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The Priestly Ministry of the Prison Chaplain as Perceived by Convicts in Light of Own Research

*Even if everyone has doubted you
show that they were wrong.*

Magik

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Abstract: The conducted studies convince of the effects that are achieved in the social rehabilitation of convicts, as well as the objective of the educational role of the prison chaplain. This objective is mainly prevention of pathological behavior which is realized by different forms of educational interaction.

Key words: prison chaplain, prisoner, religious services.

The subject of the article is the relationship of inmates to those who are engaged in pastoral work (mainly chaplains) in prison, in light of own research (Pierzchała 2013, p. 264–278).

The introduction to the topic will be a few numbers from the author's previous studies:

- religion professed by inmates (Roman Catholic) (Pierzchała 2013, p. 186) – average of 95.3%;
- faith, practice (religion practitioners and sometimes practitioners) (Pierzchała 2013, p. 188) – average of 55.3%;

- forms of religious practices (Mass) (Pierzchała 2013, p. 189) – average of 88.1%;
- openness to the words of the prison chaplain (Pierzchała 2013, p. 217) – average of 19.6%;
- help of the prison chaplain in the fight against addictions (Pierzchała 2013, p. 259) – average of 19.7%;
- sense of social support from the prison chaplain (Pierzchała 2013, p. 204) – average of 9.4%.

These data demonstrate a direct relationship, the principle in Polish prisons of the first decade of the 21st century. An incarcerated person is one who calculates strongly. If they want to leave the cell, they'll claim they are religious and wish to participate in Mass. If we ask whether they are religious or not, without the connection of leaving the cell, anonymously, the number of faithful decreases to 55.3%. But if we ask whether they count on the chaplain's help if he is open to them, then one in five answer affirmatively. Worrying is the fact that only less than 10% of inmates are convinced about helping and supporting the chaplain.

In order to complement, develop the above studies, the author analyzed the way people make first contact with persons engaged in pastoral work in prison. These relations are characterized in Table 1 (Pierzchała 2013, p. 265–266).

It follows that the majority of respondents establishes personal contact with those engaged in pastoral work in prison, this mainly applies to chaplains. Only 13.8% say that they have not established it. This confirms the rule that inmates see their own interest in it. Interestingly, 52.2% of respondents go to the prison chaplain themselves, moreover, 34% of them go to him through a person who came to the convict with such a proposal (Tab. 1).

Table 1. Method of establishing first contact with people engaged in pastoral work in prison

Method of establish first contact	Group 1 (N = 96)		Group 2 (N = 96)		Group 3 (N = 96)		Group 4 (N = 97)		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Inmate enrolled him (her)self for a meeting/talk	43	44.9	55	57.3	46	48.0	57	58.7	201	52.2
Indicating the person who came to the inmate with such a proposal:	39	40.6	27	28.1	33	34.3	32	33.0	131	34.0
– chaplain	8	8.3	7	7.3	8	8.3	10	10.3	33	8.6
– siblings	4	4.2	2	2.1	3	3.1	3	3.1	12	3.1
– warden	2	2.1	2	2.1	2	2.1	2	2.1	8	2.1

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Method of establish first contact	Group 1 (N = 96)		Group 2 (N = 96)		Group 3 (N = 96)		Group 4 (N = 97)		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
– friend	3	3.1	–	–	–	–	–	–	3	0.8
– prison fraternities	1	1.0	–	–	1	1.0	–	–	2	0.5
– someone (without indicating)	20	20.9	15	15.6	19	19.8	17	17.5	71	18.4
– therapist	1	1.0	1	1.0	–	–	–	–	2	0.5
Inmate did not establish contact	1	1.0	3	3.1	2	2.1	2	2.1	8	2.1
No answer	13	13.5	11	11.5	15	15.6	6	6.2	45	11.7
Total	96	100.0	96	100.0	96	100.0	97	100.0	385	100.0

* group 1 – prisoners once convicted with a high potential for moral improvement; group 2 – prisoners once convicted with a low potential for moral improvement; group 3 – prisoners repeatedly convicted with a high potential for moral improvement; group 4 – prisoners repeatedly convicted with a low potential for moral improvement (Pierzchała 2013, p. 234–235).

Source: own development.

In analyzing literature on the subject, the author came across the opinion (Łyskowska 2000, p. 109) that the group of prisoners who prohibits others contact with the prison chaplain is not small. These are mostly people who practically do not recognize any authorities, so-called prison elites. If the cell is dominated by prison elites, probably no one will participate in Mass in order not to expose themselves to the mockery of “colleagues”. The superiority of prison subculture to the educational role of the chaplain is also written about by: Dorota Pstrąg (2004, p. 372–384) and Franciszek Kozaczuk (2007, p. 164–165). According to Kozaczuk, prison elites regard honor and physical prowess as more valuable than spiritual values.

Persons deprived of their liberty were asked additional questions, in order to demonstrate the influence of persons engaged in pastoral work for prisoners. The data is presented in Table 2 (Pierzchała 2013, p. 267–268). The results of the study are not surprising, they merely confirm the rule that only one in five of respondents (19.5%) treat contact with clergy as positive, as something that supports someone spiritually, which allows one to understand many things, which gives greater hope. People who have a negative approach and people who do not give any answer constitute a total of 76.6% of respondents. In prison, convicts are driven more by standards of benefit than value. “I will believe if the priest gives me something or does something for me” (Lasocik 1993).

Table 2. Assessment of contact with clergy by respondent inmates

Assessment of contact with clergy	Group 1 (N = 96)		Group 2 (N = 96)		Group 3 (N = 96)		Group 4 (N = 97)		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Positive – spiritual support	28	29.2	11	11.5	24	25.0	12	12.4	75	19.5
Total negative, including:	40	41.7	47	48.9	43	44.8	56	57.7	186	48.3
– I am indifferent	35	36.5	43	44.7	40	41.7	54	55.6	172	44.6
– “I have not seen anyone yet”	2	2.1	2	2.1	2	2.1	2	2.1	8	2.1
– I have rare contact with these persons	3	3.1	–	–	–	–	–	–	3	0.8
– I have minimal contact	–	–	2	2.1	1	1.0	–	–	3	0.8
Other, including:	3	3.1	5	5.2	3	3.1	4	4.1	15	3.9
– I don’t leave the cell so that colleagues don’t have a bad influence on me	1	1.0	2	2.1	1	1.0	1	1.0	5	1.3
– no opinion	2	2.1	3	3.1	2	2.1	3	3.1	10	2.6
No answer	25	26.0	33	34.4	26	27.1	25	25.8	109	28.3
Total	96	100.0	96	100.0	96	100.0	97	100.0	385	100.0

Source: own development.

Jerzy Nikołajew, on the basis of many years of studies, claims that people who are arrested temporarily feel the impact of subculture on religiousness to a lesser extent than convicts (Nikołajew 2007, p. 198). Zbigniew Lasocik argues with this opinion; he believes (after conducting relevant research in 1989) that: “individual religiousness is a neutral element from the point of view of social stratification of prisoners. Prison elites and non-elites take part in mass celebrations” (Lasocik 1993, p. 163). The debaters were brought together by sociologist Stanisław Małkowski, who not being a chaplain, probably expressed the most accurate and objective opinion: “The chaplain cannot identify himself with any group. He must be on the side of the human being and what links people, not what divides [...]. A human and Christian approach to the prisoner and his problems is simply needed” (Małkowski 1989, p. 12).

Similar studies are described by Leszek Lubicki. A positive image of chaplains is shown by results of a survey conducted in a group of 33 convicts in the prison in Włocławek. According to inmates, it is the chaplains that allow them to have

contact with God and provide them with support. They cause many prisoners to change their lives around and not return to crime (Lubicki 2007, p. 60–63).

The results presented in Table 1 clearly show that the respondents from groups 1 and 3 – prisoners with a high potential for moral improvement – perceive the pastoral work of a prison chaplain in a much more positive light. Nonetheless, on the one hand, these studies show success, and on the other, the enormous amount of work that awaits every prison chaplain in order to reach all prisoners.

Another element of the author’s investigations was to examine another issue based on the “Personal questionnaire”, namely, the impact of religious life on the prisoners’ attitude to good and evil. The numerical analysis of the problem is shown in Table 3 (Pierzchała 2013, p. 269–270).

In examining this issue, we cannot delude ourselves that most convicts after leaving prison will take the “good” path due to the prison chaplain. In total, only 26.1% of all respondents testified that this indeed happens. Unfortunately, 33.8% of respondents replied negatively, and almost the same number of people (32.5%) did not answer this question. Among those participating in the study, one-tenth said they were innocent, that they are convicted on the basis of slander or even as a result of conspiracy activities of law enforcement and the judiciary.

Table 3. Assessment of the impact of religious life on the attitude to good and evil conducted by the respondents inmates

Assessment	Group 1 (N = 96)		Group 2 (N = 96)		Group 3 (N = 96)		Group 4 (N = 97)		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Positive, including:	33	34.4	14	14.6	23	24.0	31	31.9	101	26.1
– I analyze my past life, I understand that I did wrong	31	32.3	14	14.6	21	21.9	30	30.9	96	24.8
– I regret it a little	2	2.1	–	–	2	2.1	1	1.0	5	1.3
Negative	29	30.2	37	38.6	30	31.3	34	35.1	130	33.8
– after leaving prison, I will really become an offender	17	17.7	23	24.0	18	18.8	25	25.8	83	21.6
– I am INNOCENT	9	9.4	10	10.4	10	10.4	7	7.2	36	9.4
– I have not met with a cleric yet	2	2.1	2	2.1	2	2.1	2	2.1	8	2.1
– I was positive until I left prison – I changed my mind under the influence of colleagues	1	1.0	2	2.1	–	–	–	–	3	0.8
Other, including:	7	7.3	10	10.3	7	7.2	5	5.2	29	7.6

Table continued from previous page

Assessment	Group 1 (N = 96)		Group 2 (N = 96)		Group 3 (N = 96)		Group 4 (N = 97)		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
– I realized it myself, without the participation of the chaplain	2	2.1	3	3.1	3	3.1	2	2.1	10	2.6
– I could distinguish good and evil even before coming to prison	2	2.1	3	3.1	1	1.0	2	2.1	8	2.1
– I cannot participate in life, because I am temporarily arrested	1	1.0	1	1.0	2	2.1	1	1.0	5	1.3
– I will be more careful	2	2.1	1	1.0	–	–	–	–	3	0.8
– I am neutral	–	–	2	2.1	1	1.0	–	–	3	0.8
No answer	27	28.1	35	36.5	36	37.5	27	27.8	125	32.5
Total	96	100.0	96	100.0	96	100.0	97	100.0	385	100.0

Source: own development.

Should one give up in the face of such data? On the contrary. A chaplain is a person who has a very responsible task and an important function to fulfill. There is enormous work to be done, and the commitment must be great, because a person who has been deprived of freedom is a very demanding one, but not lost, it is a difficult person, but possible to recover (Pierzchała 2013). Certainly not everyone can be helped, but is it not worth the trouble even for one sheep?

Another, perhaps more important matter, is the issue of trust in the chaplain. Persons deprived of their liberty diligently follow if the priest does not maintain a too close relationship with the management of the prison and educators.

A convict who has “repented” their actions by long-term imprisonment, after leaving it will still be a threat to social order if the period of imprisonment was not used properly, if a certain auto-analysis of previous behavior and mistakes was not done, and a new normative system was not adopted. Imprisonment is punishment for committing evil, a redemption for crimes committed, but not only. The main task of the prison system – officers, chaplains, educators and teachers – is to fuel hope, not impose ready-made templates of behavior, and in particular therapy work with the prisoner-patient, who must themselves pass the road of change and come to specific conclusions, because only then do they recognize them as their own (Pierzchała, Cekiera 2008, p. 15–16). However, not all prisoners who use pastoral service and show piety outside, are on the way to conversion. They often treat it instrumentally.

The examination of attitude to the religious service of the prison chaplain used the “Questionnaire of a prisoner’s expectations of the prison chaplain”

(Pierzchała 2013, p. 403). This survey was designed to illustrate the relationship between the chaplain and the prisoner, as well as expectations of prisoners in relation to the prison chaplain (Pierzchała 2011, p. 279–288).

Analysis of the problem of expectations of prisoners (Pierzchała 2013, p. 272–273) in relation to the ideal prison chaplain (Table 4) indicates the general conclusion that studies in different groups did not differ significantly from each other. Collectively, the studies showed that persons deprived of their liberty expect from the ideal chaplain:

- faith in the moral improvement of convicts – 24.2%;
- greater understanding – 20.5%;
- spiritual support and prayer – 17.1%;
- ability to influence prison affairs – 16.4%;
- greater involvement in the life of prisoners – 11.4%;
- working with a calling – 10.4%.

Further studies explain what the significance of the numbers above is and what they mean.

Table 4. Expectations of respondents in relation to the ideal prison chaplain

I expect...	Group 1 (N = 96)		Group 2 (N = 96)		Group 3 (N = 96)		Group 4 (N = 97)		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Faith in moral improvement	26	27.1	23	24.0	24	24.9	20	20.6	93	24.2
Greater understanding	19	19.8	20	20.8	20	20.8	20	20.6	79	20.5
Possibility of greater influence on prison affairs	15	15.6	16	16.7	16	16.7	16	16.5	63	16.4
Spiritual support and prayer	17	17.7	17	17.7	16	16.7	16	16.5	66	17.1
Greater involvement in the life of the convicts	10	10.4	10	10.4	11	11.5	13	13.4	44	11.4
Working with a calling	9	9.4	10	10.4	9	9.4	12	12.4	40	10.4
Total	96	100.0	96	100.0	96	100.0	97	100.0	385	100.0

Source: own development.

Let the conclusion for this part of the analysis be a certain summary borrowed from the Conference of Higher Superordinates of Female Religious Congregations “Expectations of lay people in relation to consecrated people” by Katarzyna

Olbrycht: “With all the positive achievements and many examples of beautiful, constructive relationships between clergy and laity, one cannot underestimate misunderstandings and difficulties dividing these environments, leading to mutual resistance, grievances and disappointments. The great value of consecrated life in the Church and at the same time the need for unity among all its members requires reflection on the sources of these tensions and finding ways to reduce them” (Olbrycht 2000).

Expectations of people deprived of liberty are often the consequence of experiences gained from participation in social rehabilitation or assistance programmes, both formal and informal, and their beliefs about the nature of the process of social rehabilitation. The prison chaplain is usually treated differently than prison employees, but a certain problem in contact, reaching a person always exists. The expectations of prisoners are also great and certainly not unfounded.

Sławomir Leśniewski also asks himself the question of the role of the prison chaplain in the social rehabilitation of convicts and of expectations of the prisoners in relation to him. The study, which involved 40 prisoners in the prison in Nowy Łupków, shows that the prisoners mostly expect from an ideal chaplain faith in what he does, understanding and a greater influence on prison issues. In addition, they count on spiritual support and prayer. They most like that the chaplain is honest and systematic, and that he is a positive figure.

To sum up this part of the article, we can distinguish three groups of prisoners, taking into account the studies of the author and results of Sławomir Leśniewski:

- for the atheist – the chaplain does not have to exist;
- for devout believers – the chaplain is most useful to those who are most vulnerable mentally;
- for believers, but non-practicing – the chaplain has the effect of reinforcing their religiousness (Leśniewski 2002, p. 59–73).

Cardinal Stanisław Dziwisz at a meeting in Bartkowo said: “The chaplain should restore hope in prisoners and bestow them with trust. [...] [They are] privileged witnesses of God’s mercy. [...] The chaplain must be a man of mercy. He should above all bring prisoners the mercy of God, passed on through the sacrament of reconciliation and present in the Eucharist. [...] It’s never too late to convert, for penance and change of life. [...] The chaplain should restore hope in prisoners and bestow them with trust. [...] He should remind them of their inalienable dignity as children of God, created in the image and likeness of God” (Seminar 2010).

In continuing the studies, respondents answered the question: “What do you like in the activities of the prison chaplain?” The results are presented in detail in Table 5 (Pierzchała 2013, p. 275–276). When asked what prisoners like in the work of the chaplain, most inmates replied: the fervent service to God (20.9%), and additionally, honesty, orderliness, being a positive figure in the prison and selflessness and providing emotional support and safety (these values

form similarly and range from 8.3% to 15.6%). Respondents try to find people around them who have deep faith in the moral improvement of another human being and the ability to understand others. The prison chaplain must be a neutral person, of whom the convicts expect spiritual support and prayer. The answers of respondents indicate a very complex role of the prison chaplain in the social rehabilitation of convicts (Pierzchała 2011, p. 279–288).

Table 5. Respondents' answers to the question: What do you like in the activities of the prison chaplain?

Respondents' answers	Group 1 (N = 96)		Group 2 (N = 96)		Group 3 (N = 96)		Group 4 (N = 97)		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Devotedly serves God	20	20.9	15	15.6	15	15.6	13	13.4	63	16.4
He is honest	12	12.6	15	15.6	12	12.6	10	10.3	49	12.6
He is systematic	8	8.3	8	8.3	12	12.5	15	15.5	43	11.2
He is a positive figure in the prison	10	10.4	9	9.4	12	12.5	10	10.3	41	10.6
He is selfless	10	10.4	13	13.5	10	10.4	10	10.3	43	11.2
He supports spiritually	12	12.5	10	10.5	10	10.4	13	13.4	45	11.7
He provides a sense of security	8	8.3	9	9.4	10	10.4	8	8.2	35	9.1
He teaches to live in friendship and harmony	8	8.3	8	8.3	8	8.3	9	9.3	33	8.6
He can be understanding	8	8.3	9	9.4	7	7.3	9	9.3	33	8.6
Total	96	100.0	96	100.0	96	100.0	97	100.0	385	100.0

Source: own development.

A religious attitude, the prison chaplain's appeal to conscience, sense of guilt, need of forgiveness and reconciliation, and maintaining active involvement in religious activities may promote social rehabilitation. By looking at the factors shaping religious attitude, we can see that a more and more frequent reason for denial of the truths of faith and morals is the growing religious ignorance. Earlier, with the low intellectual culture, religious ignorance was not as big a threat to religiousness as it is today. Today, when there is a huge increase in general and specialized knowledge, low levels of religious knowledge causes many doubts and rejecting what was once a beacon of human life. The result of this may be inner

pride that closes a person to any religious conduct (“I know better. What can the Church tell me in the 21st century?!”) (Wilk 2005).

Prisoners were asked another question, contrary to the previous: “What don’t you like in the activities of the prison chaplain?” (tab. 6) (Pierzchała 2013, p. 277–278).

The studies show that inmates mostly do not like the fact that the prison chaplain deals with politics (an average of 37.1%, and in groups 2 and 4 respectively – 44.8% and 42.3%). These results are certainly derivative of participation in recent years of clergy in public life and public perception of this phenomenon. This is a topic for broader analysis. Another very important and significant part in the study was the lack of interviews with prisoners (average 29.4%), as well as devoting too little time to them (average 10.9%).

In prisons, prisoners expect interest in them. They need this to survive in the conditions of isolation, and for pastoral work this is the beginning of meeting another human being, often experiencing serious difficulties in life (Pierzchała 2011, p. 279–288).

Table 6. The respondents’ answers to the question: What don’t you like in the activities of the prison chaplain?

Respondents’ answers	Group 1 (N = 96)		Group 2 (N = 96)		Group 3 (N = 96)		Group 4 (N = 97)		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Dealing with politics	30	31.3	43	44.8	29	30.2	41	42.3	143	37.1
Lack of conversations with convicts	37	38.5	20	20.8	37	38.5	19	19.6	113	29.4
Devoting too little time to convicts	9	9.4	9	9.4	12	12.5	12	12.4	42	10.9
Life in sumptuousness and lack of understanding	10	10.4	14	14.6	7	7.3	11	11.3	42	10.9
Seeing convicts only during Mass	10	10.4	10	10.4	11	11.5	14	14.4	45	11.7
Total	96	100.0	96	100.0	96	100.0	97	100.0	385	100.0

Source: own development.

The most negative attitudes towards the pastoral work of the prison chaplain is present in penitentiary recidivists. Their hostility towards religious involvement can have various causes, among others:

- difficulty in admitting to their own mistakes;
- the use of strong defense mechanisms;
- fear of exclusion from the prison subculture;
- the effect of reduced moral sensitivity (Hołyst 2004, p. 1370; Rudnik 1970, p. 57).

Prison essentially is no different from normal society. Prisoners like the same thing as free people and do not like what others don't like. To illustrate the problem, we cite selected quotes of the survey conducted by "Przegląd Powszechny" in January 2010.

Archbishop Kazimierz Nycz¹ answers the question: *What is difficult to accept in the stereotypical image of a priest? What are you most bothered by?*

"I am bothered by a few things in this stereotype. For instance, there's the stereotype of the rich priest, or one who flaunts wealth. [...] Perhaps sometimes priests warrant this. The second thing is sometimes being too high above the people, that is chosen from among men, but not for them, as if he was living his own life. [...] They know that a priest should be someone who has a healthy distance to these things, which allows him to be for everyone. I think that the key issue is the availability of a priest. [...] People immediately sense a very available priest and they look for them".

Next question: *You have a lot of contact with priests. In what do they feel the most misunderstood when it comes to relations with others, especially with laity? What could they offer them to better understand them?*

"Priests often say: Yes, they would like to advise and advise, but when they are needed for such help, they're not there. Another matter is mutual understanding: priests and lay people should know that in the parish, in the Church, there are tasks that can be completed only jointly and together. [...] It cannot be done alone. The laity must be involved in it. If there is a meeting of ideas, of both groups and of the executors, then something starts to open up. [...] It is important for us, being on both sides of the altar, that they feel that we are the same Church and only then a complete Church" (Who is the contemporary priest... 2010).

Leszek Lubicki, to the question asked to prisoners – *what do you expect from the role of a chaplain and participation in religious ministries?* – obtained the following answers: "bringing peace [...], faith in a better tomorrow [...], spiritual support [...], loose conversations that every human being needs [...], help in solving problems [...], taking into account the place we're in, I don't expect anything more than what he does". To the next question *do prisoners need a chaplain?* were answers like: "The chaplain causes prisoners to change their life. Many of them do not return to crime. [...] The chaplain reminds me that there is

¹ Archbishop Kazimierz Nycz, doctor of theology, Metropolitan of Warsaw, ordinary of the faithful of the Armenian rite in Poland.

still someone who has not turned away from me. [...] To show how to function in society” (Lubicki 2007, p. 61–62).

According to Waldemar Woźniak, people “conducting pastoral work in prison need more and more commitment and better preparation for work” (Woźniak 1995, p. 73–74).

“The special position of chaplain in the prison is due to the fact that he is a priest. No one else coming to the prison from outside is able to take his place. A social activist, even the most committed, requires years to accomplish what every priest is equipped with. The capital he has – that trust and authority” (Lasocik 1993, p. 198).

Prison chaplains for a considerable number of convicts are people of special trust, interacting in a social rehabilitative way with them and often organizing their free time (Szymanowski 2003, p. 28).

To sum up, it should be stressed that the prisoners expect from educators, especially from the prison chaplain:

- partnership treatment, tact and cultural behavior, willingness and ability to help solve their problems, adequate professional training and knowledge, fairness, consistency, diligent work, interest in the affairs of prisoners (Gordon 2004, p. 143; Ciosek 2003, p. 263);
- empathy (Schmidt 2004, p. 132);
- credibility (Aronson, 2001, p. 81–83);
- resistance to stress (Nawój 1998, p. 290);
- dignity, responsibility, fairness, truth (Samonek-Miazga 2005, p. 88);
- being people of conscience, constantly working on themselves (Kaczyńska 1996, p. 170; Poznaniak 2004, p. 109);
- guided by fairness, consistency, determination and prudence (Machel 2003, p. 126–127).

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