shock, disbelief, sorrow or sadness, which typically manifest through crying, and an attempt to take control over the situation and manage their own emotions (Kornas-Biela 1999, p. 181). The influence of inappropriate reactions from the surroundings, especially from doctors and midwives, is characterized by comforting statements like: "You are young to have another child" (Szymańska 2011, p. 103). Gynecologists might display a medicalizing attitude and assume the right to make decisions on behalf of the patient regarding the handing over of mementos related to the deceased child. Doctors, by not providing such mementos, argue that "the best method is forgetfulness" or "it only worsens

the problem” (Szymańska 2011, p. 104). For medical staff, miscarriage is often seen as an insignificant event that will not subject a woman to permanent psychological effects (Adolfsson 2006, p. 11). However, after experiencing a miscarriage, parents need healthcare workers to help them avoid further prolonged emotional implications. Clear and effective methods of communication by medical staff, as well as respecting the privacy of women after miscarriage, are intended to serve this purpose (Galeotti et al. 2022, p. 22).

3.2. *Grief after the Loss of a Child*

Reactions related to the loss of a child in the prenatal period are individual in nature. Many researchers argue that the intensity of grief, sadness or anxiety, which usually appear after a woman leaves the medical facility, is similar to what occurs after the loss of a loved one (Kornas-Biela 1999, p. 180). Miscarriage is a loss that deserves mourning, and its intensity varies depending on many factors, such as previous reproductive experiences, the desire to be a mother, having a child, marital and family support and personality traits. The source literature estimates that grieving should last from 12 to 18 months and involves five stages:

- Negation;
- Anger;
- Haggling;
- Depression;
- Approval.

The specified stages of mourning serve as a tool for identifying feelings that are difficult to precisely place on a timeline, as they are highly individual in nature (Kübler-Ross and Kessler 2005, p. 7). Research indicates that grief symptoms after a miscarriage occur in 90% of women (Białek and Malmur 2020, p. 135). Despite these facts, societal acceptance of grief after miscarriage remains low, as there is a tendency to label such grief as excessive. Consequently, there is a high barrier for grieving parents to seek help (Mergle et al. 2022, August 18). The period of mourning is a time when prospective parents face suffering, isolation, loneliness and seek answers to troubling questions. There is often no one to talk to about what they have experienced, and the closest environment, not knowing how to behave in such a situation, either remains silent or diminishes the experienced mourning. These situations are highly significant because unresolved or prolonged grief can lead to psychological disorders, such as depression, anxiety disorders or post-traumatic stress disorder (Bielecka 2012, p. 65).

3.3. *Miscarriage and Mental Condition*

Loss after a miscarriage can be observed in both women and men, but the intensity of emotions is often greater in women, and their experience tends to be more intense. According to Bożena Miernik, “the intensity of grief is related to the duration of pregnancy—the intensity of grief increases in women who have experienced a miscarriage later in pregnancy” (Miernik 2017, p. 258). Depressive symptoms are a common emotional reaction to the experience of losing a child in the prenatal period for women. Statistics show that the rate of depression among women who have experienced a miscarriage can reach up to 55%, and rates of anxiety range from 28% to 45%, both immediately after the event and even up to 6 months afterward (Białek and Malmur 2020, p. 135). The probability of depression increases proportionally with the number of miscarriages and the length of time waiting for offspring. About one-third of women diagnosed with depression after a miscarriage are at increased risk of suicidal thoughts. These findings are supported by research conducted in Finland from 1987 to 1994: the average annual suicide rate in the year following a miscarriage was significantly higher than that of women in the general population, at 18.1 per 100,000. The duration of pregnancy is of great importance in terms of the severity of symptoms, but it is not important at which week the miscarriage occurred; what matters is how the woman perceives the loss of the child. Interestingly, marriage has been identified as a protective factor against the aggravation of depressive symptoms after

the loss of a child in the prenatal period. Research indicates that married women report symptoms of depression less frequently than those in informal relationships (Białek and Malmur 2020, p. 136).

Acute stress syndrome and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) can be observed in women who have experienced miscarriages. PTSD is a disorder that results from anxiety, which is a consequence and reaction to an extremely stressful event, including the loss of a child in the prenatal period. In December 2019, research conducted in three London hospitals was published. The aim was to assess the impact of early pregnancy loss on the emergence of anxiety, depression and PTSD. During the study, it was found that almost one-third of women (29%) experienced post-traumatic stress disorder compared to other healthy pregnant women. One in four women after a miscarriage (24%) felt anxious, and one in ten experienced depression. The study was repeated nine months after experiencing the loss of a child, and the conclusions were as follows: almost one in five women (18%) had post-traumatic stress disorder, one in six (17%) felt anxiety and one in twenty had depression (Pregnancy Loss Leads Post-Traumatic Stress in One in Three Women 2021, February 9). Conducted research confirms that as many as 77% of women after a miscarriage report experiencing intrusive memories, anxiety in specific situations, frequent nightmares and 68% of them describe a strong sense of helplessness (Białek and Malmur 2020, p. 137).

The loss of a child during the prenatal period affects a woman's somatic sphere, causing sleep disorders, loss of appetite, mood lowering and fatigue. Women after a miscarriage "show reduced interest in the sexual sphere, are irritable in social contacts and withdraw from them (...) they have a lower sense of self-worth and presence of suicidal thoughts" (Trębicka 2017, p. 247). The uncertainty experienced by women after a pregnancy loss contributes to a high level of anxiety, which can be a greater psychological burden than depression. This includes concerns about the return of the menstrual cycle, the desire to conceive another child and the risk of recurring miscarriages (Nynas et al. 2015, January 29). Depression and anxiety are common after a miscarriage, and the symptoms tend to persist for up to 30 months after experiencing the loss of a child.

3.4. Miscarriage and Marital Relations

Experiencing a miscarriage is incredibly difficult for both parents, as "not being able to know the face of their child means not being able to experience their identity and personal individuality. It is one of the most difficult sufferings (...) of parents who have lost their child before birth, especially in the early stage of their prenatal development" (Modlitewnik Rodzin Dzieci Utraconych 2018, p. 46). It is difficult to find information on the impact of miscarriage on the psychosocial condition of men in the literature. However, the father of the child, in the face of a miscarriage, also experiences sadness, grief and disappointment. He also goes through a process of mourning, even though these emotions are contrary to the accepted cultural norms. This is likely due to the fact that, for biological and psychosomatic reasons, the woman establishes the initial relationship with the child. Frustration, anger, guilt and reduced self-worth are common among men after a pregnancy loss. However, the grieving process is experienced differently by men, with less intense emotions. Perhaps that is why it is up to the man to support the woman, to provide her with a sense of closeness and to give her strength.

However, as research indicates, repeated miscarriages can lead to erectile dysfunction and anxiety about intimate relationships among men. Men who have seen the child during ultrasound examinations tend to have a harder time coping with the loss of a child in the prenatal period. Comparing the rate of depressive symptoms in 56 couples after a miscarriage, it could be concluded that 29% of women and 10% of men had an elevated level of depression within a week of the child's death (Białek and Malmur 2020, p. 136). It is evident that data concerning depression in men after miscarriage are underestimated. Often, the symptoms of depression in men include behaviors, such as anger, aggression, suppression of emotions, isolation, distraction, irritability, risky behavior or sleep disorders (Lewis and Azar 2015, p. 12).

It happens that in case of fathers, the consequences of losing a child in the prenatal period may appear with a delay and manifest in the form of risky behaviors, such as turning to intoxicants. Men can be overwhelmed by the way women experience grief, feeling unable to meet their expectations, leading to tension in their interactions that fosters conflicts and creates mutual distance. The disproportion in the intensity of grieving processes can make women feel isolated and misunderstood, contributing to the deepening of depression (Kornas-Biela 1999, p. 187). The conducted research shows that some men in the situation of miscarriage tried to “grasp the reality of the life that ended” (Williams et al. 2020, p. 138). They saw being a father as a possibility in an abstract future, not a certainty in the tangible present. They perceived the loss of the child as a loss of potential. Some research has shown that men consider miscarriage in biological terms, thus excluding any emotional involvement.

Marital relationships, in the face of miscarriage, are put to the test, difficulties arise and disruptions in communication occur. Mutual blaming, anger and lack of support from other family members can weaken the marital bond and often lead to the breakdown of the relationship. From conducted research, it is evident that couples who have experienced a miscarriage had a 22% higher likelihood of separation compared to couples who did not experience it. “Married couples who experience the mourning process in a mature way while simultaneously working on strengthening their marital bonds can actually become even stronger after such a trial” (Miernik 2017, p. 256).

Difficulties also arise in intimate relationships. Research conducted around 2020/2021 indicates that women after experiencing a miscarriage felt less valuable, and their sexual activity no longer brought them pleasure. The emotional state of women combined with physiological reactions to sexual stimuli has a significant impact on the quality of the relationship between partners (Białek et al. 2022, p. 813). The lack of formal identification of women in need of support in this area and, in appropriate cases, formal treatment can expose parents who have experienced a miscarriage to a significant worsening of symptoms, psychosocial impairment and the risk of miscarriage in the first trimester of any subsequent pregnancy.

According to Adrieli Booker, although miscarriage is extremely difficult for marital relationships, they are not doomed to failure. Research indicates that if a woman feels that her partner is engaged in the process of grieving, sharing emotions and experiences, then the partnership becomes more enduring and stronger. The way in which spouses react to each other after a miscarriage has a direct impact on their relationships, including their intimate ones. As Booker points out, for many couples, a properly and well-lived mourning process after a miscarriage strengthens marital relationships and deepens their intimacy (Booker 2023). The sexual sphere is extremely important in partner relations. Miscarriage, as mentioned before, affects the sexual aspect for both partners. A common behavior among women is refraining from sexual intercourse due to a decrease in libido, issues with experiencing orgasm, pain resulting from medical procedures or difficulties in daily life interactions. The sexual dimension for women carries both physical and psychological significance. The decision to engage in sexual activity is driven by a desire for closeness, seeking security and acceptance. “Sexual life is a very important sphere, and the problems that arise in it can indicate the need for assistance for the partners on this level” (Trębicka 2017, p. 253).

3.5. Miscarriage and Family Relationships

The death of a child during the prenatal period has lasting psychological consequences, not only for the mother but also for her entire family. Not only is the father of the child a person on whom the mother strongly depends for emotional support but this issue also applies to the siblings of the child who died in the prenatal period. How children experience the loss of a sibling is influenced by their age, knowledge of prenatal development and the parenting style demonstrated by their parents. It is important at what stage of pregnancy children were informed about the conception of their sibling and whether they were

involved in establishing a connection with the unborn child through actions, like touching the mother's belly or talking to the baby (Miernik 2017, p. 263). If children were aware that their parents were expecting a new family member, the information about the death of their sibling should be presented in line with their cognitive and emotional capabilities. As Piotr Guzdek writes, "Hiding the fact of the death of an unborn brother or sister from the deceased's siblings carries negative consequences. Not knowing the actual reason for their parents' sadness, the living offspring may unjustifiably blame themselves for their parents' difficult psychophysical condition and potential conflicts" (Guzdek 2017, p. 390).

Children empathize with their parents' emotions, trying to find their place in a new and often challenging reality. It is not uncommon for siblings to feel anxiety, confusion or even a sense of being lost. They might experience disappointment due to the loss of their sibling, and if feelings of jealousy or fear of the new family member arise, they might attribute themselves as responsible for the situation. Older children might fear rejection or loss of love from their parents. Therefore, in the context of miscarriage, it is important to take the time to explain the reasons for the situation to the deceased child's siblings. Children should be relieved of the burden of loss, given sufficient attention and encouraged to talk about the emotions associated with the miscarriage (Guzewicz and Szymona-Pałkowska 2014, p. 93).

Indeed, this situation can be incredibly challenging for parents who have experienced a miscarriage, as they often find themselves unsure of how to help and support those in mourning, including family members. Therefore, after a miscarriage, parents must face not only their own pain at various stages of mourning but also focus on the experiences of the deceased child's siblings. This requires a high level of emotional maturity, self-awareness of their emotions and effective communication between parents. Open and honest conversations, as well as dedicating time to answer questions or doubts from the siblings, provide an opportunity for them to navigate the crisis and emerge stronger. Research indicates that parents offer support to their deceased child's siblings in three areas: "acknowledging and recognizing the child's grief, involving them in family rituals related to saying goodbye to the deceased child, and maintaining the family's memory of the child" (Miernik 2017, p. 263).

It is important to emphasize that comprehensive support provided to parents who have experienced the loss of a child in the prenatal period contributes to a proper process of grief among all family members. Therapeutic assistance should be extended to all family members, as it not only helps them better understand the dynamics between them but also enables each member to develop coping mechanisms for the challenging experience of miscarriage (Dziedzic 2022, p. 208).

3.6. *The Experience of Losing a Child and Devotion*

Culture, language and religion have a significant influence on the way grief is experienced after the death of a child in the prenatal period. It is through religion, among other factors, that the tradition of a proper approach to the issues of death or religious ceremonies is culturally rooted. In our culture, a funeral is a natural consequence of a person's death, an expression of respect that should be paid to the deceased individual. Similarly, this applies to a child who has passed away before birth: the decision about burial lies within the purview of the parents, who, in accordance with their worldview, may choose to bury their child but are not obliged to. The funeral of a miscarried child, which is granted "due to the inherent ontological identity possessed by the child during its life and the reverence owed to human remains" (Guzdek 2017, p. 390), serves as an excellent educational tool for close or distant bereaved family members. The burial of a child who died in the prenatal period has both micro and macro social dimensions: it shapes the attitude of responsibility towards conceived life, verbalizes the dignity of the human person and the burial site (grave) becomes a place of reflection and remembrance, a visible symbol of parents' yearning for the departed, unknown and unsoothed child.

The religious aspect can have a significant impact on the experience of grieving and can serve as a buffer that makes readjustment after a miscarriage possible. Faith and strong religious convictions, along with social support, contribute to a lower level of grief stemming from the death of a child in the prenatal period. Moreover, religious institutions are centers with rich resources of social support, and the participation of parents in religious practices helps in accepting this support at various stages of mourning (Allahdadian and Irajpour 2015, December 30).

Religious matters also have an impact on coping with psychological issues after a miscarriage. Specifically, the stronger an individual's religious beliefs are, the lower the level of hopelessness and grief experienced after the loss of a child in the prenatal period. Moreover, in highly developed countries where women are often identified by their ability to bear children, the loss of a child in the prenatal period can lead to social exclusion. Therefore, the support and openness of religious institutions at this time become invaluable. There is also a connection between the mental well-being of women after a miscarriage and their participation in religious services. Mothers who regularly participate in religious practices show lower levels of post-miscarriage depression compared to non-practicing women. Taking into account the positive influence of religion on particular stages of mourning after a miscarriage, it should be made easier for orphaned parents to participate in religious ceremonies (such as funerals, worship services and regular prayers). Religious beliefs and a rich spiritual life significantly influence how women experience the loss of a child in the prenatal period. Women's spiritual lives, according to Felicity Agwa Kalu, have a significant impact on finding meaning in miscarriage and the purpose of life. Some families grieving the loss of a prenatal child have found comfort by defining the meaning of their miscarriage within their religious and spiritual beliefs (Kalu 2019).

The role of a priest seems extremely important in this situation, whose words, spiritual consolation or confession can give parents comfort in mourning, filling them with faith in eternal life and meeting their unborn children in Heaven. As we read in the Letter to the Romans: "Hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out into our hearts through the holy Spirit that has been given to us" (Letter to Romans 5:5 1966).

4. The Methodology of the Conducted Research

To cope with the difficult experience of losing a child in the prenatal period, many parents turn to online support groups. Social media platforms provide a variety of groups where parents can easily and quickly register, share their experiences, receive support and find understanding.

Data Collection

For the purpose of this study, content from posts published between 1 April 2023 and 31 July 2023 was analyzed on three of the most popular online support groups for parents who have experienced loss, accessible through the social media platform Facebook.

1. Child Loss (from Polish: Strata dziecka¹): 1790 members, a group established 9 years ago (referred to as Group A);
2. Heavenly Children's Parents (from Polish: Rodzice niebiańskich dzieci²): 5805 members, a group established 8 years ago (referred to as Group B);
3. Child Loss—Orphaned Parents—Help and Support (from Polish: Strata dziecka—Osieroceni rodzice—Pomoc i wsparcie³): 5337 members, group established 5 years ago (referred to as Group C).

The posts considered were those posted within a specific time frame, and their content was related to the death of a child during the prenatal period (on average 70% of the content). To become a member of these groups, individuals need to send a request to join to the group administrator. Each of the mentioned groups has clearly defined rules of operation in their "Information" section: "We are here to support each other, give strength, and share experiences. In the group, we do not judge (...) we trust each other (...) we all have a very positive attitude towards each other because we have an abundance of suffering"

(Group B information). The administrator of another group mentions that “membership in this group requires mutual trust. Authentic, expressive discussions enrich the groups, but sensitive and confidential topics can also be addressed. Information shared in this group should remain within the group” (Group C information).

In the mentioned groups, a proprietary questionnaire on the topic of “The Impact of Child Loss on Marital and Family Relationships” was also shared. The questionnaire was made available through Google Forms survey software from 19 June 2023 to 14 September 2023. The research had a quantitative nature and was fully anonymous. The questionnaire only included questions regarding the respondent’s age and gender. It did not require logging in from respondents. The questionnaire consisted of 13 questions: 12 closed questions with disjunctive and conjunctive cafeteria and 1 open question. Additionally, filtering questions (conditional questions) were applied, allowing the questionnaire to be structured in a way that respondents could answer only questions relevant to their situation. The estimated time for completing the survey was a maximum of 5 min.

In summary, responses were received from 77 respondents, all of whom were women. The age of the respondents ranged from 23 to 49 years. The largest group of respondents fell between the ages of 27 and 30, as well as between the ages of 32 and 35. These conclusions were based on the questions included in the survey questionnaire, which asked directly for gender and age.

5. Materials and Results

The conducted questionnaire study revealed that almost 43% of the miscarriages occurred after the 20th week of pregnancy, more than 36% of the losses took place between the 12th and 19th week of pregnancy, while the remaining almost 21% were within the first 12 weeks of pregnancy. These conclusions were based on the first question in the research questionnaire: “In what week did the miscarriage occur?” It is worth noting that each respondent provided a specific date (day, month, year). The time range covers almost 11 years: from 4 October 2012 to 31 August 2023. Next, respondents were asked a question about “How many miscarriages have you had?” More than three-quarters of the participating respondents experienced one miscarriage (73% of responses), 18% of the participants mentioned having two miscarriages, 5% of the respondents have experienced three miscarriages, while almost 3% of women reported having more than three miscarriages.

The above statistical data are supplemented by an analysis of the content of posts published on support groups (Groups A, B and C). Parents commonly use various terms to refer to their unborn children who passed away, such as “my son”, “my daughter”, “our Angel”, “our Sunshine”, “beloved Little Angel”, “unborn son” and “our greatest treasure”. It happens that children who died in the prenatal period had the name that their parents use in their posts (“son Maksiu”, “darling Mati”, “daughter Lenka”).

The questionnaire-based research indicates that the questions most frequently asked by women after experiencing a miscarriage were as follows: “Why me?”, “Why my child?” and “Why did this happen to me/us?”. It is worth noting that many women (almost 30% of responses) blamed themselves for their child’s death, posing questions, such as “What did I do wrong?”, “How could I have let this happen?”, “Why didn’t I fight more with the doctor?” and “Why didn’t I trust myself more than the doctors?”.

Analyzing the results of the conducted research, it can be concluded that 87% of respondents declared themselves as religious individuals. Among those who answered positively to the question “Are you a religious person?”, a follow-up question about the method of burying the child was posed. From the acquired information, it can be inferred that 61% of women opted for the burial of the child in an individual or family grave, while more than 13% chose burial in a collective grave for lost children. Almost 26% of respondents indicated that the hospital organized the burial.

It should be emphasized that the analysis of the content from support groups (mainly Groups A and B) indicates that parents regret the lack of opportunity to say goodbye to

their lost child and the fact that they did not decide on its burial. There are entries full of doubts of parents whose children were buried by the hospital with the following content:

“Recently, I’ve been having thoughts whether my little one (...) was actually buried? I never saw my child. I asked at the hospital if I could see them, but they refused. I asked at the funeral home, I even cried and begged to see them. Unfortunately, they kept refusing. They said that they just take them from the hospital and put them in a coffin. I didn’t even get to choose the coffin” (Group B, posts from 17 June 2023)

Believers who decided to bury their child were asked the following question: “Who participated in the funeral?” From the conducted research, it is evident that 74% of individuals who chose to bury their child (whether in an individual/family grave or in a collective grave for lost children) opted for a prayer at the gravesite or in the cemetery chapel. Just 26% of women affected by the loss of a child in the prenatal period chose a funeral with a funeral mass. Almost half of the funerals for the lost children (46% of responses) were of a familial nature—parents, grandparents and siblings attended the funeral. Over 22% of respondents indicated that distant relatives also participated in the funeral, and 32% of women indicated that the funeral ceremony was personal in nature: only the husband/partner and herself participated.

The content analysis of the posts indicates that parents of children who passed away in the prenatal period attach great importance to matters related to the burial of their child. Mainly users of Group A share designs of gravestones, photos of adorned graves of their unborn children and exchange information on where to buy personalized, named decorations for the grave (wreaths, vases, candles, toys). A lot of content is about which type of flowers is the most durable, how to decorate the grave for specific occasions and holidays, etc. Parents also inquire about epitaphs found on the graves of children who passed away before birth, especially users from Group B. It is worth mentioning the content of a few of them:

- “I’m not asking you God why you took him from us, but thank you for giving him to us”;
- “You are nowhere, because you are already everywhere”;
- “What a great treasure this grave hides only mom, dad and God know”;
- “Rest in God dear Eryk, you will never be forgotten by us”;
- “You are our part of Heaven...only time separates us”;
- “You left a lifetime too soon”;
- “Jesus, I place my treasure under Your cross”;
- “Some babies learn to walk, others get wings right away”.

In the questionnaire study, over half of the women, when asked the question “How did the loss of your child affect your relationship with your husband/partner”, stated that their relationship had strengthened (over 44% of responses). Almost 12% of women admitted that experiencing the loss of a child in the prenatal period had a negative impact on their marital/partner relationships, leading to the dissolution of the relationship. Slightly over 44% of respondents stated that miscarriage did not affect their marital/partner relationships in any way.

In support groups for parents who have experienced loss, much attention is given to mental well-being. Women share songs that lift their spirits, poems dedicated to their unborn children and even therapeutic stories written after the loss (Group B, post from 22 June 2023). On each group, information about local support groups is shared, both those that meet in person and those held online. Many women also offer to engage in conversations with other women outside the group, either through social media or over the phone.

Respondents were also asked the following question: “How did your husbands/partners react to the miscarriage?” The women participating in the study stated that they received support from their husbands/partners at every stage of their grieving process (62% of

responses). They mentioned that their husbands/partners also experienced the loss deeply (over 4% of responses). However, 26% of women declared that after miscarriage, husbands/partners were restrained in expressing their emotions; they were looking for substitute forms of activity (almost 12% of responses) and indulging in addictions (almost 9% of respondents).

Then, the people participating in the study were asked the following question: “What forms of support did you use after the miscarriage?” From the questionnaire study, it is evident that more than 70% of respondents sought various forms of support after experiencing a miscarriage. This study also indicates that almost 70% of women who reported an improvement in their marital/partner relationships after a miscarriage broadly understood support: almost 29% of respondents went for individual therapy or couples therapy (more than 9% of responses). The influence on marital/partner relationships after a miscarriage was also attributed to support from a religious figure (discussions, confession)—this declaration was made by over 19% of women. A significant number of women admitted to seeking support from other women who had experienced miscarriages (39% of responses) or from support groups for women after child loss (20% of respondents). The support of parents/closest family members seems to be extremely important in the experience of losing a child in the prenatal period, with over 45% of women making this declaration. It is worth emphasizing that women usually use several forms of support at the same time.

6. Conclusions

The conducted comprehensive analysis of content related to prenatal child loss, supported by questionnaire studies and content analysis of posts in various support groups, enables us to formulate several key conclusions:

- Parents who have experienced loss acknowledge the full dignity and inherent value of their unborn children. This understanding of dignity is expressed through the use of personal pronouns, gender-specific terms or specific names or nicknames when referring to the children who have passed away before birth.
- Women who have experienced a pregnancy loss often struggle with intrusive thoughts and feelings of guilt, which constitute significant stages of the grieving process.
- The behavior and attitude of a doctor in the face of pregnancy loss have a significant impact on the mental well-being of parents.
- Parents go through the difficult period of mourning after the loss of a child in the prenatal period much more easily if they can organize a funeral for them. Typically, this is a small ceremony, a symbolic farewell, which, nonetheless, holds significant meaning for the parents’ emotional state.
- Religious and spiritual beliefs enable individuals to find meaning in the loss of a child during the prenatal period and aid in coming to terms with miscarriage. Therefore, it is important for parents who have experienced miscarriage to utilize the full potential of their religious and spiritual convictions as resources for coping with the loss from a psychosocial perspective.
- In the face of child loss, women eagerly seek support from close family members, friends, as well as other women who have experienced miscarriage. Virtual support groups, often found on social media platforms or online forums, allow for connections to be formed with individuals who have undergone similar tragedies.
- There is still limited knowledge about how men experience grief after the loss of a child. A man who has experienced the death of a child in the prenatal period must confront not only his own emotions but also the suffering of his wife/partner.
- The aspect of faith influences marital and family relationships after miscarriage. Believing women declare an improvement in their marital relationships after experiencing the loss of a child in the prenatal period.

It is worth constantly emphasizing the great value of every human life, from the moment of conception. Pope John Paul II proclaimed that the dignity of a human person can be defended when it is considered inviolable from conception to natural death, and

“care for a child (...) is the first and fundamental test of the relationship between man and man” (Św. Jan Paweł II obrońcą życia 2023, March 10).

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Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ Available online: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/702835643062565/about> (accessed on 28 July 2023).
- ² Available online: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1553595081518532/about> (accessed on 28 July 2023).
- ³ Available online: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1851271521785003/about> (accessed on 28 July 2023).

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Article

The Role of the Faith in Jesus Christ in the Family Experience of Grief

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Abstract: Mourning is the state of grieving the loss of a close relationship. It manifests itself in multi-sided suffering affecting the mourner's mental, physical and spiritual sphere. A particularly painful form of mourning is the family experience of grief. Although ways of expressing grief depend on the culture, era and intensity of the interpersonal relationships, it is a universal human experience. This paper aims to answer the question about the role of the mourner's faith in Jesus Christ in the bereaved family experience, as a work in the field of Roman Catholic dogmatic theology. The method used is the analysis of selected material from psychology and Catholic theology (Christology, anthropology, protology, eschatology), in order to synthetically present theological and practical conclusions. The author also quotes mourners' testimonies. First, the author shows the elements of the psychology of mourning. However, his emphasis is on the next step, i.e., discussing the relationship between the mourner's faith in Jesus and the family experience of grief. Furthermore, he deals with theories concerning the relationships between the living and the dead, which are contrary to the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church: annihilation, spiritism and reincarnation. Finally, the important role of the faith in Jesus in the mourning process is presented and completed by indicating possible directions for research on this issue.

Keywords: mourning; grief; family; Jesus Christ; Christian faith; Roman Catholic dogmatic theology; relationships; immortal soul



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1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to explain how relationships with Jesus Christ, established by the act of faith of family members, influence their ways of expressing grief after the death of their loved ones (spouses, children, parents, relatives). The following issues will be discussed: the relational nature of mourning; the Roman Catholic doctrine of Jesus Christ, God who became man by being born of the Virgin Mary of Nazareth, died as a result of crucifixion and rose from the dead, thus creating communion between the living and the dead; the nature of the Christian faith; as well as the nature of relationships between the living and the dead. The content will be discussed from the perspective of Roman Catholic dogmatic theology, enriched with psychological knowledge. Moreover, this paper will deal with theories that are not in line with the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church, but may influence the way of processing grief in the family. They include the annihilation of man after death, spiritism and reincarnation.

Presenting the role of the faith in Jesus Christ in the family experience of grief is an issue that deserves detailed examination for the following reasons:

(1) Grief as a state of suffering caused by the loss of a loved one is a common human experience, particularly in time of war (e.g., in Ukraine and Israel), pandemics (e.g., COVID-19) and natural disasters (e.g., floods and earthquakes). There are attempts to eliminate death in the field of medicine or cybernetics, but according to the great religious traditions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, it is impossible to eliminate death, because its inevitability is evidenced by the revelation received from God, included in the sacred writings of these religions (Müller 2022, pp. 38–39, 92–94, 219–20).

(2) There is a close connection between the process of grief and the quality of life of those who suffer from the breakdown of relationships with loved ones as a result of their death. It is very often that people “left behind by those who have passed away” cannot find their way in a new situation for a very long time, which leads to a decrease in the comfort in their lives. Therefore, taking up this topic serves to show the bereaved how to deal with the death of a family member.

(3) Christianity has a two-thousand-year-old tradition of the mourning process, already attested in the New Testament (e.g., John 11:17–45, 19, 38–42, Mark 5:35–40) and Christian literature (Vovelle 1983; Berzano 2009, pp. 95–121).

2. Results

This section will present the results from our analyses of the research material. The syntheses of our conclusions will be demonstrated in seven points: 1. the relational nature of grief in the family; 2. the relational nature of the human person as the image of the Holy Trinity; 3. the immortal soul as the carrier of human relationality; 4. Jesus Christ as the mediator between the living and the dead; 5. the specificity of the Christian faith; 6. the relationship between a non-baptized person and Jesus Christ; and 7. relationships between the living and the dead.

2.1. Relational Nature of Mourning in the Family

The term “mourning” is used to describe the period after the death of a loved one and the psycho-spiritual state of the mourner resulting from the interruption of the relationship between him/her and the deceased. It is a very individual experience (Binnebesel et al. 2023). Men and women experience such a loss differently (Keirse 2004, pp. 58–61; Dudziak 2013, pp. 188–89; Hošťálková and Opatrný 2015, pp. 126–28, 131–32). Forms of mourning depend on the culture, epoch and the type of relationship between the mourners and the deceased (Keirse 2004, p. 15; Ziemann 2014, pp. 1565–66; Binnebesel et al. 2023, pp. 236–39). Some psychologists divide these forms into mature and immature, according to whether they help or block grief (Dudziak 2013, pp. 175, 189–90). Bereavement is a process with its own dynamics. Although there is an ongoing discussion on the current perception of the mourning process (Bielecka 2012), scientists have traditionally distinguished its phases based on the division of the phases of suffering of a dying person, as proposed by the American doctor and psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross (1926–2004)¹ in her book entitled *On Death and Dying* (Kübler-Ross Elisabeth 1999, pp. 34–121). The phases of mourning are: (1) denial and isolation; (2) anger; (3) bargaining; (4) depression; and (5) acceptance. This scheme has been used in many works on the process of dying and mourning, whose authors have introduced their own modifications (Czajkowska and Złotkowska 2005, pp. 31–36; Dudziak 2021, pp. 134–37). There are also different ways of describing the grieving process, e.g., understanding it as “job to be done”, divided into four tasks: (1) accepting the reality of the loss; (2) consciously experiencing the pain of loss; (3) adapting to the environment without the deceased; and (4) giving a new place to the deceased in the mourner’s life and learning to love life again (Keirse 2004, pp. 25–41).

The mourning process in the family is most often accompanied by emotions, namely sadness, regret, a sense of loss and abandonment and, consequently, a questioning of the current system of values and a belief in the pointlessness of further life (Keirse 2004, p. 52). One mourner described his condition as a lonely journey without a destination (Keirse 2004, p. 44). In addition to emotions, there are various types of spiritual and mental suffering, and often somatic symptoms, such as appetite and sleep disorders, a sense of general fatigue, ailments related to the improper functioning of the digestive system, resistance to treatment resulting in disability, and others (Dudziak 2013, pp. 184–86; Binnebesel et al. 2023, pp. 218–24).

Mourners experience loneliness in all areas of their everyday lives. Loneliness indicates that death is perceived as an interruption to the contact with deceased family members (Keirse 2004, pp. 35–36). Thus, the mourners’ main desire is to restore their bonds with the deceased persons. This is indicated, for example, by the confessions of parents after

the death of their child, who put the following wish at the beginning of their wish list: “I would like my child not to die. I wish I had my child back” (Kulik 2021, p. 106).

In one of his teachings on the family, Pope Francis depicts grieving, especially after the loss of a child: “Death is an experience which touches all families, without exception. It is part of life; yet, where familial love is concerned, death never seems natural. For parents, surviving their own children is particularly heartbreaking; it contradicts the fundamental nature of the very relationships that give meaning to the family. [...] The whole family is left paralyzed, speechless. And the child left alone by the loss of one or both parents suffers in a similar way. [...] In these cases, death is like a black hole that opens up in the life of the family and for which we have no explanation. And at times we even go so far as to lay the blame on God. How many people—I understand them—get angry with God, blaspheme: ‘Why did you take my son, my daughter? There is no God, God does not exist! Why did he do this?’ We hear this so often. But this anger is basically what comes from the heart in great pain; the loss of a son or of a daughter, of a father or of a mother, is a great sorrow. This happens over and over in families. In these cases, I said, death is like a hole” (Francis 2015).²

It is therefore understandable that grief and mourning are associated with a deep shock experienced by a person after the death of a close family member, and the resulting loneliness can be described as “existential evil” (Nawrot 2016, p. 17; Chrostowski 2002).

2.2. Relational Nature of the Human Person as the Image of the Holy Trinity

As a result, the mourning process points to the relational nature of the human person, i.e., to his or her innate ability and need to build bonds with other people (von Balthasar 1992, p. 390; Müller 2022, pp. 357–58). The term “person” testifies to the human ability to relate to others, because “person” means a being who thinks, feels, can make decisions and with whom one can enter into dialogue. Man’s essence consists in “being-from”, “being-with” and “being-for” (Ratzinger 2017, pp. 206–207). Fulfilling the need for interpersonal relationships is, therefore, necessary for proper growth. A person lives in a network of relationships, and his or her life will be as good as his/her main relationships, namely with their father, mother, brothers, sisters and so on, as well as his/her basic relationships that are embedded in his/her essence (Ratzinger 1997, p. 18; von Balthasar 1992, pp. 365–67). The death of a loved one interrupts and prevents the fulfillment of this need, so death is “the lack of communication” (die Kommunikationslosigkeit) (Ratzinger 1978, p. 81) and “the absolute loneliness” (die Einsamkeit schlechthin) (Ratzinger 1968, p. 248).

In the light of Roman Catholic theology, based on God’s Revelation contained in the Old and New Testaments, man was created for relationships, because his Creator is not the Great Loner and did not create man to deal with his “feeling of loneliness” since He has no such feeling (Müller 2022, pp. 253–54). The nature of God the Creator is to live in relations because He is the Trinity: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The divine Persons are *relationes subsistens* (subsistent relations), pure act of the love relationship (Ratzinger 2005, p. 155). Thanks to that, the Holy Trinity is not a closed monad, but “a dialogical unity, a being in relation” and, thus, able to go beyond themselves, towards people, to offer them a relationship of love (Benedict XVI 2008; Ratzinger 2022, pp. 448–52).

The relational nature of man and woman is “to be read” in their corporeal–spiritual nature. The body itself, its different structure in both sexes, proves that man and woman were not created for loneliness (von Balthasar 1986, p. 403). The Catechism of the Catholic Church states that “God created man and woman together and willed each for the other” (CCC, no. 371), since “not that God left them half-made and incomplete: he created them to be a communion of persons, in which each can be ‘helpmate’ to the other, for they are equal as persons (‘bone of my bones. . .’) and complementary as masculine and feminine. In marriage God unites them in such a way that, by forming ‘one flesh’, they can transmit human life: ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth.’ By transmitting human life to their descendants, man and woman as spouses and parents co-operate in a unique way in the Creator’s work” (CCC, no. 372).

Consequently, the bond between man and woman, created in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1:27), to create a family is the fundamental form of human relationships. The mutual suitability of man and woman as the basis for the possibility of living together in mutual support and creating a personal community of love is the basic condition and, at the same time, is the original model of all human communication and the creation of a similarly realized community in the family, in various groups, in the political and church community. From a biblical perspective, the relationship between man and woman is the basic form of human life in the community and in relation to others (Müller 2016, p. 119; Smuniewski 2014).

2.3. *Immortal Soul as the Carrier of Human Relationality*

Relationality, as an essential feature of the human person, does not disappear after death, since in the light of the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church, people still live in their immortal souls. Therefore, the soul, thus understood, is the carrier of the natural relationality of the human person. The term “immortal soul”, describing the possibility of building real relationships with the deceased, despite the death of their body, has been used in Catholic theology for a long time (Ravasi 2009; Nitrola 2010, pp. 98–137, 291–336; Müller 2022, pp. 121–208). Its use resulted in formulating a completely new concept of the soul, considerably different from all the ancient concepts of the *psyche*; this new concept is a product of the Christian faith and its requirements for reasoning. It is strictly Christian and could only be formulated on the basis of the Christian faith, expressing its vision of God, the world and man in the area of anthropology (Ratzinger 1978, p. 126; Müller 2022, pp. 215–18).

As a result of the 20th century theological controversies regarding the nature of human life after death, a descriptive definition of the soul was created, worked out by the Magisterium of the Catholic Church in its document on man’s fate after death. It reminds us that “the Church affirms that a spiritual element survives and subsists after death, an element endowed with consciousness and will, so that the ‘human self’ subsists. To designate this element, the Church uses the word ‘soul’, the accepted term in the usage of Scripture and Tradition. Although not unaware that this term has various meanings in the Bible, the Church thinks that there is no valid reason for rejecting it; moreover, she considers that the use of some word as a vehicle is absolutely indispensable in order to support the faith of Christians” (Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 1979). This way of understanding the soul was confirmed by the International Theological Commission (1992, p. 5) and the Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC, no. 362–68).

Joseph Ratzinger, based on this concept of the soul, worked out a concept of life after death, which when used in an appropriate and accessible way to accompany the bereaved, can be useful in grieving the loss of their loved ones. His concept emphasizes the dialogical nature of immortality. The soul is not something mysterious that one *has*, some particle of substance that hides somewhere in a person. It is the dynamics of infinite openness, which also means participation in infinity, in eternity (Ratzinger 1978, pp. 127–29). This understanding of the soul results from the fact that it is not “produced” by the parents, but is created immediately by God (CCC, no. 366). To have a “spiritual soul” is to be a creature whom God wanted to make, whom he knows and loves, and calls freely into dialogue with him. “Having a soul” and “being a partner in dialogue with God” are two ways of expressing the same reality. By complementing each other, they protect against inappropriate dualism in the perception of the corporeal and spiritual nature of the human person, dualism which cannot stand against the dialogical and personalistic approach of the Bible (Ratzinger 1968, pp. 296–97).³

A good experience of the mourning process is possible when, on the one hand, the fact of the death of a loved one is not denied and, on the other hand, there is a guarantee of the possibility of continuing the relationship with the deceased who, even though they have completed the stage of their earthly lives, thanks to the immortality of their souls, have not ceased to exist and are still capable of forming interpersonal bonds. In other

words, in order for grieving not to have a destructive impact on the family, its members should be shown how to continue experiencing and developing the relationship with the deceased person (Keirse 2004, p. 41). This relationship cannot be imaginary, but must be real, i.e., there must be strong evidence of the continued existence of the deceased person. Merely remembering them is not enough, because every moment in which mourners did not remember the deceased persons, e.g., while sleeping, would result in their annihilation.

Therefore, the guarantee of the immortality of the souls of deceased persons and the hope of meeting them again is not human memory or even human love. Their lives after death must be sustained by an infinitely greater power, which, according to the Roman Catholic Church, is in the form of the love of God who remembers his children (Isa 49:14–15). “If all love wants eternity—God’s love not only wants it, but works and is it” (Ratzinger 1967, p. 399).

2.4. *Jesus Christ as the Mediator between the Living and the Dead*

For mourning to be processed well, God who sustains the human being in existence after the death of the body cannot be a projection of human desires, but must actually exist, loving and empathizing with the mourner. These features were possessed by Jesus Christ, God incarnate, who created man for immortality (Wis 2:23–24; Col 1:15–20) and promises that whoever believes in him will never die (John 11:17–27). Early Christians presented the figure of Christ as the true philosopher on the sarcophagi of their loved ones, because Christ was the only one in history who gave a complete answer to the question of what human death was and what happened to a dying person (Benedict XVI 2007, p. 6).

Introducing mourners to the faith in Jesus Christ can significantly help them get through their grief. Pope Francis recalled this in his catechesis on the family experience of grief: “Today it is necessary that Pastors and all Christians express in a more concrete way the meaning of the faith in regards to the family experience of grief. We should not deny them the right to weep—we must weep in mourning—‘Jesus wept’ and was ‘deeply troubled’ by the grave loss of a family that he loved (cf. Jn 11:33–37)” (Francis 2015).

Pope Francis continues that today: “[w]e can draw from the simple and strong testimony of the many families who have been able to grasp, in the most arduous transition of death, the safe passage of the Lord, Crucified and Risen, with his irrevocable promise of the resurrection of the dead. God’s work of love is stronger than the work of death. It is of that love, it is precisely of that love, that we must make ourselves hard-working ‘accomplices’, with our faith! And let us remember Jesus’ deed: ‘And Jesus gave him [the raised son of the widow at Nain, Luke 7: 11–17] back to his mother’ so he will do with all our loved ones and with us when we meet again, when death will be definitively conquered in us. It was conquered by Jesus’ Cross. Jesus will give us all back to the family!” (Francis 2015).

Jesus Christ is “Pontifex”, i.e., building the bridge over the abyss of death. He is the only one who, by virtue of his incarnation and the paschal mystery, has the ability to reconnect the relationships between the dead and the living, broken down by death (Müller 2022, pp. 311–12).

The incarnation is the assumption of the true human nature by the divine Person of the Son of God, whose nature is divine (O’Collins 2004, p. 148; Strzelczyk 2017; CCC, no. 461, 483). The paschal mystery is Jesus’ passion, death and resurrection through which “an innocent lamb merited for us life by the free shedding of His own blood. In Him God reconciled us to Himself and among ourselves” (GS, no. 22). This means that the Incarnate Son of God, “by suffering for us He not only provided us with an example for our imitation, He blazed a trail, and if we follow it, life and death are made holy and take on a new meaning. [. . .]. Pressing upon the Christian to be sure, are the need and the duty to battle against evil through manifold tribulations and even to suffer death. But, linked with the paschal mystery and patterned on the dying Christ, he will hasten forward to resurrection in the strength which comes from hope” (GS, no. 22).

In the life of Jesus Christ, the paschal mystery includes the truth of the Christian faith about Jesus’ descent to hell, the content of which is not only the declaration of his real

death, but also the confession that in dying Christ descended to hell and is present where ultimate loneliness reigns (Ratzinger 1978, p. 84). A sign of Jesus' participation in this loneliness is his cry on the cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt 27:46) (Ratzinger 1968, p. 246). The man Jesus Christ, being God, overcame the absolute loneliness of death by voluntarily experiencing it. "Where no voice can reach us anymore, there He is. [...] But dying is no longer a path to icy loneliness [...]. The door of death is open since in death life: love, lives" (Ratzinger 1968, pp. 248–49). Everyone who enters into a personal relationship with Christ, will partake in his victory over death.

2.5. Specificity of the Christian Faith

Man realizes the possibility of living a life in a relationship with Christ, which he was given in the act of creation, through receiving baptism and the Christian faith. The Lord himself affirms: "He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned" (Mark 16:16) (CCC, no. 1257).

The Christian faith is a grace, a supernatural gift from God (CCC, no. 176–80). It is not merely an opinion or wish but a personal adherence of the whole man to God, involving an assent of the intellect and will to the self-revelation God has made through his deeds and words. This faith deepens the ontological relationship with Christ, established at baptism, a relationship that is also created at the baptism of small, unaware children. As they gain the ability to use reason, they should be engaged voluntarily in their relationships with Christ by participating in the holy sacraments and living in accordance with the Savior's teachings transmitted by the Church (CCC, no. 1266, 1254).

The reality of adherence to Christ through faith yields the experience of certainty that there is life after death (CCC, no. 157). "Faith is the realization of what is hoped for and evidence of things not seen" (Heb 11:1). Benedict XVI explained this: "[...] through faith, in a tentative way, or as we might say 'in embryo'—and thus according to the 'substance'—there are already present in us the things that are hoped for: the whole, true life. And precisely because the thing itself is already present, this presence of what is to come also creates certainty: this 'thing' which must come is not yet visible in the external world (it does not 'appear'), but because of the fact that, as an initial and dynamic reality, we carry it within us, a certain perception of it has even now come into existence. [...] Faith is not merely a personal reaching out towards things to come that are still totally absent: it gives us something. It gives us even now something of the reality we are waiting for, and this present reality constitutes for us a 'proof' of the things that are still unseen. Faith draws the future into the present, so that it is no longer simply a 'not yet'. The fact that this future exists changes the present; the present is touched by the future reality, and thus the things of the future spill over into those of the present and those of the present into those of the future" (Benedict XVI 2007, p. 7).

Faith that creates a relationship with Christ is a rational decision of will, but it also has repercussions on feelings. "The relationship with God takes place as an attraction to him and a passion of love for him" (Müller 2022, p. 217). "The passions are natural components of the human psyche; they form the passageway and ensure the connection between the life of the senses and the life of the mind" (CCC, no. 1764). Jesus experiences such emotions as sorrow, fear, suffering or compassion for mourners. Thus, human feelings are a space where God acts (CCC no. 1769), (Kulik 2021, pp. 22–26).

Saint Paul confirms that the bereaved experience unpleasant feelings, and so they need comfort, solace, relief, reassurance, etc. He writes to the Thessalonians who grieved for their loved ones: "We do not want you to be unaware, brothers, about those who have fallen asleep, so that you may not grieve like the rest, who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose, so too will God, through Jesus, bring with him those who have fallen asleep. Indeed, we tell you this, on the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will surely not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself, with a word of command, with the voice of an archangel and with the trumpet of God, will come down from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first.

Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. Thus we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore, console one another with these words" (1 Thess 4:13–18).

Thus, the Christian faith is not only based on knowledge, but also on personal experience of God's action. Revelation is not a theoretical teaching in the form of a treatise. It is essentially a personal, life-related cognition; like all interpersonal cognition it assumes a similar nature, sympathy, commitment, friendship or love (Laurentin 1998, p. 30). Also, the Holy Spirit allows mourners to experience what they have received through their acts of conscious faith. "For we know that if our earthly dwelling, a tent, should be destroyed, we have a building from God, a dwelling not made with hands, eternal in heaven. [. . .] Now the one who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a first installment" (2 Cor 5:1, 5). "The Spirit itself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if only we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him" (Rom 8:16–17). It is the Holy Spirit who causes faith to yield fruit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Gal 5:22–23; Rom 8:6; 14:7). As a consequence, mourners are certain that their grief over their loved ones becomes "the comforted sadness" ("die getröstete Traurigkeit"). Christians do not negate sadness and do not need to pretend that there is no sadness in their lives. Sadness remains and has its reasons, but is internally overcome by overwhelming consolation. Sadness is like a shadow. The disciples of Christ know that through their faith in Jesus, shadows are also signs of hope, because they are equipped to believe that shadows indicate the existence of great light. If this light did not exist, there could be no shadows. Christians believe that shadows are an inherent part of life on earth, but in the future, they will face the light that has been waiting for them, and this light will never go out, but will remove every shadow of sadness. As Ratzinger expresses, this is the "realism of the Christian man" ("der Realismus des Christenmenschen") (Ratzinger 1974, p. 294).

The reality of the comforted sadness is confirmed by mourners' testimonies. For example, a young priest who, standing at his father's grave, experienced the certainty that this could not be the absolute end of their relationship and confessed: "I am sure that my Dad did not stop existing! He really exists. He really lives! I am sure of that!" (Kulik 2021, p. 43). After the death of his friend Charles Williams, Clive Staples Lewis said that no event had strengthened his faith in eternal life so much as that of Charles's death. When the idea of death and the idea of Williams "met" in his mind, he changed his thinking about death as an absolute end (Kreeft and Tacelli 2006, p. 121). Moreover, Pope Francis reminds us: "In the People of God, by the grace of his compassion granted in Jesus, many families prove by their deeds that death does not have the last word: this is a true act of faith. Every time a family in mourning—even terrible mourning—finds the strength to guard the faith and love that unite us to those we love, it has already prevented death from taking everything. [. . .] In this faith, we can console one another, knowing that the Lord has conquered death once and for all. Our loved ones are not lost in the darkness of nothing; hope assures us that they are in the good and strong hands of God. Love is stronger than death. Thus, the way is to let love grow, make it stronger, and love will guard us until the day that every tear shall be wiped away, when 'death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more' (Rev 21:4). If we allow ourselves to be sustained by this faith, the experience of grief can generate even stronger family bonds, a new openness to the pain of other families, a new brotherhood with families that are born and reborn in hope. To be born and reborn in hope, this gives us faith. [. . .] All our loved ones who are gone, the Lord will give them back to us and we will be together with them. This hope does not disappoint!" (Francis 2015).

The role of the faith in Jesus Christ is not providing "cheap hope" (von Balthasar 1986, p. 275). This faith is rooted in God who really exists. We can talk about the therapeutic dimension of faith, because it is the fruit of the relationship with God who gives true life despite death. Faith does not want to offer people some form of psychotherapy, its

psychotherapy is the truth (Ratzinger 1993, pp. 89–93; 1997, p. 18). Knowing the truth about the existence of life, which is stronger than death, sets people free from despair after the death of their loved ones. “Jesus then said to those Jews who believed in him, ‘If you remain in my word, you will truly be my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.’” (John 8:31–32). Believing in life after death is not so-called “positive thinking”, i.e., a wish or dream, but it is “true thinking”, stating a fact. Thus, it is important to live in the awareness that our entire existence is heading towards meeting God and our loved ones (Benedict XVI 2012; Benedikt XVI 2016, p. 279).

2.6. Relationship between a Non-Baptized Person and Jesus Christ

Although according to the Revelation of God, contained in the Holy Scriptures and the teachings of the Catholic Church, baptism is necessary to build a real bond with Christ that lasts even after death, it is a required condition for those who have heard about Christ. The Catholic Church believes that a non-baptized person also has a personal relationship with Christ for two reasons: (1) by being created by God; and (2) due to the incarnation of the Son of God.

Before a person is united with Christ at baptism, he or she is already capable of a relationship with God because of the fact of being created by him. Hans Urs von Balthasar speaks of “the double light” that illuminates the mystery of man. One light comes from the beginnings, from the creation of man, the other comes from the final goal, the fulfillment of man’s meaning in Christ (von Balthasar 1990, pp. 76–77). In turn, Ratzinger speaks of “two dimensions of God’s fatherhood” towards man, shown by Jesus.

First of all, God is the true Father of man, because he is his Creator, the source of his being. Consequently, man is a true child and the image of God, his origin is divine and he himself is good (Ratzinger 2007b, pp. 171–72). Therefore, the very fact of being a human being leads to the existence of real bonds between man and God and, as a result of that, between people. However, creation is nothing else as showing the universal salvific will of God in the very beginning (Müller 2022, p. 253). In creation, God reveals his love as the One who “wills everyone to be saved and to come to knowledge of the truth. For there is one God. There is also one mediator between God and the human race, Christ Jesus, himself human” (1 Tim 2:4–5).

Yet, there is another, deeper and stricter type of relationship between man and God. This relationship is created thanks to the ontological relationship between man and Christ. Ratzinger defines it as “the second dimension of the fatherhood of God”, meaning that Christ is “the image of the Father” in a special way (2 Cor 4:4; Col 1:15). The German theologians reminds us that the Church Fathers state that when God was creating man in “his image”, he first looked at Christ and created man in the image of “the new Adam”, the ideal man. However, Jesus is above all “Son” in the proper sense of the word: he has the same essence as the Father. He wants to accept everyone into his sonship, so that they may fully belong to him. In this way, being a child became a dynamic concept. We are not yet fully children of God, but through our increasingly deeper communion with Jesus, we are to become and to be God’s children. Being a child is identified with following Christ. Therefore, the word “God the Father” is a call addressed to everyone: we are to live as his children, as his sons and daughters (Ratzinger 2007b, p. 172).

This is confirmed by the teachings of the Catholic Church: “by His incarnation the Son of God has united Himself in some fashion with every man” (GS, no. 22), i.e., confirmed his ontological relationship with every human person. Thus, this bond with Christ “holds true not only for Christians, but for all men of good will in whose hearts grace works in an unseen way” (GS, no. 22).

Furthermore, “[s]ince Christ died for all men, and since the ultimate vocation of man is in fact one, and divine, we ought to believe that the Holy Spirit in a manner known only to God offers to every man the possibility of being associated with this paschal mystery. Such is the mystery of man, and it is a great one, as seen by believers in the light of Christian revelation. Through Christ and in Christ, the riddles of sorrow and death grow meaningful.

Apart from His Gospel, they overwhelm us. Christ has risen, destroying death by His death; He has lavished life upon us so that, as sons in the Son, we can cry out in the Spirit; Abba, Father” (GS, no. 22). Thus, “every man who is ignorant of the Gospel of Christ and of his Church, but seeks the truth and does the will of God in accordance with his understanding of it, can be saved. It may be supposed that such persons would have desired Baptism explicitly if they had known its necessity” (CCC, no. 1260). “All people living before and after the birth of Christ can therefore be saved through Jesus, both through his grace and through their conduct of life in accordance with the truth and good. Through Christ, their immortal souls are directed towards the resurrection of their bodies and toward their eternal perfection in the triune love of God. [. . .] All people have stood before God since their creation and, in the intergenerational context, form a community of destiny on the path to salvation—despite all kinds of disaster” (Müller 2022, pp. 210–11).

2.7. Relationships between the Living and the Dead

From the human perspective, the possibility of continuing relationships between the living and the dead is a consequence of the fact that already at the level of created nature, God connects people with one another. Our hope for those who have gone to eternity is based on the promise that those who have not closed themselves to Christ will be with him forever. The existence of eternity is also confirmed by philosophical, medical, biological and psychological premises and observations in modern physics (D’Souza 2009; Ziemiński 2013). With this in mind, Christians should not speak about the deceased such that “they do not live.” They died but did not stop existing. Therefore, in the first Preface for the Dead, a prayer during funeral Mass, the Roman Catholic Church confesses with full knowledge of its meaning: “Indeed for your faithful, Lord, life is changed not ended” (Preface I for the Dead 2011, p. 622). Mourners must therefore live in such a way as to get to where, we trust, their loved ones are already. “Our imagination may be incapable of reaching these heights, but our heart does so instinctively and completely” (Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 1979).

Consequently, the death of a loved one cannot be considered an absolute loss. Anyone who professes faith in Christ and eternal life has lost their loved ones only to a certain extent. He cannot see them, cannot talk to them like he used to. He has suffered a loss on both a physical and mental level. But on the ontological level, his relationships persist and, thus, can and should be maintained. It is not only about keeping alive the memory of the dead, but about showing them love, because they still exist in God and, therefore, they understand the living better than those who are still alive.

In the Catholic Church, the existence of real relationships between the living and the dead is expressed in the truth of faith defined as the *sanctorum communio* (communion of saints), possible through the uniting role of Christ, who as the Head forms one spiritual organism with all the baptized, “one Body” (1 Cor 12:12–27; CCC, no. 953, 957–58). In the communion of saints, man’s ability to create relationships, already obtained in the act of creation, is improved and expanded. This does not contradict the order of creation, but despite its real novelty, it is its continuation. Therefore, after the resurrection of the dead, at the moment of parousia (the second revelation of Christ in history), not only the souls, but also the renewed bodies will participate in the *sanctorum communio*, because matter is integrated in the human soul; thus, thanks to the power of God, matter reaches its fulfillment in the resurrection (Ratzinger 2007a, pp. 221–23). After the resurrection, there will remain a special bond of marriage, kinship, friendship, cooperation, spiritual dignity and fame, although it will always be an infinitely universalized and elevated bond, as well as a bond with an infinite wealth of colors, shades and aspects (Bartnik 2003, p. 883). For in eternity, no one loses anything of his/her own identity.

Yet, until this moment, for the living, the *sanctorum communio* is most fully expressed in the *communio eucharistica*, which means that the real connection with the dead, although most often not at the emotional level, is experienced during the Eucharist, which is celebrated both for the living and the dead, uniting the living on earth and in heaven

(International Theological Commission 1992, sec. 7.4). In Christ, we are not only brothers to one another, but also in his Eucharistic Body, we become members for one another. Jesus does not keep this perceptiveness of the human environment to the presence of God-Man, who is inside us and does not violate our freedom, but allows us to participate in it through the Eucharist. In this way, something absolutely new appears in anthropology: people can serve one another not only in external deeds, through which they bear one another's burdens, but also on the level of inner relationships, which even death does not destroy. This happens when we can share the burden of another person's sin or infirmity in the Eucharist of Christ (von Balthasar 1992, pp. 384–85).

Participating in the Eucharist, we can have a real influence on other people's fate, also on the fate of the dead. "Our prayer for them is capable not only of helping them, but also of making their intercession for us effective" (CCC, no. 958). It is God's mystery how it happens (von Balthasar 1999, p. 391). We can even speak of some spiritual "Meta-net", infinitely faster and more independent than the Internet, a true and positive net. And this is also expressed by the *sanctorum communio*: we are all in profound communication and will recognize one another in eternity, even when we have never seen one another on earth, because the same Spirit, the same Lord, works in us (Benedetto XVI 2010, pp. 245–46).

Benedict XVI reminds us of the importance of prayerful memory of the deceased persons whom we loved; this memory is not a superficial form of saving them from oblivion, but above all a sign of faith in our uninterrupted relationship of love with them, which really exists despite death and, as it were, beyond it. The prayer of the living can help the soul of the deceased person who is being purified after death. That is why the Church encourages us to pray for the dead and to visit their graves (Benedykt XVI 2012, p. 187). Thus, prayer for the dead expresses the social relational nature of salvation and mourning (Müller 2022, p. 332).

3. Materials and Methods

We have selected texts considering their substantive content and the competences of their authors in particular areas related to the issue being discussed. Therefore, we intend to examine works concerning psychology and various branches of Roman Catholic theology: the theology of Jesus Christ (Christology), the theology of man (theological anthropology), the theology of creation (protology), as well as the theology of death and eternity (eschatology).

As regards publications in the field of psychology, we considered the following: (Kübler-Ross Elisabeth 1999; Keirse 2004; Dudziak 2013, pp. 175–98; Dudziak 2021). They are complemented by texts selected from a large group of guides on Roman Catholic spirituality, e.g., (Czajkowska and Złotkowska 2005; Pindel 2008; Alexander 2021).

The main theological studies include works by German, Swiss, Italian and Polish Roman Catholic theologians; first of all, in the field of Christology (Ratzinger 2005, 2007b) and eschatology (Ratzinger 1978; Nitrola 2010; Müller 2022) and, additionally, theological anthropology (von Balthasar 1992) and protology (Nawrot 2016).

Roman Catholic theology is inextricably linked with God's Revelation written down in the Holy Scriptures, translated and transmitted by the Church under the direction of the Magisterium of the Church. For that reason, of fundamental importance to this study are references to the Old and New Testaments (The New American Bible 2022) and texts containing the official teachings of the Catholic Church (Catechism of the Catholic Church 1993, CCC), (The Second Vatican Council 1965, Pastoral Constitution on The Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, GS), papal teachings (Benedict XVI 2007, 2008; Benedetto XVI 2010; Francis 2015), and statements from the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (1979) and the International Theological Commission (1992).

We have primarily used the method of analysis and synthesis of the data contained in the selected publications. When analyzing the materials, we have deliberately not focused on the psychology of the grieving process, since this issue, unlike the theology of mourning, has been developed in numerous works. Although both aspects complement each other, one

can hardly find studies on the mourning process from the point of view of Roman Catholic theology. In this article, referring to the psychological dimension of the process of grief and mourning is only a starting point for presenting the theological dimension, which indicates the role of the ontological relational structure of human existence recognized in the process of “rightly” processing grief, a state caused by the interruption to relationships with loved ones as a result of their death. According to psychologists, a proper experience of grief and mourning should end with accepting the loss and peacefully entering a new stage of family life (Kübler-Ross Elisabeth 1999, pp. 99–138; Keirse 2004, pp. 283–85). Synthesizing the data in the selected psychological and theological texts aims to demonstrate that the mourner should be helped by faith, i.e., adopting the Christian vision of God and the human person. One God in Three Persons (the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit) makes each human person a unity of the spiritual element (the immortal soul) and the material element (the body), which are temporarily separated at the moment of death, but will be reunited through the power of God at the moment of the resurrection of the body. In the meantime, the immortal soul is able to maintain a personal relationship with the living through the mediation of Jesus Christ (CCC, no. 362–67).

In order to confirm the important role of the Christian faith in the process of grief and mourning, we quoted testimonies from those who, thanks to their living relationships with Jesus Christ, managed to cope with the loss of their family members by building relationships with them in a new way. However, empirical research showing relationships between faith and mourning were not analyzed. This research has been presented in other publications, such as (Walsh et al. 2002; Draper et al. 2014; Guzowski et al. 2014; Christian et al. 2019; Binnebesel et al. 2023).

4. Discussion

In this section, we will discuss three hypotheses that are completely incompatible with the Revelation of God concerning the relationships between the living and the dead through the faith in Jesus Christ, transmitted in the teachings of the Catholic Church. These are the theories of annihilation, spiritism and reincarnation.

4.1. Annihilation

Strictly speaking, the theory of annihilation is a Protestant and Catholic hypothesis concerning the posthumous fate of those who have condemned themselves through their conscious and voluntary rejection of the relationship of love offered to them by God. Their annihilation by the Creator concerns his grace and mercy, because it would free them from experiencing eternal punishment, consisting of endless suffering (Finkenzeller 2000, pp. 217, 220–21; Hryniewicz 2016, pp. 271–80). This vision of death was taught, for example, by the philosopher Epicurus (ca. 341–271 BCE) and the poet Lucretius (ca. 99–55 BCE) and, in the time of Jesus, by the Jewish party of the Sadducees (Acts 23: 8) (Tatarkiewicz 1997, pp. 142–43, 145; Müller 2022, pp. 202–203, 258).

This idea occurs outside theology, in the belief of those who are convinced that after death the entire human person is annihilated because after the death of the material element (body), the spiritual element (soul) ceases to exist. For this reason, there is no possibility of establishing a real personal relationship with the deceased. The dead do not exist. The bond with them is reduced to the memory of them and is not associated with any expectation of meeting them again. The conviction on the annihilation of the dead may be considered a secularized type of coping with the fear of death, the fear of an unknown afterlife or the loss of a loved one. If death ends all relationships, because a person ceases to exist, then one should stop worrying about death and deal with the problems of earthly life (International Theological Commission 1992, p. 1).

As a theological theory, the hypothesis of annihilation contradicts the Revelation in the Holy Scriptures: “For God formed man to be imperishable; the image of his own nature he made him” (Wis 2:23). Consequently, God is the One whom a person can address: “But you have mercy on all, because you can do all things; and you overlook the sins of

men that they may repent. For you love all things that are and loathe nothing that you have made; for what you hated, you would not have fashioned. And how could a thing remain, unless you willed it; or be preserved, had it not been called forth by you? But you spare all things, because they are yours, O LORD and lover of souls, for your imperishable spirit is in all things!" (Wis 11:23–26; 12:1). Therefore, neither the annihilation of man by God nor the self-annihilation of the human being is possible. In his existence, man is completely dependent on the act of his creation and his ontological relationship with the Creator, who gave him existence, and this excludes non-existence (Ratzinger 1978, p. 131; Müller 2022, p. 357).

4.2. Spiritism

Some people, experiencing painful grief after the loss of a loved one, resort to spiritism, i.e., the belief in the existence of spirits who you can contact at your own request. This theory completely differs from the Catholic belief in invoking the intercession of the saints in heaven and the souls, being purified after death (International Theological Commission 1992, sec. 7.2) "The meaning of 'evocation': it would involve any method whereby 'the effort is made by human techniques to establish communication in the external order with spirits or disembodied souls in the hope of acquiring various kinds of information and forms of help'" (International Theological Commission 1992, sec. 7.2). In this way, the bereaved, trying to regain relationships with the deceased, ask for help from those who are supposedly able to contact souls (mediums) or use spiritualistic practices, e.g., mediumism, channeling, automatic writing (psychography), invoking spirits and others (International Theological Commission 1992, sec. 7.2; Zalewski 2013, pp. 398–415; Posacki 2016, pp. 167–68; Noworol 2017, pp. 229–41).

These practices contradict the teachings about the relationship between the living and the dead though the faith in Jesus Christ and are rejected unequivocally in the Old and New Testaments (Deut 18:10–14; Exod 22:17; Lev 19:31; 20:6, 27; Acts 13:6–12; 16:16–18; 19:11–20). A model example, condemning the practice of invoking spirits, is the story of King Saul asking to invoke the spirit of the prophet Samuel (1 Sam 28:3–25). The result of this behavior was Saul's rejection by God and, consequently, his death. "Thus Saul died because of his rebellion against the LORD in disobeying his command, and also because he had sought counsel of a necromancer, and had not rather inquired of the LORD. Therefore, the LORD slew him, and transferred his kingdom to David, the son of Jesse" (1 Chr 10:13–14) (International Theological Commission 1992, sec. 7.2).

The Catechism of the Catholic Church clearly rejects these practices as sins against the first commandment: "You Shall Have No Other Gods Before Me." "All forms of divination are to be rejected: recourse to Satan or demons, conjuring up the dead or other practices falsely supposed to 'unveil' the future. Consulting horoscopes, astrology, palm reading, interpretation of omens and lots, the phenomena of clairvoyance, and recourse to mediums all conceal a desire for power over time, history, and, in the last analysis, other human beings, as well as a wish to conciliate hidden powers. They contradict the honor, respect, and loving fear that we owe to God alone" (CCC, no. 2116).

Any attempt to invoke spirits is a manifestation of "amoral anti-personalism", because it reduces both the medium and the summoned spirit of the deceased person to the role of an instrument serving to fulfill the wishes of the seeker of such a contact. Such practices are often fraudulent, but they also involve the risk of demonic interference leading to possession. Without the will of God, no soul of a deceased person can contact the living, while evil spirits may try to take advantage of the opening of participants to these types of practices to the spiritual world (Posacki 2016, p. 168). Therefore, interest in "life after life" should be characterized by prudence resulting from sound faith and reason, which does not allow people to exceed permissible limits and which protects against directing oneself or others to spiritism, occultism or other spiritual threats (Dudziak 2021, p. 161).

At the same time, one cannot exclude the possibility of contacts between the living and the saints in heaven or the souls experiencing purification. This is proven by the

saints' testimonies approved by the Church and confirming the truth of the communion of saints. "One evening, one of the deceased sisters, who had already visited me a few times, appeared to me. [...] As a sign that she only now was in heaven, God would bless our house. Then she came closer to me, embraced me sincerely and said, 'I must go now.' I understood how closely the three stages of a soul's life are bound together; that is to say, life on earth, in purgatory and in heaven [the communion of saints]" (Kowalska 2005, no. 594). Such contacts are possible only through the sovereign consent of God and are not subject to any compulsion or manipulation, which are motives for invoking spirits (CCC, no. 2115).

4.3. Reincarnation

Reincarnation (*metempsychosis, metempsychosis, palingenesis*) (Filipowicz 2010, p. 191) is a diverse set of beliefs about the so-called "transmigration of souls" after death, which consists in taking on new bodies by the soul of the deceased person and being reborn again to life on earth. There are four main elements to the reincarnation theory: (1) the possibility of many subsequent earthly existences of one human person; (2) the existence of a law of nature causing a continuous process of human improvement in subsequent incarnations, which excludes the possibility of final condemnation; (3) achieving subsequent degrees of perfection through one's own effort, eliminating the need for God's saving intervention; and (4) the completion of the reincarnation process involves the independence of the spiritual element from the material body.

This reincarnation rejects God's Revelation in the Bible, since "[j]ust as it is appointed that human beings die once, and after this the judgment" (Heb 9:27). Reincarnation is also contrary to the main truths of the Christian faith. It denies the fact of the creation of man as a spiritual–corporeal unity destined for eternal life by virtue of the relationship with Jesus Christ, the crucified and resurrected redeemer of man. The theory of reincarnation rejects the uniqueness of human existence, the possibility of damnation (hell), the necessity of redemption by God and the resurrection of the body (CCC, no. 1013) (International Theological Commission 1992, p. 9).

Reincarnation, appearing in non-Christian systems of philosophy and religion (Kasper 2000, pp. 120–24; Filipowicz 2010, pp. 192–96) is considered by some, including those who have been brought up in Christian culture, to be a comforting opportunity to rebuild relationships with the deceased by having them come back to life in new forms. However, this possibility should be considered apparent, because according to the theory of reincarnation, a person who begins another earthly existence starts "from scratch." He does not remember his experiences from previous incarnations, so he is unable to renew the relationships with his loved ones from before his death (Ziemiński 2013, pp. 201–205; Lohfink 2018, p. 48).

The possibility of building close relationships resulting from the relational nature of man is also contradicted by the law of karma, present in the theory of reincarnation and the resulting obligation toward self-improvement. Karma means that every action by a person affects his or her fate in subsequent incarnations. Therefore, each person must make an independent effort to correct his or her fate, and others should not interfere in his or her situations, even those that cause suffering, such as illness. This would be an interference with the law of karma and, consequently, not a kind of help, but an obstacle to the development of the particular person (Lohfink 2018, pp. 41–44). Thus, reincarnation concepts contradict reason (Ziemiński 2013, pp. 201–22; Müller 2022, p. 224).

5. Conclusions

Manu Keirse, a clinical psychologist, medical doctor and head of the Sacred Heart of Jesus Hospital in Leuven, Belgium, wrote a book entitled *Helpen bij verlies en verdriet. Een gids voor het gezin en de hulpverlener* (Helping with Loss and Grief. A guide for the family and the care provider) in order to help people in mourning (there have been many quotations from the Polish edition of his book in this article). As Keirse admits himself, he wanted to provide a guide to all those who are grieving the loss of their loved ones, so that

they can process their grief and regain their faith in life (Keirse 2004, p. 287). Although the book is written by a psychologist and deals primarily with the psychological dimension of grief, the author reminds us of the positive role of Christian mourning rituals that unite people around mourners to support them in grieving the “right way.”

Keirse mentions the following Christian mourning rituals: praying for the deceased persons in church services, ringing the bells at the moment of death of a villager or a city resident, hanging a crucifix on the door of the deceased’s house, wearing mourning clothes, organizing a party for the family and relatives of the deceased, so-called wakes, ordering masses for the peace of the souls of the deceased, e.g., on the anniversary of their death or birth, ending the mourning period for the whole family with a Holy Mass, collecting offerings for masses for the deceased from neighbors, funeral processions, keeping the groom’s shirt until the day of his death as part of the bride’s dowry. All these rituals emphasize the communal, i.e., relational, nature of mourning (Keirse 2004, pp. 23–24). Hence, Keirse confirms the thesis that the human person is a psycho–physical–spiritual unity and, therefore, in order to help him/her in grief, his/her needs should be taken care of in all three dimensions (Dudziak 2021, p. 159). In his opinion, the problem concerns the contemporary underestimation of this social form of grieving the loss of a loved one, because mourning is a process that should not be experienced alone, but only in relationships with others.

In view of that, there is no real conflict between psychology and theology. Both sciences contribute to integral knowledge about man and the mourning process, even though each uses its own scientific language to describe different aspects of human existence (Gajdowiec 2012, pp. 11–12).

If drawing from both fields of science is to really help mourners, the psychological layer of grief and mourning must be respected when transmitting religious knowledge (Keirse 2004, pp. 275–77). A mourner who believes in God is also a specific person with his or her entire psyche, which cannot be underestimated. Therefore, difficult questions should not be answered with quick and easy religious answers, such as: “This is God’s will, which one must accept.” Such a message may cause someone grieving a loss to experience a blockage in the mourning process at the stage of grief and cause a rebellion against God (Keirse 2004, p. 53). If a mourner is to come to know Jesus Christ, believe in him and, thus, find a new way of real communion with the dead, he or she must first be patiently heard, with loving and understanding attention. It is often the listener’s attitude, not his words, that is the first testimony of faith in God, who is near and worth trusting in matters of life, death and eternity. Keirse recognizes that there are people who do not seek a reference to transcendence in their mourning. However, he reminds us that believers can see the death of their loved ones from a broader perspective, i.e., from the perspective of eternal life after death, which gives hope for a reunion with their beloved deceased (Keirse 2004, pp. 275–77).

The aforementioned comments prove that from a psychological point of view, when faith in Jesus Christ, along with its consequences presented here, are appropriately proposed to mourners and accepted by them, they play an important role in the family experience of grief. This is confirmed by the testimony of the Iraqi Catholic Doha Sabah Abdallah, a mother mourning the death of her four-year-old son and other family members who were killed in the 2014 attack by ISIS. During the Mass celebrated by Pope Francis in Qaraqosh, she said that her strength was undoubtedly born from her faith in the resurrection of the dead, the source of hope, and imitating the suffering of Christ testified to the power of love that conquers all. “My faith tells me that my children are in the arms of Jesus Christ our Lord [...] And we, the survivors, try to forgive the aggressor, because our Master Jesus has forgiven his executioners” (Westcott 2021). Her words testify that the Catholic teachings about Christ, the human person, death, the immortality of the soul, the resurrection of the body and communion between the living and the dead (*sanctorum communio*), which we have presented here, not only change the knowledge of its receivers, but also their lives in the emotional and spiritual sphere.

At this point, we can refer to the words of Cardinal Gerhard Müller that “the cure for mortality is identical with the Savior” (Müller 2022, p. 107); from the theological point of view, it is Christ who heals the mourner’s wounds because, as the Creator, he has access to the ontic layer of human existence, which is deeper than the psychic layer and which affects it. It is through this layer that Christ enables us to have true relationships between the living and the dead. This is most fully realized in every Eucharist, which is a “specific place”, i.e., an encounter between time and eternity, and thus an encounter between the living and the dead (Zatwardnicki 2022; Liszka 1992, pp. 143–54). Therefore, there is no need to resort to spiritism or the annihilation of the dead or their reincarnation, for the grieving process to end with finding happiness in a new life situation after the death of loved ones. The cure for grief can be Jesus Christ, if only the mourner receives him, his teachings about life, death and eternity, in an act of faith, i.e., by his/her free consent of reason. This decision, repeated persistently, will sooner or later have its soothing repercussions on the mourner’s emotional sphere, because relationships with God do not leave those who enter into them unchanged (Ratzinger 2022, pp. 450–52).

This analysis could be continued in further research on connections between the family mourning process and mourners’ faith in Jesus Christ. It would be worth examining the role of faith concerning losses of individual family members: children, spouses, parents or grandparents. In particular, it would be valuable to look at the grieving process as a result of suicide, homicide, chronic disease, sudden accident or miscarriage. Each grief after the death of a loved one is different and worth studying in order to help those who experience the interruption to relationships with deceased persons.

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Abbreviations

CCC	Catechism of the Catholic Church
GS	The Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution on The Church in the Modern World <i>Gaudium et Spes</i>

Notes

- ¹ For the controversies related to some opinions put forward by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, see (Dudziak 2021, pp. 134, 153).
- ² On the topic of the experience of grief by children, see, for example (de Kergorlay-Soubrier 2012; Keirse 2004, pp. 63–85).
- ³ This concept was criticized by the Polish theologian Czesław Stanisław Bartnik who wrongly accused the German theologian of the mortality of the soul understood in this way and the rejection of its substantiality (Bartnik 2004, pp. 317–19).

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