

Fr. Tomasz Kopiczko

Theological Seminary
Ełk, Poland

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION AND ATHEISM. ANALYZING THE INEFFECTIVENESS OF CATECHESIS IN POLAND

Catechesis and atheism are two polarizing words. Catechesis is meant to deepen one's faith and strengthen one's relationship with God, while atheism entirely negates the existence of God. The purpose of this article is to show that despite the fact that these two phenomena are so completely oppositional, yet there is an occasion of their encounter. In Polish society it may take place in catechesis—colloquially called religious instruction, which is conducted at schools. That is why this article is concentrated on outlining ineffective moments of catechesis which may entail atheism. It does not mean, though, that the whole process of catechesis should be deemed ineffective and inefficacious. The main priority is to list those elements that are imperfect, causing aspects of the redemptive ministry of Church to falter. In addition to this, vital recommendations will be provided in order to run the catechesis process more effectively, providing more care for the faith and salvation of man.

Theoretical framework

In order to provide correct methodology and clear terminology, two fundamental terms, *catechesis* and *atheism*, should be defined. In terms of catechesis it should be noted that although definitions of catechesis refer to the universal Church, this article is limited to the reality of the Church in Poland.

Undoubtedly, catechesis is a very rich and complex reality. It is also difficult to give an unequivocal and concise definition of it. Nevertheless, bearing in mind the apostolic exhortation of John Paul II on the catechesis

in our times, *Catechesi tradendae*, it must be stated that “all in all, it can be taken here that catechesis is an education of children, young people and adults in the faith, which includes especially the teaching of Christian doctrine imparted, generally speaking, in an organic and systematic way, with a view to initiating the hearers into the fullness of Christian life.”¹ The very same document underlines in the next bullet point “that the specific character of catechesis, as distinct from the initial conversion—bringing proclamation of the Gospel, has the twofold objective of maturing the initial faith and of educating the true disciple of Christ by means of a deeper and more systematic knowledge of the person and the message of our Lord Jesus Christ.”²

Whereas the *Catechetical Directory of the Catholic Church in Poland* underlines that catechesis is one of the methods of proclamation of the Word of God in Church.³ Polish bishops emphasize that catechesis should be linked with a pastoral and missionary service of the Church, without losing its specific character, though. And catechesis has an evangelizing character.⁴

This document relates to the specific Polish situation where catechesis is, to a large extent, conducted in a school setting. Bishops, bearing in mind Polish experience, historical backgrounds and a decades-based catechetical tradition, state that “school religious instruction should be treated as part of catechesis, i.e., as a specific form of catechesis. Both in catechesis and school religious instruction it is the Church which is the operator. In catechesis it is realized through a parish, and in school teachings through bestowing religious instruction teachers on canonical mission.”⁵ Hence, it can be concluded that at least within the framework of teaching religion at school, catechesis and religious instruction complete each other.⁶

The next term is *atheism*. The *Catechetical dictionary* states that “in colloquial meaning atheism refers to the negation of God’s existence and consequently leads to the assumption that human life does not directly

¹ John Paul II, *Catechesi tradendae* (1979), 18, hereafter CT.

² Id., 19.

³ Polish Bishops’ Conference, *Dyrektorium Katechetyczne Kościoła katolickiego w Polsce* [The Catechetical Directory of the Catholic Church in Poland] (Kraków: WAM, 2001), 18, hereafter DOKPol.

⁴ Cf. id., 18–20.

⁵ Id., 82.

⁶ Id., 73.

relate to God and religion.”⁷ In wider terms we can speak about the lack of faith in God, gods and supernatural forces as they are contrary to reason, are unscientific and thus negate the need for religion.⁸

In consequence, the atheist is a man who does not believe in a personally understood God or gods and thus in his life he does not apply religious reason. The atheist assumes as well that his existence takes place and is created without God’s care. In his view religion is perceived as the illusion of the senses, superstition and a cultural burden to be overcome. The atheist negates any supernatural human hope, claiming that it is a utopia which distracts people from terrestrial life. The atheist sees existence as limited in time and terminated on earth. It is often deemed that God is the creation of imagination, deprived of consistency and equipped with all human features.⁹

Often atheism does not boil down to only negation, but it also proclaims some positive content. A truly ideal atheist, if one exists, does not negate God’s existence but simply does not think of Him. Atheism does not stand for an “easy” life.

From a catechetical point of view, it means that fundamental questions regarding the purpose of life remain unanswered. Man is treated like the only creator of his life history. Atheism is seen then as the source of false concept of man and his relation to society. Negating God deprives man of his foundation and consequently leads to such a social order in which dignity and personal responsibility are ignored. Not only is atheism contrary to religion, but it understates the importance of fundamental values taught through catechesis; and it also leads to spiritual void in man and in society. In a spirit of post-council anthropological catechesis it can be stated that loss of sensitivity to God is the loss of sensitivity to the human person as well.¹⁰

Status quaestionis of the religiousness in Poland

It is symptomatic that atheism, by its nature, may exist only as an opposition to the theistic religious and philosophical tradition. The condition, or “the ground,” for atheism’s existence is what it rejects, questions and undermines, in other words, theistic religion and philosophy. It can be

⁷ J. Gevaert, “Atheism,” in *Słownik Katechetyczny*, ed. J. Gevaert (Warszawa 2006), 62.

⁸ Cf. T. Ślipko, *Zarys etyki szczegółowej* (Kraków 1981), 39.

⁹ Cf. J. Sochoń, *Ateizm* (Warszawa 2003), 98.

¹⁰ Cf. *Lumen Gentium* (1964), 20; John Paul II, *Centesimus annus* (1991), 13; DOKPol, 63.

assumed then that if it was not for theistic religion or philosophy, atheism would not exist. Thus, it is obvious that atheists need believers to exist. An entirely secularized culture would not know of faith in God, but it would not know atheism as an existential option, either. It can be stated that believers need atheists, although this need is not so distinct. As Poland is a country where religion, faith and God play a significant role, it is an ideal environment for atheism's development.

Despite many changes, Catholic faith still constitutes a significant element of Polish self-identification. Over the last few years invariably about 90–95%¹¹ of Polish society declare themselves to be Catholic. Other religious identifications are declared very rarely. Also the percentage of people not connected with any religion is negligible. Empirical data do not point at a radical fall of religiousness in Poland. There is, however, a tendency towards less institutionalized religiousness, where every-Sunday participation in a Holy Mass is not “obligatory” and the canon of Catholic faith does not have to be accepted “fully.” Yet, religion still constitutes a vital part of Poles' lives.¹²

According to the statistical data published in 2015 by the Public Opinion Research Centre regarding the attitude to faith and religious rituals, it can be stated that commonly declared faith in God is quite a permanent feature of Polish society. According to systematically carried out research since the end of the 1990s, invariably over 90% of those surveyed (92–97%) declared themselves to be believers, including 1 out of 10 (recently 1 out of 11 or 12) who assess their faith as deep. The percentage of people declaring to be entirely non-believers has stood low for years (3–8%), and what is important here is that since 2005 this number has doubled (from 4% to 8%). At the same time, the number of those who declare to be deeply faithful has declined from 12% to 8%.¹³

It is also surprising that Poles have a positive attitude to some religious elements in social life. Such elements as crosses in public institutions, the religious character of a military vow, religious instruction taught at schools, the participation of priests and bishops in rituals and state cere-

¹¹ This number is dependent on the method of research. Cf. R. Boguszewski, “Polak—na zawsze katolik? Polska religijność w latach 1989–2008 na podstawie badań CBOS,” *Więź* 9: 599 (2008): 5–10.

¹² Cf. R. Boguszewski, *Religijność i moralność w społeczeństwie polskim – zależność czy autonomia? Studium socjologiczne* (Toruń 2012), 163–165.

¹³ Cf. R. Boguszewski, *Zmiany w zakresie podstawowych wskaźników religijności Polaków po śmierci Jana Pawła II, Komunikat z badań CBOS 26/2015* (Warszawa 2015), 2.

monies, the blessing of the places and buildings of public utilities or priests showing up in public TV—it is not at all controversial for the majority of those surveyed.¹⁴

Additionally, in 2015, 86% of those surveyed declared that they do not mind catechesis at school.¹⁵ An upward tendency can be noticed here compared to 2007 when the percentage of proponents constituted 72%.¹⁶

Yet, the same research illustrates the development of a new phenomenon in Polish society. From 2005 to 2015 the percentage of people declaring to be non-believers has risen from 4% to 8%, and the percentage of those who do not participate in religious rituals has increased from 9% to 13%. Thus it can be stated that the ratio of the non-believers to the believers in 2015 is 8% to 92%.¹⁷

Status quaestionis of catechesis in Poland

Poland is an example of a country which represents quite a specific attitude to religious instruction. As one of very few countries in Europe, Poland guarantees its citizens the possibility to attend catechesis classes at school. Despite the fact that learning religion is of optional nature, it still holds a confessional character.

A school-conducted class of religious instruction was officially banned in the years 1961–1990. It was reintroduced to schools on September 1, 1990. The classes are held twice a week, each 45 minutes long. Priests and nuns constitute a vast majority of teachers of this subject; however, there is a growing number of lay teachers, too. Ethics is offered as an alternative. Back in 1990 many teachers welcomed catechesis at school with applause. Schools with a negative attitude to this subject were exceptions. Yet, for the first years, catechesis at school was often missionary work in fact. In most schools catechesis was also attended by those stu-

¹⁴ Cf. M. Grabowska, *Boskie i cesarskie. O stosunkach między państwem i kościołem(ami). Komunikat z badań CBOS 48/2015* (Warszawa 2015), 4.

¹⁵ Cf. id., 3–5.

¹⁶ Cf. M. Feliksiak, *Opinie o nauczaniu religii. Komunikat z badań CBOS 119/2007* (Warszawa 2017), 2.

¹⁷ Cf. Boguszewski, *Zmiany w zakresie podstawowych wskaźników religijności Polaków po śmierci Jana Pawła II*, 2. The data from the Institute for the Catholic Church Statistics confirm these tendencies: in 2013 the percentage of *dominantes*, so the faithful participating in a Sunday holy mass for the first time since 1980 fell below 40% (and totaled 39,1%). At the same time the percentage of *communicantes*, so the people joining the Communion is rising (in 2013 it was 16,3%).

dents who had not attended it in a parish. In the second half of the 1990s, however, we could observe a drop of interest in catechesis. Luckily, the following years showed that it was not a steady tendency.¹⁸

The latest data on participation in catechesis classes was collected by Bishop Marek Mendyk, who chairs the Catholic Education Committee of Polish Bishops' Conference. They are as follows: in primary schools around 92% of pupils attend catechesis classes, in junior high schools 79%, and in high schools around 61%.¹⁹ These data come from 2012. On this basis it can be concluded that catechesis attendance decreases with age.

These data, however, seem to be optimistic. But when we compare some information found on Internet portals, there are fewer reasons to be complacent. The foundation "Freedom from Religion," on the basis of the data collected by the National Education Ministry, says that in the years 2014–2015 in 786 schools catechesis classes were not conducted for various reasons.²⁰ These are the statistical data arising from students' declarations. Everyday reality seems to bring along more threats and difficulties.

Status quaestionis of atheism in Poland

In the countries under Communist regimes for 50 years after the war, atheism was a prevailing doctrine. Yet, taking into account the history of Poland in the second half of the twentieth century, it did not have a particular impact on the number of religious persons in the present society. On the grounds of the research carried out in 2005, it could be concluded that the number of people proclaiming atheism constituted around 4%. Over the next 10 years this number doubled and in 2014 it was 8%.²¹ Over those

¹⁸ Cf. S. Dziekoński, "XX lat katechezy w Polsce," *Episteme* 102 (2010): 59–72; T. Panuś, "10 razy 'tak', czyli próba bilansu 20 lat nauczania religii w polskiej szkole," *Katecheta* 9 (2009): 47.

¹⁹ These data come directly from the Chairman of the Catholic Education Committee of Polish Bishops' Conference. Whereas a website of the Catholic Information Agency refers to the research from 2012 and gives the following data: catechesis is attended by 98% of primary school pupils, 96% of junior high school students and 91% of high school students (cf. "Szkoły bez nauki religii w Polsce," <http://wolnoscodreligii.pl/wp/szkoły-bez-nauki-religii-w-polsce/>, accessed on 05.20.2015. Bearing in mind personal experience, I can risk a statement that statistical data given by the bishop Marek Mendyk seem to be more relevant to the Polish reality.

²⁰ Cf. "Szkoły bez nauki religii w Polsce."

²¹ Cf. Boguszewski, *Zmiany w zakresie podstawowych wskaźników religijności Polaków po śmierci Jana Pawła II*, 2.

years the percentage of people abstaining from religious rituals has risen from 9% to 13%.²²

Despite those numbers which keep rising, we can still remain optimistic if we compare the situation in Poland with the neighboring countries. The University of Chicago, which did the research, points out that the percentage of atheists in the neighboring countries is much higher, e.g., in the Czech Republic about 40%, in the eastern German Länder about 50%, in the Netherlands about 20% and in France 23%.²³

In Polish society, the majority of atheists come from traditionally Catholic families. The research which was carried out among young people, mostly students, points out that nearly 80% of them are sure that their parents either were or are believers and they admit that they were brought up in a religious spirit. The biggest surprise comes when we learn that all the surveyed atheists (100%) are baptized and received First Communion. 72% of them received the Sacrament of Confirmation, and 12% had a sacramental marriage. What is interesting, 83% of the surveyed atheists used to believe in God. 90% of them gradually accepted that they were wrong. The age at which they abandoned the faith is also interesting. The research showed that 29% of them abandoned the faith under 14, 55% between 15 and 19, and 14% between 20 and 25 years old. These data indicate a tendency according to which the biggest number of faith abandonments take place in the period of the so-called “rebellion” against parents and the surrounding world, in the period of questioning, disappointments and searching for their own identity.²⁴

²² The information given on the websites of the Institute for the Catholic Church Statistics confirm these tendencies: in 2013 the percentage of *dominantes*, the believers participating in a Sunday holy mass for the first time since 1980 fell below 40% (and totaled 39,1%). At the same time the percentage of *communicantes*, so the people joining the Communion is rising (in 2013 it totaled 16,3%).

²³ Cf. T. W. Smith, “Beliefs about God across Time and Countries” (NORC—University of Chicago), http://www.norc.org/PDFs/Beliefs_about_God_Report.pdf, accessed on 05.20.2015.

²⁴ These data come from the research carried out at Polish universities, and they constitute the foundation for a diploma thesis *Atheism in Poland*.

Catechesis and atheism

In 2012 Father Robert Wawrzeniecki, OMI,²⁵ published an article titled in a provocative way “Catechesis generates atheists.”²⁶ He writes as follows: “I am a catechesis teacher. I read online fora where many young people write about abandoning the faith. In the majority of cases they abandon for the reasons which could be prevented by a well-conducted catechesis.”²⁷

Tracking online fora²⁸ where young people, mostly from junior high schools and high schools and occasionally from universities, publish their comments, one can consider the effectiveness of catechesis. First of all, it turns out that in most cases young people abandoned the faith not due to doubts that they could not overcome by themselves or with the assistance of adults. In the majority of cases, these were the situations which should be solved during a catechesis class. These issues are included in the school core curriculum which school catechesis is bound to. First and foremost, however, the aim is to guide these young people on the way to a personal relation with God and to experience faith in a mature way.²⁹ We can also come across an opinion represented by a priest, Father Kawecki, who wishes “to see at catechesis classes only those who really want to grow up in faith. The phenomenon is that people often attend catechesis although they do not want to, because—I am not sure—they are afraid to unsubscribe from it?; they are afraid that God will take offence . . .”³⁰

Many catechesis teachers come across students who straightforwardly call themselves non-believers. From everyday observations it is clear that they constitute quite a substantial group. Very often these are small children whose parents at the very beginning of the school education declare that they are non-believers, but still they want and ask to let their children attend a catechesis class. Perhaps they do not want to deprive their children of something they were deprived of in their childhood. Another

²⁵ A catechesis teacher in Publiczne Gimnazjum nr 3 (State Junior High School no. 3) in Kędzierzyn-Koźle (Poland) and an academic priest.

²⁶ Cf. R. Wawrzeniecki, “Katecheza produkuje ateistów,” <http://tygodnik.onet.pl/wiara/katecheza-produkuje-ateistow/kg5t9>, accessed on 05.20.2015.

²⁷ Id.

²⁸ Cf. forum on a website: <http://ateista.pl/index.php>, accessed on 05.20.2015.

²⁹ Cf. K. Frejusz, “Niewierzący na katechezie,” *Katecheta* 5 (2012): 51–54.

³⁰ W. Kawecki, “Kawecki o ateistach, którzy chodzą na katechezę, żeby poznać wroga,” http://www.frona.pl/opinie/czytaj/nazwa/ks._kawecki_o_ateistach,_ktorzy_chodza_na_katecheze,_zeby_poznac_wroga, accessed on 05.20.2015.

group is represented by teenagers who think of themselves as non-believers, but at the same time, in most cases, they are baptized and they want to attend catechesis classes. It is common that there are pupils who attend catechesis and who openly declare lack of faith. There are also those who are treated as non-believers by catechesis teachers and those who attend, but this fact does not seem to change anything in them.³¹

One can consider the reasons for the ineffectiveness of some elements of catechesis. In other words, what are the reasons for which a person who attends catechesis decides to be a non-believer, an atheist, or even to combat the Church. Further considerations will try to understand this.

In an attempt to search for the reasons it is fundamental to understand catechesis, its essence. Yet, student believers and those who “search for or experience religious doubts”³² see its meaning in a different way. When students are non-believers, religious instruction “assumes the character of a missionary proclamation of the Gospel and is ordered to a decision of faith, which catechesis, in its turn, will nurture and mature.”³³ Referring to practice and Church documents it can be stated that a confessional religious instruction is aimed at all the groups of students to whom it nurtures a different task without identifying itself with catechesis in its full meaning.³⁴

Another crucial element is the fact that the identity of a young man is shaped by popular culture. In many aspects the products of mass culture guide young people out of the category of religious thinking or they simply question it. Very often popular culture is reduced to providing entertainment for the largest group of recipients, ignoring at the same time aesthetic and ethical content.³⁵ This kind of encounter with culture will lead to the creation of the so-called *Generation Me*³⁶ where the central motto reads: “As long as I believe in myself, I really do not care what others think.”³⁷ Young people both in America and in Poland grow up in the world where

³¹ Cf. A. Kielian, “Niewierzący? Obecny! Co na lekcji religii robi niewierzący uczeń czy niewierząca uczennica?,” *Katecheta* 5 (2012): 45.

³² DOKPol, 75.

³³ Id.

³⁴ Id., 73.

³⁵ Cf. W. Jakubowski, *Edukacja w świecie kultury popularnej* (Kraków 2011), 25–28.

³⁶ The name comes from the publication of an American psychologist Jean M. Twenge. Cf. J. M. Twenge, *Generation Me: Why Today's Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled—And More Miserable Than Ever Before* (New York-London-Toronto-Sydney 2006).

³⁷ Id., 20.

prioritizing your feelings and thoughts is taken for granted. A practical aspect of this situation are, according to some researchers, online social portals (*MySpace, Facebook, Twitter*). They do not aim to create a community, but to show themselves, gain popularity and dream of fame.³⁸ *Generation Me* is assured of their own value, which is based on very fragile foundations. This generation is less willing to obey the rules of an organized religion; it drifts more towards creating their own religions.³⁹

Many young people are further away from God not only due to yielding to atheistic ideologies or their own weaknesses but more due to escaping to the virtual world, and in particular the world of fictional meetings and apparent contacts. God, however, can be met only in reality and only when we are capable of making a dialogue. If parents do not talk to their sons and daughters about religious issues (if such conversations are not part of the family culture), and if in media they read only articles on some trivial matters, then young people do not know how they can meet God and what to talk to Him about.

People functioning this way are not interested in traditional prayer services or forms of devotion. They will rather look for their personal way of experiencing faith and meeting God—a way which will suit their needs and emotions more. A need may be something positive, awaiting a religiousness proposal which does not lower requirements but offers a personal contact with the Savior.⁴⁰ That is why catechesis should be the venue of a meeting and a dialogue. Some of its elements can be treated as a kind of preevangelization where subjects such as freedom, spirituality or religiousness are under discussion. It is also worth asking young people what their biggest aspirations, ideals and wishes are.⁴¹

It should be also remembered that youth is a long-term period of stormy and intensive changes taking place in a biological, mental and social context of life. It is the time when people struggle with existential dilemmas, look for the answers to fundamental questions regarding the sense of life and their place in the world. Young people undergoing biological changes observe their own transformations; they become new persons, as yet unstable, uneasy and searching for a new definition of their own identity. Young people feel the need to accept an ideology, truth and

³⁸ Cf. M. Janczewski, *CeWEBryci—sława w sieci* (Kraków 2011).

³⁹ Cf. Kielian, "Niewierzący? Obecny!," 47–48.

⁴⁰ Cf. id., 49.

⁴¹ Cf. M. Chorab, "Jestem ateistą... Religijne wybory młodzieży w obliczu kryzysu tożsamości," *Katecheta* 5 (2012): 55–57.

values and to participate in a group adopting a common system of values. Taking into account the errors made by catechists and the imperfection of the catechetical system, young people can easily abandon faith. It may happen when catechesis is not based on the foundation of a personal relation with God. It may also happen when catechesis is reduced to teaching a doctrine and morality and does not lead to a meeting with God in a prayer and conscious sacraments.⁴²

In this context it is worth noting an utterance of a student of the third year from a junior high school. It is referred to in an article on the non-believers at catechesis by a priest, Father Andrzej Kielian. The student in question wrote as follows: "I don't believe in one God, the Father almighty, Maker of heaven and earth. And I don't believe in Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, who allegedly was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary, allegedly always a Virgin, who for our sake was supposedly crucified under Pontius Pilate, who was supposed to suffer, die, and be buried and then descend into hell. Even more I don't believe that on the third day he rose again or that he ascended into heaven, where He allegedly is seated at the right hand of the Father or that He will come again to judge the living and the dead. I completely disbelieve in the Holy Spirit or the holy Catholic Church or the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting. Amen. Our Polish paradox is that someone like me is writing this profession of faith while attending catechesis class. So why do I attend it? I think that because I do believe in man and their ability to think rationally. Especially when it comes to my friends at the age of puberty who are in the process of creating their vision of reality. I treat my attendance at catechesis as apostolate, apostolate of wise reasoning."⁴³

What is surprising is the deep awareness of this student. He does realize what kind of situation he is in. Despite physical presence at catechesis, he deepens neither his faith nor his relation with God. It can be concluded that they never existed. This text illustrates two crucial issues. The first one is the awareness of creating his own "vision of reality." It is influenced very clearly by modern culture which promotes the attitude to life as

⁴² Cf. E. Rydz, "Kształtowanie się religijności młodzieży szkół ponadgimnazjalnych," in *Wychowanie młodzieży na poziomie szkół ponadgimnazjalnych*, ed. J. Stąła (Tarnów 2007), 21–40.

⁴³ Cf. Kielian, "Niewierzący? Obecny!," 48.

a free self-creation. The other element is the courage to express his point of view, create his philosophy of life and express them at a catechesis class.⁴⁴

In this type of situations one can risk a statement that atheism or disbelief stem from identity crisis. It is the result of improper choices made while searching for their place in the world. Atheism understood in this way may be of ephemeral character. It may be defined as a stage in identity development, which leads to the strengthening of faith of an adult-to-be who found God and will never again doubt the belonging to the Church. When a young man, however, does not receive proper support, then he may acknowledge his religious choice as the right one. In consequence, it will lead to shaping a personality of man deprived of faith and lonely in their atheism.⁴⁵

Another crucial element in catechesis process is the encounter of the two worlds. During catechesis young people who were not baptized meet with those who did not fully go through the process of Christian initiation, who experience a serious faith crisis or are looking for help. These are the young people who, in the name of badly understood freedom, speak of themselves as being free from faith. This situation has to be handled both by catechists and students who believe. In this situation a catechist and catechesis face a tough task. Young people live in the culture which does not favor being close to Christ; and they themselves often place unrealistic demands or hold overly high expectations. The aim of catechesis, in this situation, is to approach the Church and faith. Perhaps the testimony of peer believers showing faith in everyday life will help those who negate Christianity.⁴⁶

On the basis of the above mentioned arguments, it can be acknowledged that catechesis is ineffective towards non-believers. It should be also underlined that the main reason for this is the lack of personal, strong and systematically deepened relation with God. Simply speaking, at school catechesis in Poland there are more and more people who have never gone through the first stage of religious instruction and evangelization. In 1979 John Paul II published the post-synod exhortation *Catechesi tradendae*, which spotted the situation in which it should be borne in mind

⁴⁴ Cf. id.

⁴⁵ Cf. M. Chorab, "Jestem ateistą...", 55–57.

⁴⁶ Cf. G. Jurczyński, "Niewiara vs Wiara? Analiza i wnioski z badań dotyczące uczestnictwa osób niewierzących w katechezie na poziomie szkoły gimnazjalnej," *Katecheta* 5 (2012): 58–61.

that the initial evangelization has often not taken place. A certain number of children baptized in infancy come for catechesis in the parish without receiving any other initiation into the faith and still without any explicit personal attachment to Jesus Christ; they only have the capacity to believe placed within them by Baptism and the presence of the Holy Spirit; and opposition is quickly created by the prejudices of their non-Christian family background or of the positivist spirit of their education. In addition, there are other children who have not been baptized and whose parents agree only at a later date to religious education.⁴⁷

With reference to this situation papal document speaks of the reality of parish catechesis; however, we normally come across the reality of catechesis at school. "The diversity of the religious situation should be kept in mind: there are young people who are not even baptized, others have not completed Christian initiation, others are in grave crises of faith, others are moving towards making a decision with regard to faith, others have already made such a decision and call for assistance."⁴⁸

Conclusions

It cannot be ignored that a spiritual and cultural crisis which we experience in Poland takes its first toll upon the young people: "the rapid and tumultuous socio-cultural change . . . the pressures of consumer society . . . all contribute to make of youth a world in waiting, not infrequently a world of disenchantment, of boredom, of angst and of marginalization."⁴⁹ Alienation from the Church, faith and God or indifference in this regard—all become a kind of attitude. In this context one may pose a question: how to speak a young man of God? What to do so that catechesis will not be a place and time when other young people abandon their faith?

With reference to a two-thousand-year-old tradition of the Church, to what is permanent, there seems to be no revolution. A fundamental solution is the comeback to a classical model and order, where the first instruction precedes evangelization and catechesis. Only the man who came into faith through breaking off with the sin, through conversion and accepting Jesus Christ as the Lord and Savior can attend catechesis. Then, indeed

⁴⁷ CT, 19.

⁴⁸ Cf. DOKPoł, 184.

⁴⁹ Id., 182.

catechesis will be the place of deepening one's relation with God and strengthening the faith. This need is observed by Polish bishops, too. In the *Catechetical Directory of the Catholic Church in Poland* they underline that "a new situation of catechesis in Poland after 1990 should give rise to reflection that teaching catechesis at school is a chance for evangelization, as for some students, who are baptized but alienated from faith, school catechesis is the only place where they can get into contact with the Gospel, with faith witnesses, such as catechists and deeply believing students; it is also the only place where children and youth from dechristianized environments may hear the voice of the Church and where they may be introduced into the liturgy and prayer of the Church."⁵⁰

When elements of evangelization are included in the school catechesis, this may be a sign of addressing the needs of people of our times.⁵¹ The first preaching of the Gospel—evangelization—concerns not only pagans or non-believers in Christ, but also all Christians who lack a fundamental initiation into Christianity. The *Catechetical Directory* explains that the recipients of evangelization—the first proclamation of Christ's mystery—are non-believers and those living in religious indifference.⁵² Undoubtedly, as this article tried to show, such people attend school catechesis in Poland.⁵³

A personal meeting with Christ and accepting Him as one's Lord and Savior is fundamental to build faith. It takes place thanks to the first proclamation of the Word which springs up faith in man and calls for response. If, at any stage of catechization, such a meeting and a personal relation take place, it is much more difficult or even almost impossible to go away from God. According to the Second Vatican Council one should focus on positive thinking. In every case of school catechesis, one should not be afraid of threats but proclaim the kerygma explicitly and courageously. It is important to form "personal and mature" faith which would allow the Christians, on the one hand, to critically confront modern culture and resist the temptations and, on the other hand, to successfully influence the man. In other words, it is about keeping one's identity and at the same

⁵⁰ Id., 57.

⁵¹ Cf. *Katecheza ewangelizacyjna. Poszukiwania koncepcji*, ed. P. Mąkosa (Lublin 2010).

⁵² Cf. DOKPol, 61; G. Puchalski, *Katecheza w kontekście nowej ewangelizacji w nauczaniu Jana Pawła II* (Olsztyn 2002).

⁵³ Cf. E. Stelmach, "Jak mówić dzisiaj młodemu człowiekowi o Bogu?," *Katecheta* 7–8 (2012): 94–97.

time having missionary enthusiasm combined with effective proclamation of the Good News.⁵⁴

It should be also remembered to build a personal relation both with God and man. Program assumptions are just a framework and the content is filled up with the message and the testimony of believers. Good programs and interesting textbooks will be of no use when Christians are not skillful, persistent and firm witnesses in any time and any place. A catechist who eagerly and openly stands in front of young people may be a perfect translation of the Gospel into life. A good example of such a catechist is the one who, once trying to ignite the group, posed a question: "My dear, which of you is a Christian? Please raise your hands. No one responded. I thought they didn't understand the question. So I tried in a different way: Which one of you is not a Christian? And at this point came a surprise: six students responded. The rest? Indifferent, indecisive, unsure, maybe frightened. I posed another question: Why did you come here? I believe you are all 18 now, so you can resign from the class on your own request. It is only me who wants to be here and to some extent I have to be here. You, for sure, don't have to be here. Different answers cropped up: because mother will be angry, because the parish priest will want to see a notebook, because granny won't give me pocket money . . . Even an opportunist from the last desk joined the discussion. He explained less aggressively than at the beginning why he came there. It led to a dialogue and although we did not reach the subject of the lesson, a conversation about faith, freedom, compulsion and good intentions paved the way to decreasing the distance between that man in black and those young people. Rebellion and indifference disappeared giving way to openness and interest."⁵⁵

On the basis of this situation, it can be stated that if we want catechesis to be deprived of imperfection, its purpose cannot boil down to the six basic tasks: knowledge of the faith, liturgical life, moral formation, prayer, belonging to community, missionary spirit.⁵⁶ Catechetical tasks compared with evangelizing ones are a lot more detailed and concrete. Young people should be viewed with due responsibility so that it will guard them against atheism. Catechesis is meant to grow young people in their faith, systematically and holistically. To sum up, I will quote John

⁵⁴ Cf. John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Europa* (2003), 48ff.

⁵⁵ R. Chalupniak, "Katecheza w służbie przekazu i formacji wiary. Nowa ewangelizacja (w nowej) katechezie," *Katecheta* 7–8 (2012): 9.

⁵⁶ Cf. DOKPol, 86–87.

Paul II who spoke to catechists in Łowicz, Poland, in 1990. The Pope reminded that “this grand good, which is teaching catechesis at schools calls for sincere and responsible engagement. We should use this good in the best possible way. Thanks to catechesis, the Church can run evangelization process even more effectively and broaden the scale of the mission . . . All those who work at school need to show more sensitivity in order to create the atmosphere of a friendly and open dialogue . . . it is necessary to create the atmosphere in which children and youth will be able to freely manifest their religious beliefs and follow them.”⁵⁷

**RELIGIOUS EDUCATION AND ATHEISM.
ANALYZING THE INEFFECTIVENESS OF CATECHESIS IN POLAND**

SUMMARY

Catechesis and atheism are two polarizing words. Catechesis is meant to deepen one’s faith and strengthen one’s relationship with God, while atheism entirely negates the existence of God. The purpose of this article is to show that despite the fact that these two phenomena are so completely oppositional, yet there is an occasion of their encounter. In Polish society it may take place in catechesis—colloquially called religious instruction, which is conducted at schools. That is why this article is concentrated on outlining ineffective moments of catechesis which may have something to do with atheism. It does not mean, though, that the whole process of catechesis should be deemed ineffective and inefficacious. The main priority is to list those elements that are imperfect, causing aspects of the redemptive ministry of the Church to falter. In addition to this, vital recommendations are provided in order to run the catechesis process more effectively, providing more care for the faith and salvation of man.

KEYWORDS: religion, education, catechesis, Poland, atheism.

⁵⁷ Jan Paweł II, “Homilia wygłoszona w Łowiczu (14 czerwca 1999 r.),” in *Pielgrzymki do Ojczyzny. Przemówienia, homilie* (Kraków 2005), 1144.