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## **‘The Lord defends refugees, protects the orphans and widows’ (Psalm 146:9).**

### **Emerging Challenges in Supporting People after Loss and Traumatic Events**

„Pan strzeże przychodniów, chroni sierotę i wdowę”  
(Psalm 146, 9).

Nowe wyzwania we wspieraniu osób  
po stratach i traumach

**Abstract:** This study, rooted in patristics and social sciences, delves into the historical evolution of support for orphans and widows in the Christian and Catholic tradition, underscoring its profound significance in the identity of these faith-based communities. Tracing the modes of assistance from pre-Christian times through the Old and New Testaments and the teachings of the Church Fathers, the paper elucidates various aspects of the caregiving process. Additionally, it explores the evolving sensitivities

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across different epochs in modernity, encompassing the contemporary, postmodern and recent years, with a specific focus on the periods before, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. In light of this analysis, a fundamental question arises: What are the primary pastoral responsibilities of Catholic parishes in Poland regarding support to individuals who have experienced the loss of loved ones, borne multiple losses or endured severe traumas (such as war refugees from Ukraine in local communities)? This work provides guidance to over 10,000 Catholic parishes in Poland, considering the context of an aging society and the lessons derived from the COVID-19 pandemic. It extends an invitation for further research and the initiation of practical endeavours by pastoral theologians and specialists in social and healthcare, to ensure the highest quality of care in parish communities and local societies.

**Keywords:** support; traumas; parish; losses; bereavement.

**Abstrakt:** Niniejsze naukowe opracowanie z pozycji patologii i nauk społecznych zagłębia się w historyczną ewolucję wsparcia dla „sierot i wdów” w tradycji chrześcijańskiej i katolickiej, podkreślając jej głębokie znaczenie w tożsamości tych wspólnot wiary. Śledząc sposoby towarzyszenia od czasów przedchrześcijańskich, poprzez Stary i Nowy Testament oraz nauki Ojców Kościoła, ukazano różne aspekty procesu opieki. Niniejszy artykuł bada również ewoluującą wrażliwość w różnych epokach nowożytnych, obejmując współczesność, postnowoczesność i ostatnie lata, szczególnie przed, w trakcie i po pandemii COVID-19. W świetle tej analizy pojawia się zasadnicze pytanie: Jakie są główne zadania duszpasterskie dla parafii katolickich w Polsce w kontekście wsparcia osób doświadczających utraty bliskich, znoszących liczne straty lub doświadczających poważnych traum (takich jak uchodźcy wojenni z Ukrainy w lokalnych społecznościach)? Ta praca oferuje wskazówki dla ponad 10 000 parafii katolickich w Polsce, biorąc pod uwagę kontekst starzejącego się społeczeństwa i wnioski wyniesione z pandemii COVID-19. Stanowi ona zaproszenie do dalszych badań i podjęcia praktycznych inicjatyw przez teologów pastoralnych oraz specjalistów zajmujących się pomocą społeczną i opieką zdrowotną, dążących do zapewnienia jak najwyższej jakości opieki w ramach wspólnot parafialnych i lokalnych społeczności.

**Słowa kluczowe:** wsparcie; traumy; parafia; straty; żałoba.

## 1. Introduction

Discussions about death and grief are fundamental to all cultures, societies and religions. The issues faced by bereaved individuals have evolved throughout history (Janowicz et al., 2015, pp. 26–31). This evolution includes grief in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic as well as the experiences of individuals

coping with losses from the war in Ukraine, which has brought many war refugees to Poland. Psalm 146:9 – ‘He upholds the orphan and the widow’<sup>1</sup> – prompts a re-examination of the concept of pastoral care for those who have experienced significant losses in 2023.

This study seeks to trace the evolution of these concepts from antiquity through early Christianity and subsequent eras to the present day. It aims to identify the current needs within our parish communities. The combination of expertise from a patristic scholar and the practical experience of an end-of-life practitioner in caring for the bereaved provides both theological and social insights. This work builds upon previous research related to our parishes and bereavement support (Krakowiak, 2010) and the importance of parish volunteering for the elderly and end-of-life care (Krakowiak & Janowicz, 2015). With a focus on family caregivers who often face overwhelming responsibilities and on the current support systems, which are regrettably lacking in Poland (Janowicz et al., 2021), we aim to shine a light on their roles in the context of grief support. This paper serves as an inspiration for priests, religious individuals and laypeople involved in caring for those in need in parishes. We hope to reach theology students, helping professionals, volunteers and all individuals who wish to contribute to the caregiving process.

## **2. Biblical and patristic foundations of orphan and widow care in Christianity**

The quality of care for the seriously ill and dying, along with the concern for orphans and widows, is indicative of a civilisation’s approach to social care and human dignity. Hospice care plays a unique role in this context. Today, people are highly aware of the multiple difficulties caused by the death of one of the parents. In antiquity, however, due to the patriarchal social structure, the impact of the father’s death was much more profound and burdensome than that of the mother because men were the heads of the families, providing financial security and protection. This is evident through the frequent association of

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<sup>1</sup> Holy Bible: All Bible quotations are sourced from the New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition (NRSV-CE). In <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Sirach%201&version=NRSVUE>.

orphans with widows (Fitzgerald, 2016). In Byzantium, it was only from the 6<sup>th</sup> century that the term 'orphan' (*Code of Justinian*) came to denote a child who had lost both parents (Bobou, 2012).

During the era of the Roman Empire, about 40%–45% of children aged 14–15 years had lost their fathers (Krause, 1995). The men often died before their wives, and this left behind a large number of widows and orphans. A marriage typically began with the woman marrying at 18, becoming a widow at 33–35 and living for another 10 years. About 30% of adult women in the Roman world were unmarried widows, rising to more than 40% for women aged 40–50 (Krause, 1994). For example, the Gospel of Luke features the 84-year-old widow Anna, who was married for just 7 years (Luke, 2:36–37).

## 2.1. Greco-Roman world

In the ancient world, orphans and widows were identified as an especially vulnerable group deprived of protection and power. This is reflected in Andromache's lament over the consequences of Hector's death for their son Astyanax in Homer's *Iliad* (Book 24, 484–506). The recognition that these groups need protection against all kinds of abuses was present in all cultures, but institutional help was not very effective. Already, in Ancient Babylon, in the epilogue of the famous *Law Code of Hammurabi*, the king expresses his will to establish justice in the land and to ensure that the widows and orphans are protected.

In ancient Greece, as early as the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC, certain societies made efforts to protect the families of fallen warriors from social and economic crises (Arnaoutoglou, 1998, p. 5). According to Diogenes Laertius, Solon postulated that sons of men fallen in battle should be maintained and educated by the State (Diogenes Laertius, *Vitae philosophorum*, 1.55). The care for citizens' orphans was also postulated by Plato (*Menexemus*, 248e–249a), Aristotle (*Politica*, 1268a 6–11) and Thucydides (*Oratio funebris Periclis*). In Athens, *orfanofylax* – 'a guardian of orphans' – was appointed for this very purpose (Xenophon, *De vectigalibus*, 2.7). Unfortunately, there is no source attesting to any state support for the widows (Weiler, 1980, pp. 174–181; Hunter, 1989; Cudjoe, 2000) and daughters of fallen citizens (Rominkiewicz, 2016).

Ancient Rome never developed any institutional support for the orphans and widows of its fallen soldiers, leaving the family to care for those who had

lost a husband or father. Instead, the Romans surpassed the Greek institutions by giving much greater attention to regulating the office of the guardian of orphans (Käser, 1980, pp. 316–324; Miller, 2003, pp. 30–31).

## 2.2. Old Testament

The protection of foreigners, orphans and widows was widely viewed in ancient Israel as a moral obligation of all. Only in the book of Deuteronomy are these three groups linked in 11 verses (Evans, 2016, p. 121). In the oldest legal code preserved in the Torah, namely, in the Book of the Covenant (Exod. 20:22–23:33), the prohibition 'You shall not abuse any widow or orphan' (Exod. 22:22) sounds like a commandment in the Decalogue. The abuse of widows and orphans is paralleled there to the oppression of Israelites in Egypt. God 'helps orphans and widows, and He loves foreigners' (Deut. 10:18), and He 'will not ignore the supplication of the orphan, or the widow when she pours out her complaint' (Sir. 35:17).

Many books of the Old Testament depict God as the 'father of orphans and protector of widows' (Ps. 68:5), 'helper of the orphan' (Ps. 10:14) who 'upholds the orphan and the widow' (Ps. 146:9). The practical implementation of the command of the care for orphans and widows was a guarantee of the use of part of the land's fruits and the benefits of festivals (Deut. 14:28–29; 16:11–14; 24:19–21; 26:12–13). Judas the Maccabee and his soldiers gave orphans part of the spoils of war (2 Macc. 8:28, 30), and deposits for orphans were kept in the Second Temple at Jerusalem (2 Macc. 3:10). Job insists that he has consistently aided them (Job 29:12; 31:18).

In many discourses of the prophets, this care became a *topos* (Ezek. 22:7; Isa. 1:17–23; Zech. 7:10; Mal. 3:5). For instance, the Book of Isaiah counsels, 'Learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow' (Isaiah 1:17). Instructions and commands regarding the treatment of widows and orphans are also found in the Book of Zechariah, which urges followers to not oppress the widow, the fatherless, the sojourner or the poor (Zechariah 7:10). Similarly, Psalms affirm that 'Father of the fatherless and protector of widows is God in His holy habitation' (Ps. 68:5). Biblical illustrations further emphasise the challenges widows and orphans faced in their daily lives (e.g. Job 6:27; 24:3, 9; 31:17, 21; Ps. 109:12).

### 2.3. Teachings of Jesus and the apostles

Jesus' parables often include the image of a vulnerable widow, dependent on the goodwill of her surroundings (cf. Mk 12:40; Mk 12:42–43; Lk 2:37; Lk 4:25–26; Lk 18:3–5; Lk 20:28; Lk 20:47; Lk 21:2–3). The persistent widow seeking help from a judge exemplifies persevering prayer: 'Yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming' (Lk 18:5). The only reference to a dead orphan, the only son of a widow, is in Lk 7:12. The Evangelist emphasises that Jesus had compassion for her and helped her miraculously.

Apostolic letters in the New Testament also incorporate guidance regarding the treatment of widows and orphans. Neglecting to care for this bereaved group prompted the establishment of the institution of deacons in the early Church. 'Now during those days, when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food' (Acts 6:1).

The Letter of St. James makes it clear that 'Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself unstained by the world' (James 1:27). In Galatians 4:1–2, Paul refers to an heir still being a child and under the power of a guardian. That refers to the very typical situation of orphans in Roman Empire. In 1 Timothy 5:3–9, he mentions widows who, having children or grandchildren, reared them. He underlines then, as a religious obligation and act of piety of sons becoming adults, to care for their widowed mothers.

### 2.4. Early Church

Biblical injunctions and the practices of early Christian communities transformed the treatment of widows and orphans, entrusting the care of bereaved individuals to the Church, and addressing their spiritual, religious, social and security needs. Charitable endeavours became an essential aspect of Christian life, as important as the sacraments and the preaching of the Word (Rohde, 1976, p. 95).

Among the Apostolic Fathers, at the turn of the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries, Ignatius criticised his opponents, who were supporters of Docetism, for not caring for

widows and orphans (*Epistle to the Smyrnaeans*, 6.2); disregarding them was also identified as one of the signs of the way of darkness in the Two Ways of Barnabas (*Epistle*, 20.2). Similarly, Polycarp warns presbyters not to neglect widows and orphans (*Epistle to the Philippians*, 6.1). In the fifth *Similitudes of The Shepherd of Hermas* (56, 7) there is an indication that the money saved from fasting is to be given to widows, orphans and people in need.

The charitable activity of the Church in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century is illustrated by the description of Justin Martyr, wherein offerings made by the faithful were dedicated to supporting widows, orphans, the sick and those in need, as well as prisoners and foreigners (*Apology*, I, 67).

Tertullian says that the donations collected in the Church are designated to support poor people, to supply the wants of boys and girls destitute of means and parents and to take care of old persons (*Apologeticus*, 39). Christian concern for widows, orphans and the poor is also noted by Aristides of Athens (*Apology*, 15). Pope Cornelius (251–253), in his letter to Fabius of Antioch, speaks of caring for 1,500 widows and indigents (Eusebius, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 6.43.2). According to the *Didascalia Apostolorum* (17.4.1–2), the bishop is to take care of the upbringing of orphans in his diocese and meet their vital needs, e.g. he should help a girl marry a Christian and help boys get a suitable and economically independent profession.

Additionally, childless Christians are encouraged to adopt them. Lactantius emphasises that special care should be taken of the children of martyrs so that Christians would not falter in the hour of trial for fear of the fate of their loved ones (*Institutiones divinae*, 6.12). *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicitia* (15) suggests that a 'sister' (probably not biological, but a sister in faith) raised Felicitia's newborn daughter as her own.

The Church's care for widows was not limited to merely providing some assistance. The Christian view of marriage and virginity meant that widows began to be perceived as a specific condition, even a specific institution (*ordo*), and the rights and obligations associated with it have changed over the centuries (Degórski, 2003). Widows received material support from the Christian community but were obliged to reciprocate through prayer, charity and care activities. They were to visit the sick at home and take care of them. This aroused the admiration of the people of the time, as exemplified by the reactions when helping plague victims in North Africa in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century (Nakonieczny, 2022, p. 8).

## 2.5. Post-Constantine era

Following the Edict of Milan in 313 AD and the subsequent increase in the number of Christians, the former zeal and sense of responsibility for privileged members of the Church, such as the sick, orphans and widows, began to wane in the ever-growing communities. However, the Church was to witness institutional developments, with Constantine himself giving food supplies to the Christian communities for the support of orphans and widows (Eusebius, *Vita Constantini*, 4.28.1). During the reign of Constantius II, in the mid-fourth century CE, the first orphanage in Constantinople was established and immediately became the centre of a host of educational and philanthropic activities (Miller, 2003).

One of the Church Fathers who particularly emphasised the importance of helping orphans and widows was John Chrysostom, whose father had died shortly after John's birth. He left several writings on widowhood, including commentaries on biblical texts, homilies, letters and treatises, wherein he displayed a comprehensive vision of widowhood (*chēreia*) vis-a-vis virginity and conjugal unity (Konieczko, 2021).

Examples of biblical widows have also been interpreted as a symbol of the Church. The widow Anna, who longs with hope to see God's face (Lk 2:36–38), the widow of Zarephath of Sidon, who is threatened with starvation (Lk 4:25–26), the widow of Nain, who suffers from the death of her son (Lk 7:11–17), the widow persistently begging the judge to intercede for her (Lk 18:1–8) and the widow throwing two pennies into the treasury (Lk 21:1–4) portray the Church looking with hope for the eschatological resurrection, receiving the spiritual nourishment of the Body of the Lord, trusting in the power of Christ, who restores life to her spiritually dead sons, persistently praying to God and basing her entire existence on Him (Bardski, 2022, p. 42).

Around the mid-4<sup>th</sup> century, a new institution emerged in the Church to care for the needy: the diaconia, responsible for all caregiving activities, including charitable service, considering the needs of widows and orphans. In Egypt, each monastery and each diocese eventually established its own diaconia – an institution that later developed both in the East and West. Saint Ambrose, emphasising the specific status of virgins and widows, encouraged the latter to deepen their involvement in the Church. He underlined that widows should engage themselves in works of mercy in the Christian community



(Colish, 2005, p. 156). Continuing the Church's works of mercy were the orders that cared for the sick, dying and mourners. In the East, xenodoxia fulfilled this function, while in the West, it was hospitia, where the physical and spiritual needs of the seriously ill and their loved ones were taken care of, that did the same (Voltaggio, 2011).

In the Middle Ages, numerous brotherhoods conducted charitable activities in the Church. Participating in the brotherhood's ceremonies, devotions, prayers and social gatherings, numerous indulgences and privileges, prayers for deceased members, comprehensive care and financial assistance became magnets that attracted many faithful to the confraternities. Eschatological thought resulting from the brotherhood's duties, the presence of numerous mourners at funerals, care for orphans and widows as well as the constant remembrance of deceased members played a significant role in the social reality, particularly during times of frequent wars and epidemics (Dey, 2008). Those changes in end-of-life care and support for orphans and widows will be presented below with the highlights of every historical period.

### **3. Changes in the social perception of dying, death, grief and mourning**

**During the Middle Ages**, there was a heightened emphasis on mortality and contemplation of death among Christians. This era witnessed the development of death-related art, literature, poetry and rituals. Dying became a prominent theme in preaching, literature, poetry and painting, as well as in folk and popular legends. This focus on death persisted and evolved into a distinct literary genre known as *ars moriendi* (Taylor, 1651). This concept continued to be influential in both Protestant and Catholic traditions and was popularised in various forms (The Polonsky Foundation, 2013). The image of dying in a deeply religious context, rooted in the folk tradition, formed the basis for characterising this period as an era of 'tamed death' (Ariès, 1992, p. 229). Secular Christian brotherhoods played an active role in end-of-life care and grief support, serving as precursors to contemporary charity organisations and laying the foundation for present-day foundations that aid widows, orphans, the elderly and other needy individuals. These associations were established with the contributions of the affluent to aid of the less fortunate (Janowicz et al., 2015, pp. 27–28).

**The Renaissance era** was characterised by a greater appreciation for individual life and one's achievements, leading to a more humanistic approach. On the other hand, the rise of *memento mori* symbolism in art, which aimed to remind people of the transient nature of life, was commonly present in popular art and religious traditions. In the socially challenging times of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, St. Vincent de Paul (1576–1660) distinguished himself by his commitment to the spiritual and material support of the needy, especially orphans and the less fortunate among Christians. He established the association Filles de la Charité–Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul (Dinan, 2006). In the war-torn France of those years, this congregation provided care for over 1,000 orphans, and the Daughters of Charity (grey sisters) managed 426 houses of charity before the outbreak of the French Revolution (*A Short History of the Sisters of Charity*). Care for people left alone because of wars and traumas was once again initiated by individuals helping orphans and widows in the name of Jesus and following the Gospel, inspiring the present generation of the Saint Vincent De Paul Society (SVDP) and other Vincentian initiatives (Mohan & Sharp, 2010).

**The Enlightenment** brought changes in end-of-life care and bereavement, although the *ars moriendi* and *memento mori* still found a place in culture and parts of society. There was a shift towards secularism and scepticism in religious beliefs, especially in the educated segments of societies, with a dominant emphasis on rationality and scientific explanations of life and death. Detailed descriptions of these processes are presented by Bizeul in *Secularism in Europe* (2014). The literature of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries was dominated by sentimentalism and romanticism. Romanticism brought about a fundamental change in attitudes towards death, referring to it as the 'death of the other,' while personal death lost its significance, and fear turned towards the essence of the beloved (Kopeć, 2009, pp. 240–251).

**The Industrial Revolution**, marked by urbanisation and depersonalisation of death and dying, led to increased mortality rates in crowded cities and factories, often without adequate social care. As pointed out by Szreter (1997), the relationship between rapid economic growth and health is complex. Fast economic growth can lead to environmental, ideological, social, administrative and political disruptions. If there is no effective political and administrative response to these challenges, disruptions, deprivation, disease and death may follow. While poor relief in the pre-industrial period was an important and

well-investigated topic, research by Van Bavel and Rijpma (2016, pp. 159–187) estimated that the significance of various forms of formalised Christian-oriented relief in three countries (Italy, England and the Netherlands) persisted in the very long run between 1400 and 1850. However, a steep decline was observed from around 1800, a pattern generally observed in Europe due to factors like urbanisation, wealth, religion and social organisational features. The period from the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards saw reservations regarding the charitable activities of the Church, particularly in the context of Marxist thought. While Marxist ideals have lost supporters in the era of the global economy, the importance of merciful love remains, even in the most just society. No state order is so just that the service of love becomes unnecessary (Janowicz et al., 2015).

**The modern era**, beginning in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, witnessed the significant impacts of two World Wars. The losses during the Great War deeply affected European societies, resulting in collective mourning and trauma. The Spanish Flu pandemic further compounded grief, causing devastation to families and communities. Research regarding the Spanish Flu (Aassve et al., 2021, pp. 840–857) explored the consequences of the 1918–1919 global pandemic caused by a lethal influenza virus. The aftermath of World War II repeated these traumatic experiences with mass killings at Auschwitz, Kolyma, Hiroshima, and Nagasaki, instilling a new wave of death-fearing culture in the West (Ariès, 1992). Modern medicine has attempted to extend life, often at the expense of the quality of life and interpersonal relationships with the dying. Depersonalisation has left dying people more fearful. The fear of death could be reduced by improving interpersonal communication with patients. The medicalisation of dying and death emerged in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In response to overmedicalisation and excessive professionalisation of end-of-life care in Intensive Care Units (ICUs), hospice care and palliative medicine became crucial approaches for terminal patients and their families, gaining momentum in the UK and globally from the 1960s (Krakowiak, 2012). Globalisation brought people from diverse cultures closer, leading to the exchange of mourning practices and rituals. Multicultural grieving emerged to promote cross-cultural understanding of grief and mourning, recognising diverse expressions of loss and offering support through individual and group therapies, as well as pastoral counselling in faith communities. End-of-life care (EOLC) has encompassed palliative care from the early stages of life-threatening illnesses to emotional and social support for

loss, grief and bereavement. This is documented in the online resource entitled *End of Life Care* (SCIE, 2023).

**Postmodernism**, from the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and extending into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, is characterised by the further fragmentation of conventional religious convictions and the diversification of individualised values. Prominent transformations in grief and bereavement dynamics in the 21<sup>st</sup> century include the diminished prominence of institutionalised religions in Western societies and various forms of euthanasia, which can complicate individual experiences of loss (Yan et al., 2022). On the other hand, there is a rise in group-based support for the bereaved and the proliferation of virtual support mechanisms following losses and during periods of mourning. These tools, initially tailored to specific cohorts, have extended to encompass comprehensive support for all grieving groups, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic (Breen, 2021). Postmodernism also brings changes in end-of-life care, bereavement dynamics and individual experiences of loss and grief.

#### 4. Emerging care challenges in Poland after loss and trauma

As evident from the preceding sections of this paper, approaches to death and mourning are continually evolving due to cultural developments, the individualisation of faith, and the emergence of new traditions. Recent experiences of loss and grief, exacerbated by the pandemic, have been further compounded since 2022 due to the conflict in neighbouring Ukraine, leading to a significant influx of refugees into Poland. In this section, we will briefly discuss the new complexities and challenges in providing care after various losses, grief, and bereavement in local communities, with a focus on Polish society, which is predominantly Christian, and the structures of the Roman Catholic Church and parishes.

Poland, like the rest of Europe, is experiencing an aging population. According to data from the Central Statistical Office (GUS), individuals aged 65 and above already constitute 14.7 percent of our society, which is projected to increase to over 53 percent by 2030 (GUS, 2022a). A recent document titled *W stronę sprawiedliwej troski. Opieka nad osobami starszymi w Polsce* (Abramowska-Kmon et al., 2022) highlights that the caregiving demands in our nation will rapidly escalate. These trends are driven by long-term processes, primarily

the aging of the population, and the caregiving gap could consequently deepen. Eurostat's estimations indicate that by 2050, Poland's count of elderly individuals will surge to 10.3 million, signifying an augmentation of nearly 3.3 million persons. Regrettably, Poland ranks among the OECD countries with the lowest proportion of public expenditure allocated to long-term care in Europe. *Vis-a-vis* the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), we allocate less than 0.5 percent for this purpose. In contrast, the Netherlands boasts the most substantial budget for long-term care, exceeding 3.5 percent (Pawłowska & Tomkowska, 2022).

Moreover, in Poland, the hidden costs of underfunding are substantial, and caregivers are susceptible to burnout, isolation and often mental disorders, as they must assist the sick. There are indications of positive changes, such as the respite care program (opieka wytchnieniowa), accessible to caregivers of elderly individuals. However, its availability is not universal across all municipalities in the country (Janowicz, 2019). The consequences of societal aging are already evident. When our loved ones require support due to illness, disability or old age, arranging care for them presents a challenging task. The immediate family is not always equipped to manage these obligations. In such cases, what course of action is to be taken: searching for a caregiver, considering residential care facilities or opting for home hospice services?

Addressing these formidable challenges in Poland is a pressing concern. Resolving the issue of caregiver shortages, ensuring assistance to the families of dependent individuals, and enhancing the quality of care for dependent individuals are complex matters with no one-size-fits-all solutions. Therefore, the campaign *Under Good Care: Caregivers and Dependents* has been initiated, aimed at fostering discourse and endeavouring to identify effective approaches to tackle these challenges (Pawłowska & Tomkowska, 2022).

In what ways can parishes located throughout the country provide support to families of seriously sick individuals at home, as well as to orphans and victims of traumatic experiences? An example of various crisis intervention forms gathered during the COVID-19 pandemic by churches in the United Kingdom, as documented in an ecumenical study, may serve as an inspiration for the diverse support mechanisms that faith communities can offer (Giles et al., 2021). When considering assistance for the elderly and seriously sick individuals in home care, particular attention will be given to the possibility of supporting the bereaved and the victims of traumatic experiences in Polish Catholic parishes.

## 5. The potential of Polish parishes in providing care for individuals after loss

In our modern times, an emphasis on personal spiritual experiences and advancements in medicine and psychology are noteworthy features. Both medical and social sciences include spirituality as an important element of the integrated care process, especially towards the end of human life, after loss and during the bereavement process (Krakowiak, 2022). In this context, it is essential to outline the primary challenges in effective pastoral care for individuals and families dealing with loss and trauma in more than 10,000 Roman-Catholic parishes in Poland, which are still one of the biggest networks of possible spiritual support (GUS, 2022b).

In response to the demands of an aging society, Catholic parishes may consider prioritising the well-being of their elderly members in this rapidly aging demographic. This approach entails a thoughtful examination of how to enhance support and engagement with older parishioners while acknowledging their contribution to the community in the form of valuable wisdom and experience. Many of them grapple with loneliness due to the loss of a spouse and are in the midst of the grieving process. Therefore, tailored support programs addressing their spiritual and emotional needs become imperative. Support measures can include offering spiritual guidance and counselling to assist seniors in coping with grief, loss and existential questions during their later stages of life. Further, it is crucial to foster a sense of belonging through social events, support groups and activities that promote companionship and mutual support among seniors. Government strategies encompass the development of parish senior groups run by parish volunteers in cooperation with priests and encouraging regular community meetings (MRiPS, 2021).

There have been numerous commendable practices aimed at supporting senior citizens in Polish parishes, particularly through the initiatives of Caritas. A report from a city near the Polish-Ukrainian border underscores that besides assisting Polish senior citizens, Caritas teams have extended their support to many elders from Ukraine. The report states, 'This year, many war refugees were among the elderly charges of Caritas. They are cared for and supported not only materially; we have a group meeting for seniors every Friday, serving as both a support group and a platform for expert engagement' (Caritas Przemysł, 2022).

There is certainly room for further improvement in the realm of support for those dealing with loss and grief, as well as for individuals who are incapacitated at home, as detailed in a nationwide report (Abramowska-Kmon et al., 2022). Parish teams routinely visit homebound elderly and sick parishioners, a practice traditionally known as 'Pierwsze Piątki Miesiąca' (First Friday or Saturday sick visit rituals), carried out by priests and lay Eucharistic ministers in almost all the 10,000 Catholic parishes in Poland, as described by Przygoda (2015). Notably, as of now, there is no comprehensive research evidence in Poland regarding the support of individuals dealing with loss and trauma. Both individual assistance and support groups, in their various forms, present opportunities for more detailed study.

Among the many commendable practices worldwide regarding the engagement of faith communities in providing care for individuals experiencing losses, a noteworthy initiative is the British joint effort known as 'Equipping Churches in Bereavement Support' (Loss and Hope Project, 2023). The 'At a Loss' organisation, in collaboration with its 'Loss and HOPE' project, is actively empowering churches throughout the UK to become more 'bereavement friendly' through comprehensive training and resources. This collective effort, comprised of organisations deeply committed to enabling churches of various denominations across the UK to offer bereavement support within their communities, stands out as a compelling example of enhanced cooperation in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic.

During a time marked by financial constraints resulting from the pandemic and its subsequent challenges, this organisation initiated the practice of 'signposting' places that provide top-notch bereavement support. In 2023, over 200 parishes in the UK were recognised with this prestigious mark for their facilities. The underlying principle for this recognition is based on the following credo:

We believe bereaved people deserve the highest possible standard when it comes to signposting, whenever they decide they need support. We also believe that there should be a universal routine referral to support, especially in the early stages following a death, so that bereaved individuals know where to access support whenever required along their grief journey. Therefore, it is of utmost importance that anyone coming into contact with bereaved individuals in their daily lives – be it through their work or within the community – is capable of

directing them to a place where they can confidently anticipate receiving the support and information they need, provided at a high standard (Lose and Hope, 2023, National Standard for Bereavement Signposting).

This organisation, rooted in Christian values and beliefs, underscores that:

The death of someone close can be traumatic and cause one's life to spiral into turmoil. Universal, routine referral to bereavement support is a hallmark of a compassionate society that recognizes the importance of averting avoidable suffering and mental health challenges (Lose and Hope, 2023, What we do).

Additional details about the practical engagement of parishes in supporting bereaved individuals within local communities are available on the organisation's website.

From this example, it becomes evident that similar steps may be necessary in Poland to facilitate the development and improved coordination of care for individuals experiencing grief and bereavement in our local communities. Parishes could play a significant role in this process. Several challenges are apparent, the primary concern being the quality of collaboration between clergy, other professionals and volunteers in providing support to those who have encountered loss and grief. Despite certain signs of crisis, particularly among young Catholics, it is noteworthy that the number of priests in Poland is currently at its highest point in a thousand-year history. Moreover, the laity is actively engaged in apostolic work. There are approximately 65,500 parish organisations (or affiliated groups at the parish level, such as Caritas) and communities, accounting for a membership of 2.57 million believers (Portal Statystyczny, 2021). However, the question remains as to how these significant numbers translate into the actual provision of support and bereavement care for modern 'orphans and widows' in Polish Catholic parishes. These are questions that warrant further exploration from the perspectives of pastoral theology and social sciences, both in terms of future research and practical initiatives.



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## 6. Conclusions

In recent years, the coronavirus pandemic has shifted the level of trust in the Higher Source, as shown by research conducted during COVID-19 in Germany by Büssing, Baumann and Surzykiewicz (2022). The conclusions of that research paper are universal and worth quoting here in the context of care after losses:

The faith communities must play an important role in supporting their members in need and all who connect to them, even though many members seem to have lost their faith ... What may be needed are more innovative and less formalized ritual opportunities for encounters via the parishes. The charitable mandate of the religious communities should be underlined, the mandate which requires those communities to proactively approach members and all who feel 'lost' and 'left behind,' even when at first glance there seems to be little trust. This is also an opportunity to listen better to their members, and to take seriously their fears, worries, insecurities, needs, and even their loss of faith. In order to find theologically sound pastoral practices and corresponding answers, caring and listening seem to be most appropriate (Ibidem, p. 763).

As of now, there is a lack of data concerning the tools and practices for providing care and support to those who have experienced loss and bereavement within parishes in Poland. Existing initiatives can be viewed as a promising starting point for a new vision that aligns with the biblical principle of protecting strangers, orphans and widows (cf. Ps 146:8). These initiatives also provide a solid foundation for the development of new methods to offer support to individuals who have experienced loss in parishes. Initiatives such as 'First Fridays & Saturdays of the month' (Przygoda, 2015) could be reinvented and expanded, particularly in light of the growing number of elderly and homebound individuals in our local communities. Along with respite care for family caregivers, this could mark the beginning of the establishment of a comprehensive system for regular home visits and pastoral care for seniors who may find it challenging to attend church services regularly while still maintaining their connection with the parish community (Krakowiak & Janowicz, 2015).

This presents us with an opportunity to address symptoms of anticipated grief, which are prevalent particularly among those who have cared for chronically ill individuals over many months or years. Achieving these objectives

will require parishes to enhance their collaboration with social services, senior activity centres established under the 'Senior Plus' project (Gieroba, 2022) and healthcare facilities to create comprehensive support networks for the elderly and disabled. Catholic parishes have the potential to offer meaningful and comprehensive support to elderly individuals in grief, promoting their well-being and spiritual fulfilment in the later stages of life, as demonstrated by successful practices of senior citizen support groups (Jarzembowski, 2023). Senior citizens represent one of the most engaged groups of parish participants, and many of them have faced significant losses in their lives.

Considering the waves of refugees and war migrants from Ukraine into Poland, many of whom have experienced traumas, it becomes crucial for parish teams to respond practically to the needs of those requiring support. While group support for individuals dealing with loss and grief is a well-established tool in parish settings, it remains more of an exception than the norm in Polish Roman Catholic parishes. Thus, a thorough exploration of new forms of group support for people dealing with various types of loss in the context of pastoral care in parishes, including the integration of modern technology, is the next necessary step to assist parishes in caring for those who have lost loved ones.

Following the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine, Poland has achieved a great deal in terms of social assistance, largely through various forms of cooperation between parishes and Caritas in different projects (Caritas Polska, 2023). Despite these achievements, there is a need to formulate and implement new forms of assistance for those grappling with loss, grief and bereavement. Although the Caritas Annual report mentions grief support, one can assume that most of the 83 Senior Clubs, 53 stationery and home hospices, 36 Nursing Homes (DPS) and 5 Nursing and Treatment Centres (ZOL) under Caritas's purview cater to those dealing with loss and bereavement (Ibidem, p. 85).

A comprehensive examination of various new forms of group support in parishes, with due consideration for modern technology and innovative virtual and hybrid methods for assisting those in need, should be a focus of future research in this area. The longstanding tradition of providing support to individuals who have experienced loss has been regarded as a significant pastoral task in faith communities from antiquity to modern times. In the present era, it is more crucial than ever to explore new ways of assisting the orphaned, particularly in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic and during the Ukraine war. The

biblical mandate to protect strangers, orphans and widows (cf. Ps 146:9) still holds relevance for our present and future parish communities. This paper also calls for further research and practical activities in the field of grief and bereavement pastoral care by all those who aspire to provide more effective support to individuals who have experienced losses and traumas within our local environments.

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