



Fully human. People with profound intellectual disabilities in light of the teaching of the Catholic Church¹

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People with profound intellectual disability are fully human. Could any Catholic theologian dissent? Apparently not. However, as soon as we examine the notion of the humanity of people with intellectual disabilities more carefully from the point of view of Catholic doctrine, we find ourselves facing certain problems. It is not “whether” but “how” that seems perplexing. It is beyond any doubt that people with intellectual disabilities are human, but are they human in the very same way as us, intellectually able? And if so, how can this fact be explained taking account of the Church’s statement regarding the rational nature of human being², the rational human soul³, the personal responsibility of every human person, the

¹ This study has been developed under research project No. 2016/21/D/HS1/03402, financed by the National Science Centre.

² It is characteristic for the documents of the Magisterium, even fairly contemporary ones, to use the term „man” to denote the human person, yet the author otherwise uses contemporary inclusive language in this respect, except when providing direct quotes. As for references made to God, inclusive language is applied in this text only when the author’s own theses or propositions are presented, but not when official Church documents or opinions of other authors who do not use such language are analysed.

³ The teaching of the Magisterium frequently stresses rationality, and more precisely a “rational soul”, as an inherent part of human nature. See e.g. Second Vatican Council, *Pastoral constitution on the Church in the modern world “Gaudium et Spes”* (1965), nr 29 (hereinafter cited as *GS*).

inalienable freedom of every human being⁴, the capacity for either acknowledging or rejecting God, etc.⁵?

The Church is adamant as to the humanity of persons with intellectual disabilities, yet the claim has, in our opinion, so far been poorly argued and its defense poses many challenges. The teaching of the Catholic Church contains both statements that affirm the human status of persons with profound intellectual disabilities, as well as ones which in their view of the human person take no account of intellectually disabled people. Such statements seem not to include persons with profound intellectual disabilities in the set of human beings for their lack of certain characteristics or abilities typically attributed to the human person. But is this really the case that persons with intellectual disabilities are “incomplete” or “flawed” as human beings? Do they in fact not possess all the qualities and abilities constitutive for the human person invoked by the teaching of the Church? How can these two theses that are in apparent conflict with each other be reconciled: that people with intellectual disabilities are human persons and the statements identifying the essence of humanity as something that is beyond these people’s reach?

The paper sets out to address these questions. To begin with, we will briefly discuss the apparent internal conflict present within the teaching of the Catholic Church, which, whilst asserting the humanity of persons with intellectual disabilities, at the same time defines the essence of humanity through categories incongruous with the actual capacities and abilities of the persons in question. Next, we will attempt to discuss the possible ways of resolving the conflict, and propose a solution of our own. Before, however, arriving at a final conclusion of any sort, it will be necessary to seek the right hermeneutics to be applied when analysing the statements of the Magisterium, which this text draws heavily and primarily from.

We will also examine the Church’s existing verdicts concerning the situation of persons whose condition resembles that of people with intel-

⁴ The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches that “angels and men, as intelligent and free creatures, have to journey toward their ultimate destinies by their free choice”, *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1992), nr 311.

⁵ The Catechism of the Catholic Church (hereinafter cited as *Catechism*) opens by describing the existential situation of man, who was created with the “capacity for God” (*Capax Dei*), has desire for God, and searches for God (*Catechism*, nr 27-30). God reaches out to human being to satisfy this human yearning for God, and presents human being with an offer of love, one that human being responds to freely (*Catechism*, nr 50). For other statements concerning human freedom, see e.g. *GS*, nr 17: “Hence man’s dignity demands that he act according to a knowing and free choice that is personally motivated and prompted from within, not under blind internal impulse nor by mere external pressure”.

lectual disabilities. In particular, the statements regarding infants and fetuses (prenates) will be considered, as this is an issue that the Magisterium has frequently addressed, most significantly in relation to their redemption. In the view of the Catholic Church, infants and persons with profound disabilities share a certain affinity, as they (citing *Magisterium Ecclesiae*) “lack the use of reason”⁶.

This study endeavors to make a contribution to the development of a Catholic theology of disability, hence it is anchored in the teaching of the Catholic Church and its anthropology, whilst engaging with the achievements of disability theology, with the sources cited in the text chosen to adequately suit this purpose. The primary theoretical claim and practical goal of disability theology that underpins our entire analysis is the following: persons with intellectual disabilities are fully equal to intellectually or cognitively able persons. Such a statement is not merely an assumption made on ideological grounds, as it is substantiated by the faith of the Church (grounded in the Revelation of God) in the absolute equality of all people (Rom 2:11; Acts 10:34; Gal 3:28; GS 29)⁷.

We will also take as the basis for our considerations the understanding of disability assumed by disability theology. Leaving details aside, and without putting forward one binding thesis, we undertake to assume that disability is not invariably a result of sin, something unequivocally evil, but it can reflect God’s desire for diversity in people, or in a broader perspective, in all creation⁸. Admittedly, it is no easy feat to unequivocally determine what disability is in any given case: whether it is, indeed, evil as such, or if

⁶ The *Code of Canon Law* (1983) says thus: Can. 97 § 2. A minor before the completion of the seventh year is called an infant and is considered not responsible for oneself (*non sui compos*). With the completion of the seventh year, however, a minor is presumed to have the use of reason. Can. 99. Whoever habitually lacks the use of reason is considered not responsible for oneself (*non sui compos*) and is equated with infants.

⁷ Despite the fundamental equality of all people, there exists a certain inequality among them as regards the “powers of body and mind”, in other words a certain diversity, which we shall address shortly. See Leo XIII, *Encyclical on socialism “Quod Apostolici Muneris”* (1878), nr 5, 9.

⁸ Thomas E. Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2008), 59-63, 160-161; Myroslaw Tataryn, Maria Truchan-Tataryn, *Discovering Trinity in Disability: A Theology for Embracing Difference* (New York: Orbis Books, 2013), 10, 14, 27-29; Amos Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome: Reimagining Disability in Late Modernity* (Waco: Baylor University, 2007), 181-182. See also World Council of Churches, *Christian Perspectives on Theological Anthropology. A Faith and Order Study Document* (2005), nr 39-52.

it is society that perceives or even construes it thus. This is due to the fact, that as beings living by, immersed in and used to sin, we find it difficult to see it clearly along with its consequences, i.e. suffering. It is only the Holy Spirit that can make us aware of sin, convict the world of sin (John 16:8)⁹. We commonly see evil or suffering where none is to be found, whilst failing to recognize it where it is in fact present.

On the other hand, we would like to avoid an approach which would assume that disability is never objectively evil or a cause of suffering. It seems that such a way of thinking is derived from a certain kind of resentment in the approach to disability: we do not wish to admit that by being disabled we miss out on anything important, as we do not wish to be overwhelmed by a sense of loss and suffering¹⁰.

Many theologians of disability, interpreting Christian tradition or the Church's teaching as oppressive for people with intellectual disabilities, set out to "start from scratch" and formulate an entirely new anthropological paradigm that would be truly inclusive by not placing people with intellectual disabilities outside the core of humanity. Elizabeth L. Antus¹¹ discusses two divergent types of anthropology employed in disability theology: one of them enfolds people with disabilities into a pre-existing anthropology, whilst the other looks first at the lives of such persons, and seeks to accommodate their experience. Antus herself is a proponent of the latter option, claiming that by trying to "fit" disabled people into the pre-existing "definition of humanity" we arrive at the conclusion that "even people with disabilities can *still* be considered fully human"¹².

This text, however, firmly endorses the former of the two options, embracing the already existing anthropological view proposed by the Catholic Church. It is, nonetheless, our belief and hope, that we will be able to further our project beyond the above-stated conclusion, by finding a new vision of people with profound intellectual disabilities that would be in keeping with the Church's teaching about the human person, whilst exposing their true humanity. Thus, the method adopted for the purpose of this study will

⁹ See Raniero Cantalamessa, *La vita in Cristo. Il messaggio spirituale della Lettera ai Romani* (Milano: Ancora, 1997), 29.

¹⁰ Resentment is well illustrated by Aesop's fable of the fox and sour grapes. The fox could not reach a bunch of grapes, therefore it reassured itself by deciding grapes were sour anyway and thus not worth gaping for. Frederic Nietzsche was the first to introduce the concept of resentment into philosophy.

¹¹ Elizabeth L. Antus, "Disability at the Heart of Theology: On Marginality, Method, and Overcoming »Best-Case Anthropologies«", *Journal of Religion, Disability & Health* 17, nr 3 (2013): 244-262.

¹² *Ibidem*, 253.

involve the application of the binding teaching about human being onto persons with intellectual disabilities, to which end we will inevitably engage in certain reinterpretation of the pertinent Church doctrine. The notions of human rationality and freedom in particular will require adequate attention, as according to the teachings of the Catholic Church these are the two key characteristics that distinctively set human persons apart from the rest of the visible creation.

Based on what has been pointed out so far, it is clear for a careful reader by now that the study draws from an anthropology bearing certain essentialist traits. This is primarily due to the fact that the Church assumes, based on what is given by Revelation¹³, an essentialist anthropology to a certain extent, describing who the human person is, what characteristics they have and what their nature is.

Secondly, in our view all anthropologies that by definition reject any essentialist element, are inevitably doomed to some form of essentialism anyway. Let us offer just one example in the field of disability theology. In her book, a project in inclusive anthropology, aiming not to exclude persons with profound intellectual disabilities, Molly Haslam postulates that human being should be defined not through the primacy of reason (defined as their intellectual faculties, capacity for language communication, etc.), but through their capacity for relationships. In Haslam's view, human being is essentially a being that partakes in relationships, i.e. is a subject actively engaging in relationships of mutual responsiveness (not necessarily in a verbal way) with another subject. The author refuses to define the human person through the abilities they possess, including the ability to employ concepts or make free choices¹⁴. Haslam herself, however, admits towards the end of her work that even her own concept is essentialist to a certain degree, as it assumes a certain capacity for responsiveness found in the human being¹⁵.

Moreover, this study will not be primarily concerned with results of empirical studies, which will only be used as accessory sources¹⁶. It is our

¹³ Even though the Scripture (the Old and the New Testament) does not describe and develop any given anthropology /notion of the human person, by making the dialogue between God and the human person that is narrated in the Bible possible, it assumes one. Adolphe Gesché, *Człowiek*, tłum. Agnieszka Kuryś (Poznań: W drodze, 2005), 64.

¹⁴ Molly C. Haslam, *A Constructive Theology of Intellectual Disability. Human Being as Mutuality and Response* (New York: Fordham University, 2012), 53.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, 110.

¹⁶ For the role of qualitative studies in theology of disability, see an excellent chapter in Jill Harshaw's book, *God Beyond Words: Christian Theology and*

position that it is what faith teaches us that should be the ultimate criterion applied for the evaluation of the achievements of positive sciences, not the other way round, and that, in a sense, Revelation supplements scientific findings, providing answers to questions that remain unanswered by reason¹⁷. Nonetheless, results of positive sciences must be employed to validate theological statements, and to facilitate mutual communication between empirical studies and theology¹⁸.

It is also necessary to define more accurately the term used in the paper's title, i.e. "persons with profound intellectual disabilities". Even though, as theoreticians of disability rush to point out, any classification is inevitably oppressive for people with intellectual disabilities, it is nonetheless necessary to ensure accurate communication¹⁹. Profound intellectual disability is classified as an IQ score, measured with Weschler Adult Intelligence Scale (WAIS), below 20, equal to that of a 3 year old. In very extreme situations, profound intellectual disability means life in a persistent vegetative state²⁰. It is humanity from this perspective that this paper undertakes to investigate.

1. A collision of two truths: the Church's teaching regarding people with intellectual disabilities vs teaching regarding the human person

It has been since the pontificate of John Paul II that the Magisterium of the Catholic Church has increasingly often spoken out regarding persons with intellectual disabilities. It has often done so to defend their inalienable right to live, thus defending their status as human persons. At other times, it has directly asserted the truth of their human condition. Numerous statements describing people with intellectual disabilities as equal to

the Spiritual Experiences of People with Profound Intellectual Disabilities (London-Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley, 2016), 52-84.

¹⁷ Edith Stein, *Was ist der Mensch?* Theologische Anthropologie 5, dośpę 24 kwietnia, 2017, http://www.edith-stein-archiv.de/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/15_EdithSteinGesamtausgabe_WasIstDerMensch.pdf.

¹⁸ See Henryk Seweryniak, „Wprowadzenie”, w: Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Człowiek, wolność, Bóg*, tłum. Grzegorz Sowiński (Kraków: Znak, 1995), 14-15.

¹⁹ C.f. Harshaw, *God Beyond Words*, 16; Daniel W. Blair, “Christian Theology and Human Disability: A Literature Review”, *Journal of Religion, Disability & Health* 7, nr 3 (2003): 71; Tabita Kartika Christiani, “Doing Theology: Towards the Construction of Methods for Living with Disability,” *Asia Journal of Theology* 28, nr 1 (2014): 37.

²⁰ Marcin Garbat, *Historia niepełnosprawności. Geneza i rozwój rehabilitacji, pomocy technicznych oraz wsparcia osób z niepełnosprawnościami* (Gdynia: Novae Res, 2015), 125.

persons fully intellectually able can be found in papal documents. Thus, we read that e.g. “the disabled are not different from other people”²¹ or that „even when disabled persons are mentally impaired or when their sensory or intellectual capacity is damaged, they are fully human beings and possess the sacred and inalienable rights that belong to every human creature” (DR 2)²².

A very interesting paradigm found in Church documents is disability perceived in light of human diversity. Disability is not referred to as some kind of a deficiency or defect lessening a given individual’s worth, but as one of the qualities contributing to the person’s unique identity: “the diversity that is due to a person’s disability can be integrated into his respective unique individuality” (DR 4).

On the other hand, some Church documents contain somewhat disconcerting statements that seem ambivalent as to whether people with intellectual disability are in fact endowed with the fullness of humanity. A particularly alarming example is an instance where one of the documents mentions “the wounded humanity of the disabled” (DR 2), as if implying that the humanity of a person with an intellectual disability is not intact, but in some way “compromised”.

The challenge in the understanding of the fullness of the humanity of people whose intellectual or cognitive faculties are impaired begins when issues related to the *imago Dei* are at stake. The following statement can be found in the teaching of John Paul II concerning the *imago Dei*: “Philosophical and theological reflection has identified in man’s mental faculties, that is, in his reason and in his will, a privileged sign of this affinity with God”²³. The pope, however, assures us that even though mental faculties testify to the spiritual nature of the human being, even when they are severely limited

²¹ John Paul II, *Message on the occasion of the International Symposium on the Dignity and Rights of the Mentally Disabled Person* (2004), nr 3 (hereinafter referred to as *DR*).

²² See also: *Document of the Holy See for the International Year of Disabled Persons* (Boston: St. Paul Editions, 1981), 4.

²³ See John Paul II, *Mentally Ill Are Also Made In God’s Image* (1996), nr 2 (hereinafter cited as *GI*).

Even though intellectual disability and mental illness are two completely distinct realities, the common characteristic they share are the limited mental faculties that occur in both conditions (even though in the case of the latter this may not be continual). Moreover, mental illness, even when not associated with a concomitant intellectual disability, may lead to a disability. See Tracy A. Demmons, “Tacit and Tactile Knowledge of God: Toward a Theology of Revelation for Persons with Intellectual Disabilities”, *Journal of Religion, Disability & Health* 11, nr 4 (2008): 7.

or impeded in a given human person, this human person is still a human person (*GI 2*). It could be asked, therefore, what makes the human beings who they are, if their very substance, that which is most specific for them as the human being, and renders them similar to God is limited or not present at all, as is the case for people with profound intellectual disabilities? What makes the human person, despite any mental defects, an image of God, and as thus endowed with a unique dignity (“dignity beyond compare”)?

John Paul II attempts to resolve this issue in the following way: „It should be made clear however that the whole man, not just his spiritual soul, including his intelligence and free will, but also his body shares in the dignity of ‘the image of God’” (*GI 3*). The contemporary sensitivity, which holds the bodily aspect of humanity so crucial, can hardly find such words surprising. On the contrary, they sound very logical. However, the next question to be asked is: why is it the human body that shares in the dignity of God’s image, whilst, for instance, animal bodies do not? The Magisterium is prompt to explain: because it is animated by a spiritual soul (*GI 3*)²⁴, hence God’s image resides also in the human body. It is the human soul that lends the human bodily existence the unique worth and dignity of God’s image.

Thus, the human body has its great dignity because it is united with the spiritual soul (which is rational and free), yet even when the soul lacks its natural capacity, in no way does the human person become less worthy. What, then, allows the human person to remain the human person under such circumstances?

In its line of reasoning, the Magisterium invokes the traditional solutions drawing from the classical metaphysics which distinguishes actuality (referring to that which actually occurs or happens in a given being) from potentiality (that which is possible for a given being). Justifying the dignity of a conceived child, the Church, also equipped with the contemporary knowledge concerning the human genome, talks of the potential present in the human embryo. *Evangelium Vitae* says: “From the time that the ovum is fertilized, a life is begun which is neither that of the father nor the mother; it is rather the life of a new human being with his own growth. It would never be made human if it were not human already. This has always been clear, and (...) modern genetic science offers clear confirmation. It has demonstrated that from the first instant there is established the programme of what this

²⁴ See John Paul II, *Address to the Members of the Pontifical Academy for Life* (1998), nr 4. John Paul II states that “by virtue of the substantial unity of body and spirit, the human genome not only has a biological significance, but also possesses anthropological dignity, which has its basis in the spiritual soul that pervades it and gives it life”.

living being will be: a person, this individual person with his characteristic aspects already well determined. Right from fertilization the adventure of a human life begins, and each of its capacities requires time—a rather lengthy time—to find its place and to be in a position to act²⁵.

The same document features a quote from Tertullian: “He who will one day be a man is a man already” (*EV* 61) as contributive to the line of thinking concluding that the embryo’s dignity rests in its potential to become fully human.

The same principle is applied to people with intellectual disabilities, stating that they are human persons, even though their potential has not been actualized²⁶. According to this logic, it is not using (for instance) reason, but “having” it that makes us human²⁷. Based on classical metaphysics, Thomas Aquinas claimed that human nature does not have to be manifested in the same way in all individuals of the species, hence even when someone does not use reason, they still belong to humankind by virtue of being born of human parentage²⁸. Rationality is not a quality singular for a given individual only, but for human nature as such²⁹. Therefore, in the case of a human being in their prenatal stage of development, a newborn, a person with a profound intellectual disability, or one in a vegetative state, their individual human nature is also rational, even though their rationality may remain potential, without becoming actual³⁰.

The following question arises: if a person does not act like a human being, can he/she be presumed to be one? According to Hans Reinders, the Church gives an affirmative answer to that question by teaching the primacy of a person over his/her acts: a person preexists their acts, it is not acts that “create” a person. Thus, it is possible that a person’s capacities or potentialities are not manifested, which does not render them nonexistent.

²⁵ Id, *Encyclical Letter “Evangelium vitae”* (1995), nr 60 (hereafter cited in text as *EV*).

²⁶ Hans S. Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship. Profound Disability, Theological Anthropology, and Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2008), 94.

²⁷ Rafał Dettlaff, „O godności ludzi z upośledzeniem umysłowym w nauczaniu Jana Pawła II”, *Studia Gdańskie*, nr 14 (2001): 303.

²⁸ Miguel J. Romero, “Aquinas on the *corporis infirmitas*: Broken Flesh and the Grammar of Grace”, w: *Disability in the Christian Tradition. A Reader*, red Brian Brock, John Swinton (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2012), 104.

²⁹ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 29, a.1, accessed April 24, 2017, www.sacred-texts.com/chr/aquinas/summa/.

³⁰ See Czesław Bartnik, *Personalizm* (Lublin: KUL, 2000), 86; Gerard Dogiel, *Metafizyka* (Kraków: Instytut Teologiczny Księży Misjonarzy, 1990), 119-120.

When something is not apparent, it does not mean it does not exist³¹. How can we, however, recognize a person for a person, if he/she does not act like one? Here, we reach a point, where it is necessary to make an *a priori* assumption. The Church states that one is human, i.e. a human person, by being born of human parentage (the Magisterium does not draw a distinction between a human being and a human person), hence they potentially have human capabilities³².

The consequence of stating that capabilities such as reason and free will are not developed in a given person is the belief that they are not able to make a decision concerning their salvation³³. Some argue, therefore, the privileged situation of such people: as they are not able to act in a way diminishing their dignity, they are bound to attain salvation³⁴.

However, it is hard to resist the impression that in practice people with an “undeveloped potential” are no different from creatures that do not have this potential at all. How is such a person different from other creatures that lack the use of reason? After all, in practice a person who lacks the use of reason (which he/she has) and an animal which lacks the use of reason (which it does not have) share the same predicament: one of lacking the use of reason.

Moreover, even if the above-discussed line of reasoning, according to which they “have, but lack the use of” reason, is an attempt at defending the humanity of persons with intellectual disabilities, it does not prevent such humanity from appearing wounded, incomplete, imperfect, or inferior in some way. After all, according to classical metaphysics act is invariably superior to potency, which is resoundingly reflected by referring to God as pure act (*actus purus*). Even though persons with intellectual disabilities may be included as human, they remain at the margins of humanity.

2. Fetuses and infants in the teaching of the Magisterium

Infants and fetuses (prenates), according to the Magisterium, share a common fate with people with intellectual disabilities. As mentioned above, this notion primarily relies on the fact that they lack the use of reason. However, the difference between persons with profound intellectual disabilities and children and prenatates is that the latter lack the use of reason, it could be argued, temporarily. Infants and prenatates need time for their potential to use reason to develop. Frequently, it is based on this premise that

³¹ Reinders, *Receiving the gift of friendship*, 104-106.

³² Ibidem, 95.

³³ Ibidem, 97.

³⁴ Dettlaff, *O godności ludzi z upośledzeniem umysłowym*, 303; Reinders, *Receiving the gift of friendship*, 231

their humanity is argued, as previously pointed out in this text. In the case of persons with intellectual disabilities, the traditional approach to their situation has been to say that their potential cannot be actualized, because something “went wrong”.

Nevertheless, the situation of a prelate and a person with a profound intellectual disability at a given point in time shares a considerable affinity. In reality, both of them, according to the Magisterium, lack the use of their own reason³⁵. Also theologians, including disability theologians, commonly associate the condition of persons with profound intellectual disabilities with that of prelates or infants³⁶. The fact that infants and prelates lack the use of reason has for centuries fuelled the debate over the fate of children who die without Baptism. As it is impossible to discuss the history of this problem at length here, we will only outline the crucial arguments employed in this centuries-old debate.

The prime, traditional theological arguments (hence we are excluding here arguments from the Church’s tradition) supporting the thesis of non-salvation of unbaptized infants are: the state of original sin which they are in and from which they could not be freed by the sacrament of Baptism, and the impossibility of accepting grace by a free act of will, which may be the case for unbaptized adults who have nonetheless in some way responded to God’s calling. The major arguments for salvation of unbaptized children include: the universal salvific will of God and the lack of any personal sin on the part of the child.

This “balance” of arguments has prompted the greatest thinkers of Christianity, most remarkably St. Thomas, to propose the existence of the Limbo of Children (*limbus pueorum*), a place where such children would not suffer due to the original sin which they are not guilty of or the lack of Baptism, whilst not enjoying the glory of heaven either due to the lack of virtue or at least a free desire to see God.

Thus, if we reject the possibility of a personal decision made by unbaptized children who have no capacity for using reason, and thereby free will, their salvation is entirely contingent on factors which they have no control over, particularly the inherited original sin. It seems to be the same

³⁵ For instance, the Church states that children are baptized in the faith of the Church, and similarly intellectually disabled people (mentally handicapped) may receive the Eucharist in the faith of the Church. See Benedict XVI, *Post-synodal apostolic exhortation “Sacramentum caritatis”* (2007), nr 58.

³⁶ Haslam, *A Constructive Theology of Intellectual Disability*, 17; Harshaw, *God Beyond Words*, 102; Antoni Bartoszek, „Sakrament namaszczenia chorych a dzieci, które nie osiągnęły używania rozumu, oraz osoby od urodzenia upośledzone umysłowo”, *Studia Pastoralne*, nr 6 (2010): 168-182.

for a child who is baptized below the age of using reason – he or she depends entirely on someone else’s decision, only in this given situation it results with attaining salvation. This is exactly how *Benedictus Deus*, a bull pope Benedict XII promulgated in 1336, describes it. The document states that immediately upon their death, yet prior to final resurrection and judgment, the souls of baptized children who die prior to having “the use of free will” go to Heaven. As the bull is one of the decrees of the Magisterium considered the highest authority, it seems that the statement regarding the automatic salvation of baptized children, and thereby also persons with profound intellectual disability, is irrevocable. This, in turn, amounts to stating that they are not capable of making personal decisions regarding their salvation. However, is this indeed the case?

3. Hermeneutics of dogma

A dogma, like every other text is subject to interpretation. A dogmatic formula which carries the message of Divine Revelation is “merely” a text which requires interpretation, just as Sacred Scripture does. It seems, however, that the principles applied to the interpretation of dogmas have not been as thoroughly thought out and meticulously developed as the principles of Biblical hermeneutics. Dogma continues to be perceived as a static, immutable language formula rather than a reflection of a deepening understanding of the Revelation.

In his masterpiece *The Survival of Dogma*³⁷, Avery Dulles lists a number of principles necessary for the interpretation of dogma, two of which seem particularly relevant for a sound interpretation of the above-mentioned papal bull (*Benedictus Deus*). Specifically, it is crucial to identify (1) the question addressed by a given decree³⁸, as the answer is irrevocable and constitutes the core of a dogma, and (2) the historical world vision of a given decree impacting its shape³⁹.

Also, we venture to propose yet another principle. Even though not directly included in Dulles’ catalogue of principles governing the hermeneutics of dogma, it is consistent with his line of reasoning, and is, in fact, the common denominator of all the detailed principles he postulates⁴⁰. Namely, it involves applying the readily acknowledged principles of Biblical interpretation to the interpretation of dogmatic statements. Since dogma, sim-

³⁷ Avery Dulles, *The Survival of Dogma. Faith, Authority, and Dogma in a Changing World* (New York: Crossroad, 1982).

³⁸ Ibidem, 179-180.

³⁹ Ibidem, 176-177.

⁴⁰ Ibidem, 175-184.

ilarly to the Bible, flows from Revelation, and accommodates Revelation, the method of interpreting dogma should not differ from that used for the exegesis of the Bible. In both cases, it comes down to separating the truth of Revelation from its human expression and any distortion⁴¹. It is essential to remember that unlike dogma, Sacred Scripture is divinely inspired, hence its absolute primacy, and the fact that the Bible is referred to as the “soul of theology”. On the other hand, one might venture to say that if historical and critical methods are applied to the exegesis of the Bible, no ambivalence should remain as to whether this is a legitimate approach in respect of dogma.

Let us now examine the above principles in the context of interpreting *Benedictus Deus* bull. First, it must be stressed that the primary purpose of this decree was to dogmatize the teaching concerning the intermediate state⁴². Hence, the purpose of the decree was to confirm the faith in the soul's existence prior to the final resurrection, in which state the soul already experiences eternal reward in Heaven, punishment in Hell, or temporary purification in the Purgatory. The aim of this document was not to address the salvation of children (or, in broader terms, people lacking the use of reason) who die baptized. The bull lists the categories of people qualifying after death for each of the states, yet this remains outside its primary purpose. Also, it should be noted that considering the contemporary teaching of the Church, the category of persons attaining salvation would need to be extended to include those who are not baptized, yet live in accordance with their own consciences⁴³. It seems, therefore, that the catalogue of the categories of people redeemed or condemned does not necessarily belong to the very core of the dogma.

Let us now try to address the world vision assumed by the dogma. In our case, the question to be asked is how young children and prelates were then perceived. To be certain, in the Middle Ages and also in later times, the attitude to children was quite indifferent or detached. The death of a child was not even customarily recorded in family annals or chronicles. People were not overly concerned with their children's death, who were soon replaced by new offspring⁴⁴. It seems that children and childhood were not awarded much attention, nor were a subject of thorough studies or reflection, hence the difficulty of determining how the human faculties of

⁴¹ Ibidem, 160.

⁴² Cezary Naumowicz, „Konstytucja Benedykta XII *Benedictus Deus*. Próba nowego spojrzenia na kontrowersję”, *Teologia w Polsce* 4, nr 1(2010): 109-123.

⁴³ See Second Vatican Council, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church “Lumen Gentium”* (1964), nr 16.

⁴⁴ Philippe Ariès, *Historia dzieciństwa* (Warszawa: Aletheia, 2010), 6, 11.

young children and fetuses were then perceived. This lack of interest, however, seems to demonstrate that young children were seen more as pleasant little creatures rather than human persons⁴⁵. Moreover, Thomas Aquinas, the greatest thinker of the medieval times, considered the human fetus to be animated by a succession of souls, first a plant, than an animal, and finally a human⁴⁶. These two examples alone make the difference between how infants and prenates were perceived then and now striking.

As far as prenates are concerned, there has been a tremendous shift in our awareness supported by scientific evidence. Currently, an entirely different attitude can be observed to children before birth: a fetus is no longer perceived as a senseless, unresponsive cluster of cells or bundle of tissue who is not to be bothered about, or who may undergo medical procedures without anesthesia. A prenatal child has come to be rightly seen for the human being that he/she is, who responds to environmental stimuli, learns, remembers, feels, and is able to communicate (!). Contemporary psychology and prenatal pedagogy teaches us that from the moment of their conception prenatal children live a rich life in different aspects of their humanity⁴⁷.

Also the attitude to somewhat older children has evolved. From the contemporary perspective, the death of a child is one of the most traumatic experiences known to humans. Children are appreciated, and our understanding of childhood is steadily growing. The Church is also moving towards a better understanding of children's spirituality, now allowing the idea of sainthood attained at a very young age, one that was impermissible for the medieval mentality and sensitivity. The progress in this area is well illustrated by the story of Antonietta Meo, a girl who died in 1937 before attaining the age of 7 years old, and who currently is a candidate for the Church's youngest saint up to date. Her beatification process was initiated in 1942, but terminated in 1972, as at the time the Church did not permit the beatification of children who were not martyrs. However, in 1981 the Congregation for the Causes of Saints lifted that informal ban, and the pope Benedict XVI signed a decree praising the heroic virtues of the young Antonietta on 8 December, 2007.

Hence, does not *Benedictus Deus* bull assuming the lack of use of reason (equivalent with the lack of use of free will) in children up to a certain age, simply reflect the scientific view of their faculties available at that time in history? At present, we live in an entirely different scientific par-

⁴⁵ Ibidem, 6.

⁴⁶ Reinders, *Receiving the gift of friendship*, 111, 114.

⁴⁷ David B. Chamberlain, "Babies are not what we thought: Call for a new paradigm", *International Journal of Prenatal and Perinatal Studies*, nr 4 (1992): 161-177.

adigm, according to which prenatals, neonates and babies already live an abundant life, communicating, feeling, remembering. To reiterate, it may be presumed that *Benedictus Deus* bull does not exhaust the discussion over the predicament and abilities of people “lacking the use of reason”, as 1) addressing that particular question was not its prime purpose, 2) it was rooted in a world view that has been much amended since the document’s times.

Let us now examine the decree from yet another angle. Considering the entire body of the Church’s teaching, it can be seen that, as pointed out before, two incompatible categories of statements concerning this matter seem to exist. On the one hand, it is said (or clearly assumed) that every person is rational and free, and thus each and every one of us makes a personal decision regarding his/her salvation. Since people with intellectual disabilities, infants and prenatals are human, it entails that they are also equipped with that rationality, freedom and ability to choose. On the other hand, there are documents claiming automatic salvation of baptized children (*Benedictus Deus*) and condemnation of unbaptized ones, or statements attributing the ability to use reason and free will only to people over a certain age.

Is it then possible to find any way out of this impasse? There are various statements of the Magisterium at stake, some refuting children’s ability to use reason and free will (hence the same must apply to people with profound intellectual disabilities), and other claiming all people, including those with intellectual disabilities and infants, to be free. Let us then try to apply the same methodology as in the case of Sacred Scripture, where contradictory traditions are also encountered. Biblical statements concerning women may serve as a prime example, as some of them emphasize the inferior role or even nature of women (e.g. 1 Tim. 2:13-14 or 1 Cor. 11:7-10), whilst other pronounce them equal to men (e.g. Gal. 3:28). Feminist hermeneutics has addressed this dilemma and arrived at certain solutions. Feminist theologians have come to propose that the tradition holding woman inferior to man was informed by the culture of the times, not God’s will. Thus, some of the statements have been recognized as “the word of God”, whilst other – as “the word of man”, refuting one of the traditions and acknowledging the other⁴⁸.

We postulate a similar approach to the conflicting statements of the Magisterium. It seems justified to refute the ones denying that prenatals and intellectually disabled people have the ability to make personal decisions concerning their salvation, as an expression of the mentality of the times

⁴⁸ C.f. Anna Maliszewska, „Hermeneutyka feministyczna w interpretacji Pisma Świętego. Wprowadzenie do zagadnienia”, w: *Historia – Interpretacja – Reprezentacja*, red. Monika Żmudzka-Brodnicka i in. (Gdańsk: Athenae Gedanenses, 2012), 213-214.

these opinions were formulated in. We should acknowledge, in turn, the tradition emphasizing the rationality and freedom of man, with no exceptions being made (i.e. referring it also to people with intellectual disabilities, prenatals and infants).

4. How to resolve the conflict

Before we proceed to a more detailed discussion of the thesis we propose, let us take a brief account of other options of resolving the contradiction identified as “all human beings are rational and free, yet persons with intellectual disabilities, even though they are human, are not rational and free”.

As pointed out above, the first possibility is to assume people with intellectual disabilities as only “theoretically”, i.e. potentially rational and free. It could be argued, then, that they have reason and free will, yet cannot use them. We have already remarked, however, that such a solution seems to contradict the full humanity of such persons. Moreover, being associated with the claim of automatic salvation of (baptized⁴⁹) persons “lacking the use of reason”, this solution reduces these people to the level of animals, which will be saved in a way that is not related to their will⁵⁰.

Naturally, it is possible to outline the difference between the salvation of human beings and animals. People are destined to partake in the Divine nature, i.e. come to a deeper union with God (divinization⁵¹) than the rest of the visible world. On the other hand, we might venture to ask: does the possibility of such union with God not result from the freedom of entering this relationship? It is definitely possible to specify more differences between the salvation of animals and people “lacking the use of reason”. For instance, we may not know if each given member of the “dog” species is to be saved, or only some, while others will perish irretrievably, yet it

⁴⁹ Some authors are convinced of automatic salvation of unbaptized people who lack the use of reason, arguing that they are incapable of committing personal sin.

⁵⁰ Our text assumes the uniqueness of the human being compared with the rest of the creation (*Catechism*, nr 342, 343, 356), hence our lack of acceptance of various anthropologies that perceive the human person as absolutely equal to other creatures. This does not mean that we are denying the need for solidarity with all creation (*Catechism*, nr 344). The focus of this text, however, is to seek out differences, not emphasize similarities among creation, hence it might create the wrong impression of denying the solidarity with other creatures.

⁵¹ “Created in a state of holiness, man was destined to be fully »divinized« by God in glory”, *Catechism*, nr 398; c.f. *ibidem*, nr 1129, 1988.

cannot be overlooked that all universe will be saved “without its permission” just like people “lacking the use of reason”, at least according to the proponents of this particular view.

Another, radical solution would be to question the teaching and tradition concerning the rationality and freedom of the human being. Such an approach, however, seems completely misguided, as it contradicts the crucial point of Christian anthropology, one that highlights the uniqueness of human person compared with all other creatures. Some theologians of disability who are inclined in this direction try to depreciate the significance of human rationality. This maneuver, however, by undermining the role of human rationality and freedom leaves us in a blind alley, as such an approach would render human beings no different to other creatures⁵². The major problem appears to be that theologians in fact confuse human rationality with intelligence, ability to process information, or mental acuity. Thus, it is essential to identify what human rationality and freedom precisely stand for, a task we will shortly attempt.

Other theologians seek to solve the problem concerning the lack of the decision-making capacity in regards to one’s own salvation in persons “lacking the use of reason” by speculating their ability after death. According to this theory, since the ability for choosing salvation is denied to such persons while they are alive, God will surely endow them with it after death. It is when they will “mature”, their cognitive deficiencies will be eliminated, and their limitations overcome⁵³. The theory should, however, be refuted for several reasons. First, the Church believes that human beings choose either salvation or condemnation in the course of earthly life. Second, if we were to accept that this way of making the choice concerning one’s salvation is some exception from a general rule, it would imply that the humanity of persons with intellectual disabilities or children is somehow damaged or incomplete, as they are “exceptional” cases of humanity.

It could be asked, however: why would God need to postpone endowing persons “lacking the use of reason” with the possibility of choice until after their death? Is the almighty God powerless when confronted with their disability? Can God not act despite or beyond disability, speak to the person’s heart, beckon them towards Himself/Herself to receive an answer given freely, a genuinely human “yes” or “no”?

⁵² Compare the proposal Haslam put forward in *A constructive theology of intellectual disability*, 114, 115.

⁵³ Marta Ficoń, *Od piekła do nadziei zbawienia. Rozwój kwestii zbawienia dzieci zmarłych bez chrztu świętego w teologii katolickiej i jej egzystencjalna doniosłość* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UPJPII, 2012), 59.

Another avenue to pursue for the interpretation of the decrees of the Magisterium concerning human being is the following. What the Church teaches as regards the rationality and freedom of human persons could only be referred to adult, fully intellectually able representatives of the human kind. It might be argued that this was the intention of those who made the pertinent statements. By doing so, however, we would necessitate the existence of a double anthropology, generating subsequent problems.

5. A person with an intellectual disability as a rational and free subject⁵⁴

Now, let us consider a thesis saying that, as startling as it may initially seem, persons with profound intellectual disabilities, just like all other people, regardless of their stage of development and condition, are rational and free, i.e. have the use of reason and free will. Such a statement follows from logical reasoning based on two premises assumed in the Church's teaching: 1) people are rational and free, 2) persons with intellectual disabilities are fully human. It must be stated very accurately, at this point, how, in line with the Church's teaching, the notions of human rationality and freedom are to be conceived.

Rationality means the ability to come to know God⁵⁵. It is, then, not concerned with cognition or understanding the world, as animals also learn and know the world in their own right or ways, hence rationality thus understood would be nothing that would set human being apart from the rest of God's creation⁵⁶. Nor should rationality be confused with intelligence, as animals are also intelligent, and their IQ often surpasses a given person's IQ. This way of understanding human rationality is consistent with the view that Thomas Aquinas had, or, rather, did not have. Rationality was for Thomas a broad term used to differentiate us from animals, not synonymous with intelligence or cognitive capacity⁵⁷.

⁵⁴ Admittedly, the great emphasis placed on human freedom is distinctly anchored within the contemporary mentality. As the Magisterium seems to assume a favorable approach towards this appreciation of human freedom (*GS* nr 4, 17), we are taking the liberty of following suit in this study, trusting the contemporary appreciation of free will to be inspired by the Holy Spirit guiding the Church, not just a blind alley in the history of human thought.

⁵⁵ As John Paul II put it, reason and will are abilities that "enable man to know the Lord and to establish a relationship of dialogue with Him" (*GI*, nr 2).

⁵⁶ "Of all visible creatures only man is »able to know and love his maker«" (*Catechism*, nr 356).

⁵⁷ Romero, „Aquinas on the *corporis infirmitas*”, 105.

Freedom, in turn, stands for having the freedom in choosing God. It means that there is free will in every human being, not determined by anything external, capable of accepting or refusing God's offer of love (charity). The freedom means the freedom to realize man's supreme calling, that is the calling to love: to be loved and to love. Without freedom, true love may never exist. Human freedom is primarily realized in relation to God⁵⁸, in the fact that the human being may love their Maker.

We take rationality (the ability to come to know God) and freedom (the ability to freely respond to God's love) to be the key characteristics of humanity according to the teaching of the Catholic Church. It is a common feature in the Church's teaching to commence any description of who the human being is by defining him as capable of knowing and loving their Maker. It must be pointed out, however, that another common and important theme is human dominion over all creation⁵⁹. This theme, particularly in relation to people with profound intellectual disabilities, warrants a broader discussion, which, however, is impossible within the confines of this text.

Can we find arguments in the wealth of the tradition of the Church that would support the thesis that profoundly disabled people (and all other people "lacking the use of reason") in fact use their rationality and freedom? *The Hope of Salvation for Infants who Die Without Being Baptised*, a document issued by the International Theological Commission, even though the text navigates the paradigm of the lack of freedom of infants and prelates, nonetheless seems to open an avenue for pondering the possibility of some personal decision on the part of the child. The following statement can be found in footnote 127 in regard of the document's item 94: "With regard to the possibility of a *votum* on the part of the infant, growth towards freewill might perhaps be imagined as a continuum which unfolds towards maturity from the first moment of existence, rather than there being a sudden qualitative jump to the exercise of mature, responsible decision. The existence of the unborn is a continuum of human life and growth; it does not suddenly become human at some point. Consequently, infants may actually be capable of exercising some kind of rudimentary *votum* by analogy with that of unbaptised adults. Some theologians have understood the mother's smile to mediate the love of God to the infant, and have therefore seen the infant's response to that smile as a response to God himself. Some modern

⁵⁸ Luis F. Ladaria, *Introduzione alla antropologia teologica* (Rome: Gregorian & Biblical Press, 2011), 82-83.

⁵⁹ See *GS*, nr 12: "For Sacred Scripture teaches that man was created »to the image of God«, is capable of knowing and loving his Creator, and was appointed by Him as master of all earthly creatures that he might subdue them and use them to God's glory."

psychologists and neurologists are convinced that the infant in the womb is already in some way conscious and has some use of freedom⁶⁰.

Despite all its caution and being an altogether marginal remark compared with the main narrative of the document, this statement nonetheless provides us with a foothold for our argument.

Among contemporary philosophers, Yves Congar was one to allege that infants and prenatales have the ability to choose between salvation and condemnation. He rejected the point of view suggesting that this were to occur *after* the child's death, claiming that the choice could be made at the very moment of death, by virtue of special divine enlightenment⁶¹. Thus, it should be noted that even though Congar thinks that we cannot entirely rule out the possibility of young children being capable of choosing or rejecting God, he nonetheless states they are only able to do so by virtue of exceptional Divine aid (Divine act), and only at a very exceptional moment, i.e. the moment of death. Hence, infants' choice according to Congar differs substantially from adults' situation, being some type of an "exception".

The thesis that it is possible for infants to choose God and salvation is also held valid by a Polish Jesuit, Zbigniew Kubacki. Relying on the above-cited excerpt from the document by the International Theological Committee, he undertakes to claim that infants and prenates may choose God. Even though their act of faith is unconscious and non-reflective, and is expressed solely through their will of living and simple gestures such as a baby's smile at his/her mother, it brings salvation, hence it is true and real⁶².

In the theological tradition there have also been voices which, whilst acknowledging prenates' ability to come to know God and rationality, do not take a stance regarding their ability to choose, and are inclined to claim their limited share of eternal salvation. This was a view Cosmas Indicopleustes, a Byzantine monk living at the break of the fifth and the sixth century, put forward in his work, *Christian Topography*⁶³. He claimed the embryo to be rational and to have some partial experience the world through the mother's womb, thus arriving at the knowledge of God the Maker. Cosmas' position, notwithstanding, was that embryos would likely spend the eternity in some kind of an intermediate state ("they form an

⁶⁰ International Theological Commission, *The Hope of Salvation for Infants who Die Without Being Baptised* (2007).

⁶¹ Yves Congar, *The Wide World My Parish: Salvation and Its Problems* (Baltimore: Helicon, 1961), 147-154.

⁶² Zbigniew Kubacki, „Wiara, która zbawia”, *Studia Bobolanum* 28, nr 2 (2017): 116–119.

⁶³ Cosmas Indicopleustes, *Christian Topography* (1897), dostęp 24 kwietnia, 2017, http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/cosmas_07_book7.htm.

intermediate class”) between Heaven and Hell, as they have neither toiled, nor sinned. Ultimately, he left the final judgment to God, who “alone has real knowledge in that matter”.

Theology has been embroiled not only with the issue of the knowledge of God by infants and pre-nates but also by persons with profound intellectual disabilities. In her book *God Beyond Words: Christian Theology and the Spiritual Experiences of People with Intellectual Disabilities*, Jill Harshaw proposes a thesis according to which people with profound intellectual disabilities may enjoy a satisfying relationship with God, i.e. have a spiritual experience. God has access to a person with a profound intellectual disability, and can reveal Himself/Herself to him/her, communicating with him/her. Harshaw, nevertheless, avoids formulating a precise answer to the question whether an actual response on the part of persons with profound intellectual disabilities to received grace (God’s presence) is possible. For her, this is a problem she does not venture to ultimately resolve⁶⁴. Her goal is solely to demonstrate that God may reach people with profound intellectual disabilities in diverse ways, and may be directly experienced by them. Thereby, the author seems to leave us “stuck mid-way”, failing to put forward any binding thesis as regards the freedom of the persons in question.

Tracy Demmons⁶⁵ and Erinn Stanley⁶⁶ take a similar stance. Sharing the view that people with profound intellectual disabilities may come to know God and be recipients of His Revelation, they use slightly different arguments, which we will shortly discuss.

Perhaps arguments for our cause can be found in the work of none other than Thomas Aquinas himself. At this point, we are resorting to the interpretation of Miquel Romero, whose interpretation of Thomas’ thought is distinct from that by other commentators in the field, including Hans Reinders. According to Romero, Thomas Aquinas holds that if one belongs to a species endowed with a rational soul, one never loses their rationality, even if it cannot fully function. As much as corporeal defects or disorders may affect the use of reason (which is “situated” in the soul), they may not impair the soul’s most crucial function, that is communication with God, which is an immaterial act of the soul⁶⁷. The human person, despite any

⁶⁴ Harshaw, *God Beyond Words*, 121-123, 149.

⁶⁵ Demmons, “Tacit and Tactile Knowledge of God”, 5-21.

⁶⁶ Erinn Staley, “Intellectual Disability and Mystical Unknowing: Contemporary Insights From Medieval Sources”, *Modern Theology* 28, nr 3 (2012): 385-401.

⁶⁷ Romero, „Aquinas on the *corporis infirmitas*”, 107. Also Edyta Stein (*Was ist der Mensch*, 8) claims that the soul’s knowing and wanting are purely spiritual acts. .

defects of the body, does not lose their ability to respond to God's grace⁶⁸, and may partake in the beatific vision that is their destiny⁶⁹. The problem however is that Romero does not clarify to what extent this communication, response to divine grace, or attaining salvation are contingent on the person's free will, or whether they are a result of something altogether distinct, some external factors, such as the sacrament of Baptism, i.e. it is automatic. It seems that Aquinas does not, after all, presume the freedom we are concerned with to be possible in the case of persons with an impaired body (and partially soul), as he also claims that persons with intellectual disabilities are not capable of committing sin⁷⁰, which in its deepest essence consists in the rejection of God⁷¹.

The thesis that it is possible for people with intellectual disabilities to cooperate with divine grace is directly formulated by Justin Glyn. In his opinion, the Church's teaching concerning the necessity to respond to God's grace to be saved must also be upheld in the case of persons whose certain acts of free will are impaired⁷². Glyn claims, therefore, that the free will of people with intellectual disabilities may be "imperfect", yet its essential quality, which is the ability to choose or reject God, remains intact.

Also Amos Yong seems to favor the opinion that every person, including one with an intellectual disability, is free and capable of answering God. Notwithstanding, he emphasizes the enormous diversity of people with intellectual disabilities, and thereby their varying degree of responsibility in choosing God and salvation, even to the point of suggesting some of them to entirely lack this responsibility⁷³.

5.1. Theological arguments – convincing reason

Let us now probe the theological arguments that would support the thesis we are proposing. As pointed out above, some theological research has already been done in this field. We will, therefore, list fellow theologians' arguments we deem most significant. Jill Harshaw's argument based on the

⁶⁸ Romero, „Aquinas on the *corporis infirmitas*,” 109, 114.

⁶⁹ Ibidem, 112.

⁷⁰ Ibidem, 118.

⁷¹ It remains unclear, however, whether what Thomas has in mind is sin understood as an act, which, admittedly, not all people are capable of, or as the choice of evil, opposition of God, rejection of God, which we believe to be possible for every person. Sin understood as severing the relationship with God is described in the *Catechism*, nr 386.

⁷² Justin Glyn, „»Pied beauty«: The Theological Anthropology of Impairment and the Light of Vatican II”, *Heythrop Journal* 57, nr 5 (2016).

⁷³ Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome*, 236-239.

theory of divine accommodation⁷⁴ is particularly pertinent. It is a belief that the infinite God revealing Himself to finite human beings accommodates His Self-revelation to what they are capable of apprehending of Him. Why, therefore, the author asks, would people with intellectual disabilities not have access to God? Is God not able or does He not wish to accommodate His Self-revelation to their abilities as well?

In the context of the theory of divine accommodation, it remains unclear why Harshaw is reluctant to attribute people with intellectual disabilities with any action taken to receive the Revelation, thus refusing to acknowledge their free response to God's offer of salvation. To invoke Paul Tillich's thought, for Revelation to occur, it must be understood in some way. Revelation has a dialogic structure, and as long as the addressee is not able to understand the message, we remain at the level of a monologue, which is not yet the revelation of the Revealer⁷⁵. Thus, the addressee must take certain action, which is possible due to the abilities that he/she is equipped with. The knowledge of God is also made possible by the activity of the knower, not solely by the activity of the known. Having arrived at this assumption, we are only one step away from acknowledging that persons with intellectual disabilities heed God's calling freely.

Elaborating on the argument derived from the theory of divine accommodation, we may also invoke the truth of God's omnipotence and ask: is the almighty God not powerful enough to reach a person with intellectual ability? Can the Holy Spirit who permeates all that exists not permeate every human person, communicate with him/her, offering His/Her love? The might God who wished to adopt the human nature, who stooped to His/Her creation not wish or not be able to stoop to the level of an infant or a person with an intellectual disability? Since the infinite God lowers Himself/Herself to the level of His/Her finite creatures to communicate with them, is it right to envision any limits to His/Her act?⁷⁶ Why would, then, God's relationship with people with intellectual disabilities be impossible?

It is, obviously, possible to conclude that even though God does offer Himself/Herself to every person in the world, including every person with a profound intellectual disability, the problem lies on the part of the person incapable of answering God's love. Let us ask once again, then: why would this person not be capable of it? Would that be because God did not enable him/her to? Or because someone deprived him/her of this ability? Even if we were to assume that disability (a given disability or disability in general)

⁷⁴ Harshaw, *God Beyond Words*, 95-116.

⁷⁵ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, t. 1 (London: The University of Chicago Press, 1973), 111.

⁷⁶ See Harshaw, *God Beyond Words*, 106.

is a result of human sin, we may never be compelled to assume that someone's sin finally destroys in us what it means to be human⁷⁷, and which we take to be the freedom necessary to love⁷⁸.

Frequently, when we refer to something as "impossible" for God, thus setting the "limits" of God's omnipotence, we invoke God's nature (e.g. God cannot sin, as by nature He/She is boundless goodness and nothing but goodness alone) or the free will of God's creations, which also results from their nature (e.g. God cannot eliminate evil and suffering, as it would amount to depriving His/Her creations of free will). In this case, neither of these can be considered an obstacle. On the contrary, the claim that God can make Himself known to every human being, and those who are "not rational" are free to respond to God's offer of salvation, restores the correct image of God and the human being: there is nothing impossible for God, God is almighty, whilst every human person is truly free by nature. If there is anything God is helpless against, it is the free will He/She chose to endow His/Her creations with.

Erinn Stanley uses another kind of argument, drawing from medieval theology and highlighting the truth of the impossibility of knowing God⁷⁹. More specifically, at stake is the belief that since an infinite difference exists between God and the human being, we can never come to know and understand God fully⁸⁰. It could be asked whether it matters if that difference concerns an intellectually able person or one with an intellectual disability? In both cases, the difference is so enormous, that indeed our degree of intellectual ability does not matter at all, as we are never capable of understanding God's mystery fully, and if we come to know it to any degree at all, it is solely by merit of His Self-revelation. Hence, is it not the case that by claiming that God can communicate with those who are intellectually able whereas He cannot communicate with those with intellectual disabilities, we claim a greater difference to exist between given persons than between God and man? Stanley suggests that we find it easy to draw a distinction between those who are fully intellectually able and those with intellectual disabilities, losing the sense of the actual infinite distinction

⁷⁷ World Council of Churches, *Christian Perspectives on Theological Anthropology*, nr 27.

⁷⁸ We are not considering a version whereby an intellectual disability would be a result of personal sin, as it would paradoxically amount to acknowledging such a person's ability to exercise freedom, and thus testify to their full humanity.

⁷⁹ Stanley, "Intellectual Disability and Mystical Unknowing", 385-401 . C.f. Harshaw, *God Beyond Words*, 115.

⁸⁰ Catechism states that "our knowledge of God is limited", *Catechism*, nr 40.

between God and man⁸¹. Thus, she reminds her readers that “the smartest human being is far more like a person with an intellectual disability than he or she is like God”⁸².

God’s justice, i.e. the claim that God “shows no partiality”, but finds every single person equally precious in His/Her eyes is another important argument. Thus, it might be asked if the God that is just and impartial could possibly act in such a way as to offer the gift of rationality (the knowledge of God) and freedom (the choice of God) not to all people, but only to some? Or could perhaps the just, impartial God endow all people with those most valuable of gifts, whilst not making all capable of using them?

The crucial argument that seems to have eluded us in the debate on the situation of people with profound intellectual disabilities and their potential automatic salvation, is such: the freedom offered by God is His/Her most precious gift, as it allows the human being to genuinely love his Maker, i.e. freely choose the supreme good that God is⁸³. Should we not have this fundamental freedom, we would not be able to love, as love is always freely given. This truth, however, tends to be dimmed by the fear that freedom could be put to ill use, whereas what counts is the fact that someone (in this case a person with a profound intellectual disability) will be saved. We perceive freedom as something dangerous, a curse, not a blessing. God, however, did not endow us with freedom so that we could harm ourselves. It is only when we come to see freedom for what it is that we realize that the claim that God could deprive any of our brothers or sisters of this most precious of gifts is plainly and utterly discriminatory.

As preposterous as it may initially sound that a prelate or a person with a profound intellectual disability should make decisions concerning his/her salvation, what other claim would, in fact, be more reasonable or better grounded? That we decide “for or against” God once we turn (for example) 7 years old? Or that not all people are endowed with free will (or not all are capable of using it)? Or, perhaps, that some of us are saved (or damned) automatically?

5.2. The ways God communicates with the human person – releasing the powers of imagination

According to its classical definition, theology is “faith seeking understanding”, yet it is imagination that frequently is more important when practicing it than reason. Something may seem beyond our grasp simply because we fail to engage our imagination. In the case of people with pro-

⁸¹ Staley, “Intellectual Disability and Mystical Unknowing”, 398.

⁸² Ibidem.

⁸³ “Only in freedom can man direct himself toward goodness” (GS , nr 17).

found intellectual disabilities, we find it extremely difficult to imagine their relationship with God, the way they might possibly heed God's calling, as even their parents or caregivers are unable to communicate with or obtain the most basic information from them.

The christian tradition, nonetheless, abounds in various accounts of the possible ways of encountering God. The Bible confirms that God approaches human being in a multitude of ways, e.g. reveals Himself/Herself even to a person "lacking consciousness", sleeping (Gen 28:10–22; Dan 2; Matt 1:18–25)⁸⁴. Admittedly, an intellectually able person deep in his/her sleep is substantially different from a person with an intellectual disability, yet it might be asked: if God makes Himself/Herself known to a sleeping person, why could He/She not choose to reveal Himself/Herself to a person "permanently asleep", one that we perceive as permanently unconscious? The Biblical scene of visitation (Luke 1:29-45) seems especially pertinent in this context, as it shows John the Baptist recognize and respond to the presence of Jesus-God while He is still in His mother's womb, and thus, according to our criteria, merely an "unconscious" fetus.

There are also literary accounts that offer interesting insights regarding the possibility of God communicating with a person in an unconscious state. William P. Young's *Cross Roads* tells a story of a man on the brink of death, who, while in a comatose state, experiences the "last chance" encounter with God. Despite being strictly fictional, the book contains a message that is sound from the theological point of view: God pursues all possible ways to speak to a given person's heart, regardless of the state they are in. We cannot rule out the possibility that a person in a coma still is offered a chance to turn to God. If the Church had the conviction that nothing of essence in terms of his/her relationship with God can transpire in the heart of a person who is in such a condition, it should permit euthanasia in such cases, which it does not (*EV* 64-68). Moreover, the numerous existing accounts of persons who had the so-called near-death experience may also be considered an argument for the thesis that we experience God in the most diverse ways and in various states of our consciousness.

It is no less possible for God to approach, reveal Himself/Herself to a person with an intellectual disability than to any other human being, even though He/She may choose to do so in an altogether different way⁸⁵. We know that people experience God in various ways, with spiritual theology providing ample material for analysis in this regard. Moreover, a given person's experience of God may not be perceptible to others, nor does it require

⁸⁴ See Harshaw, *God Beyond Words*, 86.

⁸⁵ *Ibidem*, 117.

to be empirically proven⁸⁶, just like the person's free response to God's calling does not require to be documented. The fact that we do not perceive something does not entail that it does not exist⁸⁷. Does not faith involve believing in what we cannot see (yet)? Do we seek empirical evidence of transubstantiation? Since we are able to accept by faith so much else, perhaps we can also believe that people with profound intellectual disabilities are capable of having a relationship with God?

* * *

The limitations of body and mind suffered by persons with intellectual disabilities should not mislead us to deny them the very essence of humanity: the knowledge and the choice or rejection of God. We claim that every adult, intellectually able person makes his/her own free decision concerning his/her salvation, despite being also limited by his/her cognition, senses, abilities or emotions. No one contests that the person makes a genuine choice that he/she is responsible for. Why, then, deny people with intellectual disabilities the possibility of making the same choice?

In the Epistle to the Romans, St. Paul asks whether there is anything that could separate us from the love of Christ (Rom 8:35). In other words, is there anything that destroys this mutual love? It could also be asked: is there anything that makes it impossible for a person to love Christ? By denying that people with intellectual disabilities have the capability of loving God, we, in fact, give an affirmative answer to Paul's question: yes, indeed, a person can be separated from the love of Christ by an intellectual disability...

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⁸⁶ Ibidem, 146.

⁸⁷ Note that also the thesis proposing that people with intellectual disabilities are potentially rational and free lacks empirical confirmation.

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W pełni człowiek. Osoby z niepełnosprawnością intelektualną w świetle nauczania Kościoła katolickiego

Twierdzenie o pełnym człowieczeństwie osób z niepełnosprawnością intelektualną jest dobrze ugruntowane w nauczaniu Kościoła katolickiego. Z drugiej strony wydaje się, że większość wypowiedzi Magisterium dotyczących istoty człowieczeństwa z żaden sposób nie odnosi się do osób z niepełnosprawnością intelektualną. Szczególnie problematyczne są wątki dotyczące rozumności i wolności człowieka. Niniejszy tekst, opierając się na nauczaniu Kościoła katolickiego i czerpiąc z niego argumenty, chce ukazać osoby z głęboką niepełnosprawnością intelektualną jako posiadające i realizujące pełnię człowieczeństwa.

Słowa kluczowe: Teologia niepełnosprawności, rozumność i wolność osoby ludzkiej, głęboka niepełnosprawność intelektualna, osoby nie używające rozumu, człowieczeństwo

Fully human. People with profound intellectual disabilities in light of the teaching of the Catholic Church

SUMMARY

The claim of the full humanity of people with intellectual disabilities is well grounded in the teaching of the Catholic Church. The majority of the Magisterium's statements regarding the substance of humanity, nonetheless, seem to take no account of people with intellectual disabilities. The notions of human rationality and freedom appear to be particularly problematic in this context. This study, firmly embedded in the teaching of the Catholic Church and employing arguments from its wealth, aims to demonstrate people with profound intellectual disabilities to be endowed with and able to actualize humanity in its fullest.

Keywords: Theology of disability, rationality and freedom of a human person, profound intellectual disability, persons who lack the use of reason, humanity

