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ECUMENISM IN MAGNIFICAT, A MINISTRY TO CATHOLIC WOMEN

If prayer is the «soul» of ecumenical renewal and of the yearning for unity, it is the basis and support for everything the Council defines as «dialogue»¹.

Introduction

Magnificat, an International Ministry to Catholic Women has had neither ecumenical purpose nor character since its beginnings. However, analysing its origin, methods and structures we can state that in its theology and pastoral practice the ministry has realised the teaching of the Catholic Church on ecumenism. The assumptions and realisation of the ministry contain many elements building unity among Christians. At the very source of the ministry we can see the inspiration from the Gospel of St. John, in which Jesus prays for unity to his Father, 'I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, keep those you have given me true to your name, so that they may be one like us' (17: 11). In its *Decree on Ecumenism* the Second Vatican Council acknowledges, 'Such division openly contradicts the will of Christ, scandalizes the world'². Women involved in Magnificat, a Ministry to Catholic Women want the will of Jesus, expressed in his prayer before his passion, to be fulfilled, and they think that they will contribute to this unity by a ministry directed basically to Catholic women. On the basis of a solid foundation of faith Catholic women will be able to use more the benefits, which efforts for the cause of ecumenism bring³. It is in accordance with what the Catholic Church

¹ JOHN PAUL II, *Encyclical letter «Ut unum sint» on commitment to ecumenism*, Vatican City 1995, 28.

² *Decree on Ecumenism*, in: *Vatican Council II*, ed. A. FLANNERY, Northport-New York 1984, 1.

³ MAGNIFICAT CENTRAL SERVICE TEAM, *Constitution*, Metairie 1999 [next: *Constitution*], V.

stresses in ecumenical dialogue, namely the importance of building their denominational identity. It is the basis to undertake activities in the spirit of ecumenism. Concern for ecclesiastical identity goes together with the need to serve the Gospel, collaborating with brothers who belong to other Churches and Christian communities⁴.

The exhortation *Christifideles laici* encourages the faithful to bring their own contributions to ecclesiastical communities through their various charisma and tasks⁵. Some women in New Orleans made efforts to realise the salvific mission of the Church in the world by virtue of Baptism participating in the mission of Christ as Priest, Prophet and King. It is worth stressing that the local bishops as shepherds of the Church acknowledged and supported the development of this ministry. According to the exhortation, 'The Pastors, therefore, ought to acknowledge and foster the ministries, the offices and roles of the lay faithful that find their *foundation in the Sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation*, indeed, for a good many of them, *in the Sacrament of Matrimony*⁶.

This article aims at showing the ecumenical spirituality of Magnificat, a Ministry to Catholic Women. Its ecumenical origin can be described as 'dialogical exchange of gifts.' I am going to present the ecumenical contacts that formed this Ministry to Catholic Women. The contacts are connected with the interdenominational ministry 'Aglow' and the beginnings of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal. I intend to show the beginnings, development and theological inspiration of Magnificat, its statutes, membership, confessional openness as well as its main method of evangelisation worked out for Catholic women.

1. Aglow International

'Aglow' originated in the year 1967. A group of women from various Christian denominations, who had experienced the charismatic renewal, decided to meet together as Christians without denominational boundaries. Thus the organisation 'Women's Aglow Fellowship International' was born. Its groups began in Canada, New Zealand and Holland. The leaders of 'Aglow' aimed at renewing women according to their roles described in the Bible. In the 1970s an Aglow group started in New Orleans, the USA. It was initiated by Barbara Byerly, a Presbyterian, who had participated in prayer meetings of

⁴ W. HRYNIEWICZ, *Hermeneutika w dialogu*, Opole 1998, 180–181.

⁵ JOHN PAUL II, *Christifideles laici*, in: *The post-synodal apostolic exhortations of John Paul II*, ed. J. M. MILLER, Huntington: Our Sunday Visitor 1998, 23.

⁶ *Ibidem*, 23.

Catholic women who had experienced the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. This initiative was supported by numerous women, who were mostly Catholics. As Women's Aglow Fellowship was growing territorially and in the number of groups its leaders, seeing such large numbers of Catholics women attending the meetings, concluded that the presence of a Catholic priest serving as a spiritual adviser in the Board of Directors of Women's Aglow Fellowship could yield good fruits. Finally, with the consent of the Bishop of New Orleans Women's Aglow Fellowship received a priest who could minister in this interdenominational fellowship⁷.

2. Ecumenical beginnings of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal

'They were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and began to speak foreign languages as the Spirit gave them the gift of speech' (Acts 2:4b).

In the Catholic Church the Renewal in the Holy Spirit is a direct fruit of the Second Vatican Council. Thanks to Cardinal Suenens the term 'charism' was introduced to the conciliar text. According to Vatican II the gifts of the Holy Spirit, i.e. charisma, constitute normal equipment of the Church and are granted to every baptised person. At the same time the Council encouraged Catholics to open themselves to the gifts of other Christians, thus encouraging them to be open to the charismatic experiences of the Protestant Churches. It was not long that the real Charismatic Renewal among Catholics began. In the spring of 1966 two lecturers of Duquesne University in Pittsburgh, dissatisfied with their Christian lives, decided to start their own spiritual search to renew their faith. These lecturers made contacts with the Pentecostal Christians, which led to intercessory prayers over them, resulting in their openness to the extraordinary gifts of the Holy Spirit⁸. There were also other people there, including the students: Patti Gallagher⁹, Kevin and Dorothy Ranaghan, Ralph Martin, Gerry Rauch and Steve Clark. When the Pentecostals put hands over them the Holy Spirit came on them. Their experiences were so strong that they initiated prayer groups and communities all over the world¹⁰. The fact is that it was the Pentecostals that prayed over Catholics so that they could experience the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Those who had experienced this renewal were accused of a kind of sabotage

⁷ *A Brief History of Magnificat*, Metairie 2007, 2–3.

⁸ A. GREFKOWICZ, *Historia Katolickiej Odnowy w Duchu Świętym*, at: <http://www.odnowa.jezuici.pl: http://www.odnowa.jezuici.pl/szum/animatory-i-liderzy-mainmenu-34/struktura-historia-mainmenu-84/88-historia-katolickiej-odnowy-w-duchu-witym>, access on 14 November 2012.

⁹ She was connected with the founders of Magnificat and attended their first breakfast, which initiated the ministry. During the breakfast she shared her testimony.

¹⁰ Such communities also began in New Orleans and they initiated Magnificat.

aiming at drawing Catholics to Pentecostal or Protestant communities. Until today in many environments those who are involved in charismatic groups, after having experienced the Baptism of the Holy Spirit, arouse suspicions that they are part of a sect. The issues related to the Renewal in the Holy Spirit were subjects of the documents of the Magisterium of the Church. Such theologians as Yves Congar, Walter Kasper, Rene Laurentin and Joseph Ratzinger dealt with these problems¹¹.

3. The beginnings of Magnificat, a Ministry to Catholic Women in the USA

The year 1970 marked the development of a community of people who having experienced the Baptism in the Holy Spirit in New Orleans grew in their increasingly deeper experiences of God. And from a group of several women a network of fellowships of several thousand women began. An attempt to present a retrospective and comprehensive view of these events makes us conclude that in the Roman Catholic Church lay faithful experienced graces and with new power began to share their experiences with others. The bishops of the Archdiocese of New Orleans, seeing that the women of their diocese got interested in this interdenominational ministry, encouraged Catholic women to create a similar ministry. To initiate something like Women's Aglow Fellowship among Catholics was real because there had already existed a network of women involved in prayer groups. The bishops' suggestion was directed personally to Marylin Quirk. The result was the creation of Magnificat, A Ministry to Catholic Women. An interdenominational equivalent of Magnificat was the Women's Aglow Fellowship. This association was an inspiration and support for Magnificat. Catholic women from New Orleans recognise this interdenominational equivalent as a great work of God in our times. They also contribute to the unity about which Jesus speaks in his prayer as the High Priest in the Gospel of John through the ministry directed basically to Catholics. The purpose of Magnificat, A Ministry to Catholic Women is to care for solid foundations. On 7 October 1981, Magnificat, A Ministry to Catholic Women was born. Patti Mansfield was the first speaker who giving her testimony – her Magnificat – proclaimed the great works of God in her life¹².

The method, which was later thoroughly described as a prayer meal, today constitutes a basis for evangelisation of various environments. This method, used thousand times in various parts of the world, yields extraordinary fruits¹³.

¹¹ J. L. SUENENS, *Dokument z Malines. Odnova Charyzmatyczna. Wskazania teologiczne i duszpasterskie* (vol. I–III), ed. J. L. Suenens, Kraków 2006, 15–16.

¹² *A Brief History of Magnificat*, 8–9.

¹³ *Constitution*, VI.

The 25th prayer breakfast, organised on 11 February 1987, gathered 650 women. In the Deanery IV – East Jefferson, the Archdiocese of New Orleans, Magnificat affected numerous women's lives.

The Magnificat ministry grew rapidly. From various parts of the United States and from abroad there came questions how to find a Magnificat local group. In order to meet the needs of this increasing ministry the Central Service Team was created. It was necessary to write and approve statutes. The team in the Archdiocese of New Orleans worked out a document that was approved on 12 August 1987. It serves to spread the ministry all over the world. In the United States Magnificat developed very rapidly and within 20 years it reached all the states.

4. Magnificat in Poland

In 1997, the Magnificat ministry reached Europe through various international contacts. In 1995, the first Magnificat chapter originated in Malta. Its dynamics was very big. Because of various religious contacts the ministry reached Poland. In 1997, the first women began their formation in Lublin, Poland. The presence of some Polish women at the International Conference in New Orleans in 1999 made it possible to receive licence and begin activities of the first Polish group in Lublin.

Meetings in Lublin were held regularly four times a year and gathered from 250 to 600 women. The Lublin Chapter began to embrace women from all over Poland. In 2005, two next chapters were founded: in Częstochowa and Koszalin. At the same time a chapter was created in Ireland. The Polish Magnificat Ministry organised two big charismatic conferences called 'Time of Praise' and started a movement gathering families known as 'Children's Army'¹⁴.

5. Theological inspiration

The theological inspiration for Magnificat, a Ministry to Catholic Women is the story described in the Gospel of St Luke 1: 39–56. Mary, empowered with the Holy Spirit, thanks to whom Jesus had been conceived in her, went quickly to her cousin Elizabeth who was expecting a child. Mary shared with her the Good News of salvation and ministered to her with love. Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, praised Mary as the most blessed of all women and Jesus as the blessed fruit of her womb. Overjoyed with God's goodness Mary

¹⁴G. SAJ, *Konferencje charyzmatyczne jako element turystyki religijnej*, Kraków 2012, 10–11.

proclaimed the greatness of the Lord in a beautiful hymn of praise called the Magnificat. The meeting between Mary and Elizabeth (the Visitation) is an essential theological and pastoral inspiration for the Catholic ministry. Magnificat is women's ministry to women. It arouses a living faith in God and his action in women's daily lives. It arouses love of the Church and leads to holiness. The way to reach holiness for the women of Magnificat is prayer, the experience of fellowship, reading the Sacred Scriptures, teaching, testimony and mutual service. One can see here the realisation of what the Second Vatican Council regards as 'the soul of the ecumenical movement.' 'All the faithful should remember that the more effort they make to live holier lives according to the Gospel, the better will they further Christian unity and put it into practice'¹⁵. The ministry of Magnificat was born out of the desire to share with Catholic women the fruits of the experiences of the Roman Catholic Church and the Catholic Charismatic Renewal. It is an answer to the words of Jesus from the Gospel of Matthew 10: 8, 'You received without charge, give without charge'. Like Mary and Elizabeth the women of Magnificat, filled with the Holy Spirit, want to become a source of God's love, which each of them has received, to one another and to other people.

Magnificat was born and developed thanks to the Catholic Charismatic Renewal. It can concern all women. Its characteristic is openness to the charismatic gifts, which means respect for experiences of all those who are leaders in this ministry¹⁶.

6. Rules of Magnificat, a Ministry to Catholic Women

The purpose of Magnificat, a Ministry to Catholic Women is to live in the mystery of the Visitation – meeting between Mary and Elisabeth. It wants to help Catholic women to open more and more to the Holy Spirit through a deeper commitment of their lives to Jesus as Lord and to impart the Holy Spirit to one another by their love, service and sharing the good news of salvation. Thus it gives opportunities which will foster a desire to grow in holiness. A concrete expression to realise this objective of Magnificat, a Ministry to Catholic Women is to organise a meal call 'Magnificat Meal' as its fundamental task.

Magnificat encourages Catholic women to grow in holiness through daily personal prayer, knowing the love of God, the Father, commitment to Jesus Christ as Lord, experiencing the presence and power of the Holy Spirit and openness to his gifts, frequent participation in the sacraments of the Eucharist and reconciliation, daily reading of the Word of God, love for and loyalty to the

¹⁵ *Decree on Ecumenism*, 7.

¹⁶ *Constitution*, C-3.

Catholic Church as expressed through her teaching authority of the Pope and Bishops in communion with him, guiding in the matters of faith and morality¹⁷. 'The obedience of faith' functions in Mary, who agreeing to become the Mother of the Redeemer, subordinated her mind and heart to faith. Catholic women are to show sensitivity to the needs of the Church and readiness to meet them through spiritual and physical works of charity, deep love for and commitment to Mary as Mother and model of all Christians, and especially women. The women of Magnificat notice the value of the Christian vocation of woman, reverence for the sanctity of life from its conception to natural death, leading intercessory prayer and building unity according to the words from the *Letter to Ephesians* 4: 3, 'Do all you can to preserve the unity of the Spirit by the peace that binds you together'¹⁸.

7. Confessional openness in the Ministry to Catholic Women

In its foundation and practice Magnificat, A Ministry to Catholic Women is a private association of the faithful. Magnificat does not enjoy unlimited autonomy. It remains under the jurisdiction of the local ordinary. Membership in Magnificat is of a spiritual nature, conferred for life, and open to all women who strive to incorporate in their lives the purposes and objectives of Magnificat, agree to pray for Magnificat and its members. The spiritual nature of the membership means that the relationships between its members are not of a legal character and do not result from any oaths or promises, binding parties in the name of civil or ecclesiastical law. The membership in Magnificat is voluntary. Since membership is available to all women those who belong to other denominations and fulfil the above-mentioned conditions can also become members. This openness does not carry the danger that Magnificat abandons its Catholic objectives. But the women involved in the Board of Directors must be practising Catholics. Non-Catholics can attend Magnificat Meals, not becoming its members. Membership is granted after getting to know the objectives of Magnificat and filling an application form. Every chapter (local branch) is run by a service team, consisting of three to five women. The testimony of a guest invited for a Magnificat meeting should be as a rule given by a Catholic woman, which does not mean that the possibility of inviting a woman who belongs to any other Christian community should be excluded¹⁹.

¹⁷ JOHN PAUL II, «*Redemptoris Mater*», in: *Mary, God's yes to man: Pope John Paul II Encyclical letter, Mother of the redeemer*, San Francisco: Ignatius Press 1988, 13.

¹⁸ MAGNIFICAT CENTRAL SERVICE TEAM, *Magnificat Meal*, Metairie 1999, M-3.

¹⁹ *Constitution*, C-7 – C-13.

8. Magnificat Meal – essential expression of the ministry

The Magnificat Meal is an essential function of Magnificat. Like the Eucharist fulfils the central role in the Church, so does the meal in Magnificat. ‘The liturgy is the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed’²⁰. The Magnificat Meal is of paraliturgical character. It is something more than a social meeting. It is a method of service. One of the most important tasks is to preserve the mood of prayer during the meal. And at this point, one can see the soul of the ecumenical movement: atmosphere fostering the ‘change of heart and holiness of life’²¹. A local group must organise a Magnificat meal at least four times a year. It is an occasion to share one’s faith; it can be organised at a public or private place. These meals allow women to experience fellowship, conversation and to enjoy one another in an atmosphere of God’s presence and love. They are moments of communal praise, worship and intercessory prayer for the needs of the Church and of those present as well as personal testimony of one woman whose life has been dramatically impacted by God’s grace²².

Conclusion

The 1960s brought many challenges to our generations and for some they turned out to be the times of profound spiritual transformation. When the Second Vatican Council was about to close many hierarchs and faithful of the Catholic Church did not feel what kind of catalyst the activities of the Holy Spirit among the people of God would become. Magnificat, a Ministry to Catholic Women originated on the outline of the Charismatic Renewal, which has been a dialogical exchange of gifts in its whole history. Its purpose is to strengthen the ecclesiastical identity of its members and thus providing a perfect platform to initiate a change of life. The spiritual ecumenism that the Renewal realises can be called ‘the soul of the ecumenical movement.’ The change of heart and holiness of life have become experiences of numerous people who listened to the testimonies of witnesses in a favourable atmosphere. The Magnificat, a song of gratitude, sounds in many hearts since God makes great deeds in everyone’s life. The joy that accompanies the celebration following the pattern of the biblical women: Mary and Elizabeth renews faith of many participants of the Magnificat meetings. What is in the heart of the Church – concern for spiritual revival of women’s spirituality – is realised in Magnificat with high effect-

²⁰ *The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, in: *Vatican Council II*, ed. A. FLANNERY, Northport-New York 1984, 10.

²¹ *Decree on Ecumenism*, 8.

²² *Decree on Ecumenism*, 44.

iveness among young generations and among those who sometimes seem to think that it is too late for the fullness of joy in their lives. The words of Mary's song are fulfilled anew – all generations will call me blessed – since in a Magnificat Meal one can meet three generations of women: mothers, daughters and granddaughters.

Furthermore, in Magnificat, a Ministry to Catholic Women practical ecumenism is realised. This ministry is a school of ecumenism. It fulfils such tasks as deepening Christian faith, forming various environments and creating practical forms of ecumenical collaboration. It is with hope that one can look at the ecumenical perspectives of Magnificat, a Ministry of Catholic Women as 'a sign of the times'.

Ekumenizm w Posłudze Kobiet Katolickich «Magnificat»

Streszczenie

Artykuł niniejszy ma za zadanie ukazanie duchowości Posługi Kobiet Katolickich „Magnificat” jako duchowości ekumenicznej.

Międzynarodowa Posługa Kobiet Katolickich „Magnificat” powstała w Nowym Orleanie 7 października 1981 roku jako odpowiedź kobiet katolickich na zachętę do głębszego angażowania się w życie Kościoła. W swojej strukturze nigdy nie miała charakteru ekumenicznego. Śledząc jednak jej genezę, metodę działania i strukturę można śmiało stwierdzić, iż w swojej teologii i praktyce pastoralnej realizowała nauczanie Kościoła Katolickiego na temat ekumenizmu. Założenia posługi i ich realizacja z całą pewnością posiadają wiele elementów budujących jedność wśród chrześcijan. Już u samych źródeł posługi widzimy inspirację tekstem z Ewangelii św. Jana, w którym Jezus modli się do Ojca o jedność. Sobór Watykański II w *Dekrecie o ekumenizmie* uznaje, że „brak jedności jawnie sprzeciwia się woli Chrystusa, jest zgorzeleniem dla świata” (DE 1).

Kobiety zaangażowane w „Magnificat” pragną, aby spełniła się wola Jezusa wyrażona w modlitwie przed Jego męką. Jednocześnie uważają, że do jedności, o której mówi Jezus, najbardziej przyczynią się poprzez posługę przeznaczoną zasadniczo dla katoliczek.

Kobiety katolickie, w oparciu o solidny fundament wiary, będą mogły lepiej korzystać z dobrodziejstw, jakie niosą ze sobą wysiłki na rzecz ekumenizmu. Kościół Katolicki w dialogu ekumenicznym wielokrotnie mówi o budowaniu

naszej tożsamości. Jest ona podstawą do podjęcia działań w duchu ekumenicznym. Troska o wyznaniową czyli kościelną tożsamość idzie w parze z potrzebą służenia Ewangelii, współpracując z braćmi i siostrami z innych Kościołów i wspólnot chrześcijańskich.