

Beata Antoszevska Ph.D.
Urszula Bartnikowska Ph.D.
University of Warmia and Mazury
Olsztyn

A Christian view on disability as a factor improving life quality of the mentally handicapped

In every society we can meet people who, in some respect, differ from the generally approved standard. Even the greatest human efforts will not eliminate incomplete ability. Present efforts to make life easier result in a situation where the weakest, who need special care and support, are pushed away from everyday life. Despite of the declared humanism, there is no place for weakness in today's world. Sometimes, pushing the weak away is covered up under the form of material help, organising a place fulfilling outwardly the necessary conditions, but not securing close emotional bonds with another human being.

For centuries the words of Jesus Christ: "whatever you did to those little brothers of mine, you did this to me"¹. inspired to help the needy. But taking care of the disabled have not always been the result of a positive perception of the disabled as individuals of complete rights and value, at the aid have often missed to secure them with a worthy life.

Jean Vanier is considered as the "discoverer of the world of the pushed away", who established the communities of "Faith and Light" and "The Arc". It is him, who points to the value of the mentally handicapped and their irreplaceable place in the society, in which mostly power, youth and abilities are propagated. Mr Vanier, in his articles, presents the disabled as teachers of love, friendship and other most important, and at the same time, the simplest values. He believes, the weak are not needless. On the contrary – their existence has a profound sense, and their life has a great significance in the process of healing so called fully able part of the society.

The first Arc was created in 1964, when Jean Vanier invited two mentally handicapped men Raphaella i Philippe'a to live together with him. Then the community grew and presently there are more than 100 Arc homes in 30 countries. The homes "take onboard" mentally handicapped people who "so quickly drown in the waters of our societies based on

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Vanier J., Każda osoba jest historią świętą. W drodze, Poznań 1999.

rivalry”². Arcs are homes where the disabled with their friends, called assistants, live. The assistants are usually young people, deriving from various lands and environments, who decided to live together with the disabled for a month, year or a few years. Because the Arc is a real home, each person living in it has his/her own duties. The mentally handicapped persons work in workshops, for example: painting, weaving, embroidering, making Christmas and Easter cards, candlesticks, key rings. At this time assistants who live in the home are supposed to prepare meals, clean, wash... In the afternoon the life goes its own way – but characteristic for the Arc – it is a life full of meetings and conversations. The life rhythm is set by the residents’ needs, so there is no hurry.

The other community, mentioned here – Faith and Light – was established in 1971. It is a movement which is taking care of mentally handicapped people, sometimes referred to as Muminki and their friends, called Paszczaki. Their meetings take place once or twice a month and are composed of mutual celebration, i.e. talks with a cake and tea, with songs etc. Besides celebrating and meeting each other, those people pay visits at each other’s homes thus confirming and strengthening their bonds of friendship. Presently there are approximately 1800 such communities in 72 countries.

Faith and Light and the Arc are communities of sharing friendship, prayer and celebration, where the mentally handicapped are treated subjectively, as human beings, as persons gifted with a soul.

In our research we have performed interviews with people engaged in the movement of Faith and Light in Olsztyn and with the residents of the Arc homes of Poznań. The group of interviewed is 33 people at age from 14 to 56 years, among which there were 11 mentally handicapped people.

The greatest number of the interviewed came to the communities through testimonies of their friends, some through the books they read, which described the life in the communities. Only a few through earlier contacts and meetings with the disabled. We should note the fact that 94% of all our respondents do not have pedagogic qualifications. The approach of those people towards the disabled is not formed by the scientific trends or the pedagogic literature, but by their everyday true being in the community and Christian principles that endure in the community. One can say that they execute a fragment of the

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Vanier J., *Każda osoba jest historią świętą*. W drodze, Poznań 1999, s.6

Gospel which Mr Vanier called the foundation text, namely „when you make a party, invite the poor, the lame and the blind. And you will be happy...”³.

The analysis of our research was, in great degree, based on opinions of people engaged in the Arc for a considerable time. Their answers show their maturity and present the truth of Mr Jean Vanier's beliefs, who writes that while living in the community one can make lots of discoveries. Most of all, it is the possibility to learn about the suffering of the mentally handicapped, their questions: do you still love me?, to discover their extraordinary openness for the love of Jesus and for things which are most important.

Each person is subject to continuous change. He is formed by the environment in which he lives, people whom he meets, joys and sufferings he experiences. Thanks to all that he grows. However, there are such events which are assessed as dominant in the process of forming humanity in separate persons. Our respondents are people who believe they are formed by the environment in which they spend time, the family, friends, present events. Many of them emphasise the role of religion in changing their world perception. But the greatest number of people see the interpersonal relations as those which form their humanity. The inhabitants of the Arc believe that this place allows them to grow. It is important to them how people react to each other. Of course, they mean the mentally handicapped, their way of life, their sharing of joys and sorrows. An important element forming the personality of the assistants is the possibility of supporting, and also experiencing receiving support not only from fully healthy people. Also some mentally handicapped people said they have changed due to being in the community and due to the presence of other people.

From the side of the assistants and Paszczaks, the basic motive to engage in the community life is the chance to help others and the feeling of being needed as well as the possibility to establish interpersonal relations. However, the assistants with greater experience admit that after some time, something quite different started to attract them, e.g. they noticed the balance in giving and taking, they noticed a spiritual depth. It turned out that the communities create the possibility to meet people convinced of the same values and aiming at the same goals. This allows to make the meeting with mentally handicapped persons a profound experience. One of the assistants described his life in the Arc as “The Gospel illustrated by life”, in which the functions of helping the disabled are not the most important. Much more important are simple meetings with the other person and the feeling of unity.

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Vanier J., *Każda osoba jest historią świętą*. W drodze, Poznań 1999, s.13 – 14

The communities become fields of growth for all the participants. Almost everyone we talked to can mention at least one area of life where their personality benefited due to their work with mentally handicapped people. The Arc is here of special significance. It allows, as the residents say, to see the weaknesses of the handicapped person, but most of all it allows to see one's self, one's strong and weak points. Thanks to that, one can receive and accept the truth not only about another person, but also about himself/herself. Jean Vanier, in his texts, often emphasises that "the knowledge of the dark side of one's own self and then accepting it makes the first step towards understanding one's self"⁴. And this is a significant element of growth.

Taking into account the above, the people examined have been to a great degree influenced by the communities and the rules there. We asked them to say something about the contemporary man, a disabled man and his role in today's society.

The contemporary man is perceived by our respondents as a lost, living in a hurry, striving to multiply his state of wealth individual. Such man misses the most important thing. A lot of the respondents said this assessment derives only from the information they hear and is not confirmed in the reality in which they live because the people they meet every day have quite different values⁵. According to their assessment, they live the thing which gives them true happiness – a thorough relation with other people and with God through them.

Therefore, spending time with the mentally handicapped is of great significance. One of other questions our respondents answered was who a disabled person is. Most of the interlocutors described a disabled person simply as a human being. Those who have been working with the mentally handicapped for a short time perceived them still through the view of stereotypes present in the society and that is why described them as more unhappy and requiring help. Long-term members of the communities see the handicapped as those who reveal the strong and weak sides of their personality and also as those who on one side need help but on the other can give a lot to other people. The assistants from Arcs believe they can rely on the handicapped they live with, sometimes even more than on other assistants. One can trust them, ask for help in difficult situations, especially for emotional support.

Almost unanimously the respondents state that disability is only one of a person's characteristics, and not a complete difference. It is obviously an important characteristic, sometimes noticeable at the first sight, but it cannot be an excuse for a different treatment of the disabled. It definitely does not state on a lesser value of such person. Everyone has unique

⁴ Vanier J., *Każda osoba jest historią świętą. W drodze*. Poznań 1999, p. 9.

⁵ It refers mostly to the residents of Arcs

characteristics which make people various but the core of humanity is always untouched and the same for every person, therefore everyone – regardless of the physical, psychological or mental state – should be a full-right member of the society. Presenting such approach, the assistants are able to provide the disabled with a warm, family-like atmosphere, where every person is able to grow in accordance to his/her capacities, to grow in the society and become his or her own self.

One can say that those who often spend time with the mentally handicapped, are those who most clearly see what capacities and limitations they have. Our respondents mentioned two types of limitations that the mentally handicapped experience: those present in the environment and those present in the mentally handicapped person. The people we examined saw much more limitations which are somewhat organised by the fully able part of the society. The other group of limitations refers to the disability to manage in various situations due to a lesser intelligence. Those people worked out certain schemes to learn the world and certain skills. Sometimes the scheme proves to be inefficient. So it is with handicapped people – they need different patterns through which they could adapt themselves to the surroundings. Therefore, we are supposed to create some space for them, outer conditions filled with love, acceptance and wisdom of another person. “The limitations of another person are, as a matter of fact, my limitations, because it is me who cannot discover his/her capabilities, look at her from another point of view” – told us one of the assistants. Someone else said that when she talks to a mentally handicapped person and that person does not understand her then she does not think of the intellectual limitations of her interlocutor but rather of her inadequate words or patterns of behaviour which may hinder the understanding.

“Normality lies within the capacity of the disabled” – so said one resident of the Arcs – “But to make it happen, the able have to create appropriate conditions”. Another respondent said: “the disabled have all the capacities of having a full life, being part of the society. What is the most important, is to discover and understand one’s own place, the aim of one’s life and why we are here”. Therefore everyone – whatever mental or physical ability, has his/her own role, but needs some assistance in discovering the sense of his/her existence. This is something every human being needs, because everyone has the same human needs, desires and, finally, “we are more alike than different” – emphasised our respondent.

About 80% of fully-able persons in the communities said they feel disabled in some areas such as interpersonal relationships, sport. We even received such a reply: “as a matter of fact, I don’t feel fully able in any field”.

In this light, what can the residents of the communities give to each other?

There is no doubt, the mentally handicapped need support in some areas. The most important thing they can receive is a confirmation that they are not needless, redundant people, somebody who mixed-up someone's plans. The very important role of the Paszczaks and the assistants is to show the disabled their good sides and skills. In other areas, it is the mentally handicapped who become teachers, they teach celebration of holy days, unselfishness, hospitability, forgiveness and enjoying the little things. And what is very important, the disabled are aware of what they give to others by their presence. There is a constant exchange in the community. Friendship, love, joy – these things are both given and received by everyone. After what has been said above, nobody will be surprised that, according to the respondents, everyone needs the community, though in various degree. The disabled see it the same way. They don't perceive themselves as those who only need support, but both the ones who are receiving and those who are giving. They know that wiping the plates, cleaning, or serving in the church services is important and needed by everyone in the community. There is no division between "the poor" needing support and "the good" able to help others.

That is why the handicapped, when asked how they feel in the community, said they are joyful, smiling, and feel liked. Those disabled living in Arcs even say that it is their family, "God's home" and love.

In the communities of Faith and Light and in the Arcs, the disabled person is accepted as a "complete" person, having also spiritual needs. And this is how the mentally handicapped want to be accepted by the rest of the society, regardless of their vices or virtues. From the Christian point of view, they are "the poor of the world who are enriching many, and as those having nothing, but owing everything"⁶.

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Vanier J., Każda osoba jest historią świętą. W drodze. Poznań 1999, s. 6-10

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