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## SAINT NICHOLAS OF MYRA'S *PEDAGOGIA PAUPERUM*\*

**Abstract.** Recognizing the growing educational challenges that often appear insurmountable even when following the best pedagogical guidance, the author raises questions concerning—among other things—the reasons behind the continuing relevance of Saint Nicholas's ideas. In the absence of more in-depth research, the author makes no definitive claims. However, he notes that Saint Nicholas's pedagogy appears effective in many cases despite being founded on personal example rather than educational frameworks or theories. Drawing selectively on literature, popular piety, and folk tradition, the article explores the case of Saint Nicholas to illustrate the personal qualities that a modern educator should possess and the directions that contemporary pedagogy should follow.

**Keywords:** Saint Nicholas, pedagogy, personality, values.

**Streszczenie.** *Pedagogia pauperum* św. Mikołaja z Myry. Autor artykułu, dostrzegając narastające problemy wychowawcze w wielu przypadkach wydające się nie do pokonania przy zastosowaniu nawet najlepszych wskazań pedagogicznych, stawia pytania między innymi o to, gdzie tkwi siła ponadczasowości wychowawczej św. Mikołaja. Nie przeprowadzając wnikliwszych badań, autor niczego nie twierdzi, ale jest faktem, że w wielu przypadkach pedagogia św. Mikołaja wydaje się skuteczna, chociaż nie opiera się

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\* The term *pauperum* refers to personal disposition rather than material deprivation. The *Biblia pauperum* (Paupers' Bible) was a picture Bible created for those unable to read and write. The pictorial form was used in order to convey the central idea of the Word of God: the Gospel of the crucified and risen Christ.

na założeniach czy teoriach wychowawczych, a bardziej na przykładzie osobowym. Artykuł wybiórczo – w oparciu o literaturę, kult i tradycję ludową – próbuje ukazać na podstawie przypadku św. Mikołaja cechy osobowe współczesnego wychowawcy i kierunki pedagogii.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Św. Mikołaj, pedagogia, osobowość, wartości.

## 1. INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

In light of contemporary guidelines directed at pedagogical sciences, the idea formulated in this article might be considered outmoded and redundant. Within the context of continental Europe, the term “pedagogy” typically signifies “the practice of influencing someone [...] with the intention of improving them”—as opposed to “pedagogics,” which can be defined as “a rigorous attempt at a theory of education.”<sup>1</sup>

Bridging theory and practice, pedagogics is a remarkably diverse field that demands both quantitative and qualitative research—pursued in a complementary manner and informed by methodological developments in such disciplines as psychology and sociology.<sup>2</sup> According to established methodological indications,<sup>3</sup> researchers should not limit themselves to purely quantitative or qualitative descriptions and analyses of the facts, phenomena, processes, or events that they are investigating. Instead, they should strive to supplement and enhance quantitative studies with qualitative approaches, and vice versa.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Norm Friesen and Karsten Kenklies, “Continental pedagogy & curriculum,” in *International Encyclopedia of Education*, 4th ed., vol. 7, ed. Robert J. Tierney, Fazal Rizvi, and Kadriye Ercikan (Elsevier, 2022), 245.

<sup>2</sup> See Stefan Nowak, *Metodologia badań społecznych* (Warsaw: PWN, 1985), 23–24.

<sup>3</sup> “Methodology” is defined as “a set of methods used in a particular area of study or activity.” See *Cambridge Academic Content Dictionary*, s.v. “methodology,” accessed June 28, 2025, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/methodology>.

<sup>4</sup> Mieczysław Łobocki, *Metody i techniki badań pedagogicznych*, 9th ed. (Kraków: Impuls, 2009), 18.

Mirosław Krajewski notes that

the object of pedagogical research is the social activity of individuals aimed at shaping human personality in its material and immaterial contexts. Every research project should be planned, which means that it is necessary to anticipate its conceptual framework, including the following requisite steps: 1. identifying the problem situation; 2. formulating the research topic (which will be subject to necessary and essential modifications); 3. outlining the research objectives; 4. completing a critical review of existing research findings in the relevant literature; 5. formulating the main hypothesis and (if applicable) additional working questions; 6. determining the research field, location, and timeframe; 7. determining methods for the collection of research and factual material; 8. conducting the research; 9. outlining the manner of presentation of the results; and 10. processing and interpreting the results.<sup>5</sup>

In approaching this subject, the author must first consider the extent to which the above rigorous methodological and technical indications for pedagogical research can be applied to the case at hand. There are many challenges involved, including the fact that according to tradition, Saint Nicholas lived in the late third and early fourth centuries, in an era long past, but the earliest written accounts of his life appeared as late as the sixth century. What is more, the majority of these accounts are legends<sup>6</sup> in which factual descriptions are intertwined with fictional narratives built upon them, making it difficult to distinguish between fact and fiction.

The above issues pose a major barrier that might discourage the author from pursuing the subject. At the same time, however, it is important to recognize a certain phenomenon: while it is primarily the veneration of Saint Nicholas that plays an educational role, his very figure remains central

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<sup>5</sup> Mirosław Krajewski, *Badania pedagogiczne* (Płock: Wydawnictwo Naukowe NOVUM, 2006), 10–11.

<sup>6</sup> Some scholars provide evidence in support of the claim that Saint Nicholas was a historical figure. See Józef Naumowicz, "Św. Mikołaj – rzeczywistość czy legenda?," *Spółeczeństwo Otwarte* 12 (1997): 3–4; Agnieszka Dejnawicz, ed., *Kult świętego Mikołaja w tradycji prawosławnej* (Gniezno: Wydawnictwo Fundacji Collegium Europaeum Gnesense, 2004), 9.

to it and continues to inspire certain groups of people<sup>7</sup> across various geographical regions. In the author's view, this phenomenon merits closer examination for a number of reasons.

As the old maxim says, "we live as long as we are remembered." The memory of some people, such as Nicolaus Copernicus, can endure for centuries, while for others, it can be much more short-lived and, in most cases, fleeting. Saints, however, are an exception, as John Paul II emphasized in his homily during the canonization Mass of Blessed Kinga: "Saints do not fade away. Saints draw life from other Saints and thirst for holiness."<sup>8</sup> The pope's reflection reveals a Paschal dimension<sup>9</sup> to holiness—one that also encompasses Saint Nicholas in his role as an educator.

Drawing upon Pope John Paul II's conviction that saints "thirst for holiness," as quoted above, it can also be concluded that they become educators toward holiness. In doing so, they do not establish educational frameworks; rather, they educate in a practical manner, mainly through the testimony of their lives, which is why their style (or manner) of education fits more appropriately under the term "pedagogy" than "pedagogics." Strictly speaking, the educational role is fulfilled by the saint (in this case, Saint Nicholas) whose veneration is central to an individual's or a group's life.

One of the issues with which the author of this article has engaged in his research is the educational dimension of hagiography.<sup>10</sup> Drawing on developments in psychology and hagiography, he has investigated the personalities of saints for many years, and the results of his studies have been published in a monograph titled *Problemy i zadania współczesnej hagiologii* [*The Issues and Tasks of Contemporary Hagiology*] (Toruń:

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<sup>7</sup> For example, research conducted by Boris Uspenskij shows that this educational effect is particularly strong among people with no education living in rural areas.

<sup>8</sup> John Paul II, "Homily of His Holiness John Paul II: Eucharistic Celebration for the Canonization of Blessed Kinga," Vatican website, June 16, 1999, [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/1999/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_hom\\_19990616\\_stary-sacz.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/1999/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_19990616_stary-sacz.html), sec. 1.

<sup>9</sup> In the Catholic sense, this dimension is eternal (*in aeternum*).

<sup>10</sup> Ireneusz Werbiński, "Wychowawcza rola hagiografii," in *Świadek Jezusa*, Homo Meditans, vol. 25, ed. Marek Chmielewski (Lublin: Towarzystwo Naukowe KUL, 2004), 325–345.

Wydawnictwo Naukowe UMK, 2004). The very title of the book points to the fact that interdisciplinary research has led to the emergence of a new concept, that is, “hagiology.” The rationale behind the introduction of this term into theological discourse is explained in the introductory chapter.<sup>11</sup> On the basis of the above research, the author has also coined the term “hagiopedagogy” to describe the educational effect that saints are believed to have.

In preparing this article, the author has relied on the biographical method in its both variations: monographic study and individual case study.

## 2. HISTORY OF THE VENERATION OF SAINT NICHOLAS IN SELECTED REGIONS

Studies on the veneration of Saint Nicholas show that he is the most revered saint in the Russian Orthodox Church,<sup>12</sup> and hagiological research conducted in Poland confirms that he is also venerated in certain regions of that country.<sup>13</sup>

Boris Andreevich Uspenskij, famous for his research into the veneration of Saint Nicholas in Rus', writes that Nicholas is held to the same level of reverence as the Virgin Mary, Christ, or even God Himself. In fact, Uspenskij cites various accounts indicating that many Russians offer Saint Nicholas the kind of devotion that should belong to God alone.<sup>14</sup> In the past, the faith that the common Russian people placed in the saint's power was so strong that when they found themselves in particularly difficult situations, they would pray not to Christ, not to God, but to Nicholas.

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<sup>11</sup> Ireneusz Werbiński, *Problemy i zadania współczesnej hagiologii* (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UMK, 2004), 13–18.

<sup>12</sup> See Borys A. Uspieński, *Kult św. Mikołaja na Rusi* (Lublin: Wydawnictwo KUL, 1985).

<sup>13</sup> See Katarzyna Parzych-Blakiewicz, ed., *Św. Mikołaj Biskup Myry w wierze, pobożności, teologii i sztuce – dawniej i dziś* (Olsztyn: Warmińskie Wydawnictwo Diecezjalne, 2014). The publication is a collective work in which several authors describe different forms of the veneration of Saint Nicholas in various regions of Poland.

<sup>14</sup> See Uspieński, *Kult św. Mikołaja*, 19.

Popular Orthodox piety saw Saint Nicholas as a miracle worker and as a benefactor who interceded for the people. His popularity in the Eastern Orthodox Church—combined with the predominantly emotional rather than rational approach to his person—caused him to be attributed with traits of other saints, or even of God Himself. As a result, in folk songs, Saint Nicholas can be seen to take the place of saints such as Theodore, George, or John the Baptist. Of those three, Nicholas is most often substituted for John the Baptist in Orthodox folk spirituality.<sup>15</sup>

Since popular Orthodox piety sought to present Nicholas primarily as a miracle worker, there was a proliferation of legends and stories recounting his miracles. In most of these stories, he was portrayed as an ideal bishop chosen by God rather than by people, which is why he was attributed with divine powers that enabled him to perform miraculous deeds. The literary form of the works recounting Saint Nicholas's miracles resembles that of Gospel narratives centered on Christ. For example, one such account tells the story of a miracle involving wine, which the saint blessed and multiplied; others describe the multiplication of bread, and so on.

A more in-depth examination of the beliefs found in popular Orthodox spirituality reveals that their complexity and the existence of various presumptions as to their origins make it difficult to draw any valid conclusions. This only serves to underscore the remarkable educational dimension of Saint Nicholas.

Saint Nicholas has also been venerated—for instance, as the patron saint of cattle—in certain regions of Poland. Franciszek Kotula, Polish ethnographer and folklorist specializing in the culture of southeastern Poland, cites folk prayers that speak of Nicholas as an actual “herdsman of cattle.”<sup>16</sup> As Kotula notes in his book, “in these prayers, the livestock is driven out: into the hands of the Lord Jesus, under the cloak of the Mother of God, and under the staff (or whip) of Saint Nicholas.”<sup>17</sup> Looking at this mode of prayer, one may see an analogy with the Nativity of Jesus: the Bible

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<sup>15</sup> See Tomáš Špidlík, *Wielcy mistycy rosyjscy* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo M, 1996), 274–275.

<sup>16</sup> See Franciszek Kotula, *Znaki przeszłości. Odchodzące ślady zatrzymać w pamięci* (Warsaw: Ludowa Spółdzielnia Wydawnicza, 1976), 50, 53, 68, 70, 86, 91ff.

<sup>17</sup> Uspieński, *Kult św. Mikołaja*, 82.

refers to Saint Joseph as Jesus's father in the sense of being responsible for His upbringing, even though His true Father is God—to whom Jesus Himself refers as “my Father.”

### 3. SAINT NICHOLAS AS AN EDUCATOR PRESENT IN THE LITURGY

The Eastern Orthodox Church celebrates Saint Nicholas twice during the liturgical year: on December 6 and on May 9. In addition, there are liturgical texts for the day of his birth, which is commemorated on July 29. In Poland, the Roman Catholic Church honors Saint Nicholas in the liturgy on December 6.

The liturgical texts dedicated to Saint Nicholas form a mosaic of biblical passages, prayers, and hagiographic works; the arrangement of such texts is prescribed by a *typikon*.<sup>18</sup> In the liturgical texts of the Roman Catholic Church, particular emphasis is placed upon mercy and kindness: God's mercy is portrayed as a forgiving love, and kindness as a sensitivity to human needs, including poverty. These divine attributes were embodied by Saint Nicholas in his conduct.

Mass formularies are the most prominent liturgical sources in which Saint Nicholas is portrayed as an educator. In the Missal of Pius V, commonly known as the Tridentine Missal, the memorial of Saint Nicholas was classified as a third-class feast.<sup>19</sup> The corresponding formulary is

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<sup>18</sup> A *typikon* is a collection of directives governing the order of Orthodox liturgical services. The first part contains general guidelines pertaining to the liturgical year. The second part, known as the *Synaxarion*, sets out the offices for each month and day and for the period determined by the Lenten Triodion (which is a liturgical book that describes the preparatory rites for Great Lent and the liturgies of Great Lent) and the Flowery Triodion, or *Pentecostarion* (which governs the Paschal Season, beginning with Palm Sunday). The third part contains variable hymns for the entire liturgical year, that is, *troparia*—the most common stanzas in Orthodox hymnody, whose content is closely linked to the liturgical season or feast being celebrated (e.g., a troparion for the Resurrection, a troparion in honor of the Mother of God, etc.), and *kontakia*—originally long and intricate hymns, now preserved in a shortened, single-stanza form and sung after the sixth ode of the canon during morning services.

<sup>19</sup> Bartłomiej Matczak, “Ewolucja formularzy mszalnych na wspomnienie św. Mikołaja Biskupa i Wyznawcy,” in *Św. Mikołaj Biskup Myry w wierze, pobożności,*

general in nature and speaks about pastors; the liturgical texts do not make any explicit references to the person of Saint Nicholas, instead offering a general form for honoring a saint.<sup>20</sup> On the basis of this formulary alone, it is not possible to draw any specific conclusions about Nicholas as an educator.

Following the liturgical reforms of the Second Vatican Council, the memorial of Saint Nicholas is now classified as optional. The corresponding formulary speaks about pastors, highlighting Nicholas's engagement in pastoral ministry—and in the salvation of the faithful in particular. Consequently, little can be said about Nicholas as an educator on the basis of this text, too.

#### 4. SAINT NICHOLAS AS AN EDUCATOR PRESENT IN FOLK TRADITION AND POPULAR PIETY

Much greater insight into Saint Nicholas's role as an educator can be gained by examining the folk traditions of certain geographical regions and tracing the historical development of his veneration.

In Orthodox spirituality, Saint Nicholas is typically portrayed as an educator of peasants or rural communities. Of the abundance of examples in this regard, the author has selected one that perfectly illustrates the above assertion.

Some narratives use opposites to highlight Saint Nicholas's concern for the well-being of peasants and rural communities, as demonstrated by the following two accounts:

1. Where were you, Saint Cassian?" asks the Creator. "I was walking to and fro across the earth," answers Cassian, "and I happened upon a peasant whose cart was stuck in the mud. He asked for my help to free it, but I was afraid I would soil my heavenly garments.

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*teologii i sztuce – dawniej i dziś*, ed. Katarzyna Parzych-Blakiewicz (Olsztyn: Warmińskie Wydawnictwo Diecezjalne, 2014), 264.

<sup>20</sup> See Matczak, "Ewolucja formularzy," 265ff.

2. And where did you get so filthy?" asks God of Nicholas. "I was roaming the land and happened to walk the same road," replies the Saint, "so I helped the peasant pull his cart out of the mud."<sup>21</sup>

The story then goes on to describe how God responded to the two saints:

Listen, Cassian," says the Lord, "you did not help the peasant, and for that reason, people will only honor your memory and celebrate services in your name once every four years. As for you, Nicholas, because you helped the man free his cart, you will have a feast, a service, and prayers twice each year."<sup>22</sup>

To further emphasize Saint Nicholas's exceptional virtues, some Orthodox folk tales speak of other saints committing sinful acts—for example, stealing horses or learning from the devil how to distill moonshine.<sup>23</sup> From a psychological point of view, such stories may also suggest that since saints are capable of sin, they are more understanding of human weaknesses and thus more likely to intercede for sinners before God. In the case of Saint Nicholas, the Orthodox folk tradition makes an exception by attributing to him certain personal traits that normally belong to God Himself. Like God, Nicholas is believed to be sinless and, at the same time, compassionate and merciful toward sinners.

The extent of Saint Nicholas's popularity among the rural population of Rus' is also reflected in songs that refer to him as God's successor, or even as God Himself.<sup>24</sup> Incidentally, this is not the only doctrinal error found in traditional Russian folk songs and proverbs, with one such proverb saying,

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<sup>21</sup> See Uspieński, *Kult św. Mikołaja*, 81–82.

<sup>22</sup> Uspieński, *Kult św. Mikołaja*, pp. 81–82.

<sup>23</sup> Moonshine is a high-proof liquor produced by peasants without official authorization.

<sup>24</sup> An example is the fourteenth-century *Akathist in Honor of Saint Nicholas*, which is a hymn of praise traditionally sung while standing, presumably written by the Patriarch of Constantinople, Isidore Buchiras. See Uspieński, *Kult św. Mikołaja*, 18.

for instance, that Saint Nicholas will take over the rule of the world when the good Lord grows old.<sup>25</sup>

Although the story of Saint Nicholas's life remains somewhat obscure and is not always grounded in historical facts, certain traits of his personality can be regarded as timeless and thus still relevant today. A critical examination of Nicholas's qualities as an educator gives rise to the question of whether folk tradition has only preserved his positive pedagogical attributes. The answer is that while the overwhelming majority of stories emphasize the positive aspects of the saint's character, there are also documents which, in a sense, reveal some negative features of his personality.

An *encomium* composed in the eighth century in honor of Saint Nicholas<sup>26</sup>—traditionally attributed to Bishop Andrew of Crete<sup>27</sup>—compares him to Old Testament figures and to the disciples of Jesus. Andrew likens Nicholas's personal virtues to those of biblical figures, asserting that “in righteousness, he in no way fell short of them.”<sup>28</sup> A careful reading of the speech reveals that the personality traits ascribed by Andrew to Nicholas are those that belong to Christ Himself. Just as Jesus calmed the storm on the lake (see Mark 4:35–41), so too Nicholas reportedly calmed a sea storm, allowing grain ships to reach the port of Lycia safely.<sup>29</sup> Also originating in the eighth century is the earliest known biography of Saint Nicholas, written by Archimandrite Michael. Despite historical inaccuracies, the text conveys a strong moral and spiritual message, particularly so in the story of Nicholas providing dowries for the three daughters of an impoverished noble.<sup>30</sup> The biography emphasizes several positive traits of Nicholas's character:

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<sup>25</sup> See Uspieński, *Kult św. Mikołaja*, 18.

<sup>26</sup> The speech became extremely popular, as evidenced by the existence of around seventy manuscript copies. See Naumowicz, “Św. Mikołaj,” 15–17.

<sup>27</sup> Andrew of Crete (born c. 650 in Damascus, died July 4, 712 or 726 or 740) was the Bishop of Gortyna (Crete) and a theologian, hymnographer, and homilist. He is venerated as a saint in both the Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church.

<sup>28</sup> See Naumowicz, “Św. Mikołaj,” 15–17.

<sup>29</sup> See Naumowicz, “Św. Mikołaj,” 15–17.

<sup>30</sup> See Naumowicz, “Św. Mikołaj,” 12.

- (1) As a shepherd, he cared for the faithful and, in particular, strove to protect them from sin.
- (2) He was sensitive to the needs of others, as exemplified by the act of delivering pouches of gold for the sisters' dowries under the cover of night.
- (3) The manner in which he gave the gifts to the young women reflected Christ's teaching: "Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward" (Matt. 6:2, ESV). This principle is meant to ensure that the recipient is not humiliated and that the giver receives a far greater reward. For that reason, Christ provides further guidance to the benefactor: "But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you" (Matt. 6:3–4).
- (4) When he was caught by the nobleman, Nicholas bound him under oath not to reveal his identity. This marks yet another step in pursuit of a Gospel-inspired attitude that manifests itself in humility and leads one to love one's neighbor—an attitude that is modeled on the example of Christ.

There are also writings in Russian folklore which suggest that Saint Nicholas possessed some negative personality traits. However, it is important to note that what might be deemed negative in light of the Gospel may still be judged favorably in the context of folk tradition. Uspenskij notes that "the general idea in Russian folklore is that Nicholas may deceive God<sup>31</sup> in order to defend the poor [...] in this case, he saves a poor widow's cow."<sup>32</sup> He also quotes a story that reverses the earlier account (legend) by saying that "it is God who deceives Nicholas and saves the peasant's

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<sup>31</sup> In many hymns and prayers, God is described as "awesome," "incomprehensible," "enthroned upon the cherubim," "wielding lightnings," and so on. In other words, these texts portray God as being unfavorably disposed towards a person in need or distress.

<sup>32</sup> Here, Uspienski references Aleksandr Nikolaevich Afanasyev, *Narodnye russkie legendy* [*Russian Folk Legends*] (Kazan: Molodye Sily, 1914), 3b. See Uspienski, *Kult św. Mikołaja*, 69.

harvest, which means that Nicholas is presented as a fearsome, punitive force, seemingly independent of God.”<sup>33</sup>

In the religious tradition of the common Russian people, Nicholas is most often portrayed as the guardian of livestock. According to Uspenskij, “Nicholas’s connection with cattle is manifested in numerous rituals. [...] The celebration of *Nikol’shchina* was accompanied by a liturgical service (*molieben*), the sprinkling of cattle with holy water, and the offering of sacrifices.”<sup>34</sup> Interestingly, celebrations in honor of Saint Nicholas involved drinking—a practice which, according to Uspenskij, “was widespread and ritual in character [...]. They [the Russians] consider it improper and inappropriate not to become intoxicated with wine or vodka on that day.”<sup>35</sup> It is difficult to determine with certainty whether this practice resulted in the introduction of specific verbs in Russian, that is, *nikolit’* (meaning “to drink, to become drunk, to celebrate”) and *nanikolit’sa* (meaning, more specifically, “to get drunk on Saint Nicholas Day”).

It is also astonishing to see how folk tradition transposed the educational role of Saint Nicholas into a timeless dimension. Belief in an afterlife—imagined as a pasture in which one of the gods would tend the souls of the dead—had already existed in European pagan cultures,<sup>36</sup> but it was Christianity that introduced a qualitative shift in the understanding of life after death through the resurrection of Christ. Nonetheless, while Christian views undoubtedly exerted some influence on pagan conceptions regarding the afterlife, these two ways of thinking continued to interpenetrate for many centuries. The common people believed in eternal life, but it was a belief that, on the one hand, drew on biblical sources, such as the image of the worm that never dies and gnaws at the flesh of a sinner, and on the other, was permeated with pagan mythological imagery, such as that of hell envisioned as a serpent (or worm). This dichotomy appears to have been ultimately resolved by the Second Vatican Council,

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<sup>33</sup> Uspieński, *Kult św. Mikołaja*, 71. The story is quoted after: Pavel Vasilyevich Shein, *Materialy dlya izucheniya byta i yazyka russkogo naseleniya Severo-Zapadnogo kraya* [*Materials for the Study of the Life and Language of the Russian Population of the North-western Region*], vol. 2 (St. Petersburg: Imperial Academy of Sciences, 1893), 265–367.

<sup>34</sup> Uspieński, *Kult św. Mikołaja*, 75–76.

<sup>35</sup> Uspieński, *Kult św. Mikołaja*, 77.

<sup>36</sup> See Uspieński, *Kult św. Mikołaja*, 91.

which redefined eternal life as joyful communion with the loving God. Hagiopedagogy played a significant role in this process, portraying saints as practical educators who demonstrate how this dimension of life can be attained. This perspective was also creatively affirmed by the Congress of Christian Pedagogy organized by Akademia Jagiellońska in Toruń.<sup>37</sup> The motto of the Congress, *Educatio permanet in aeternum* (Education endures forever), emphasizes that the most important aspect of education is the transmission of values that do not depreciate with time. The inclusion of this timeless dimension in education contributes meaningfully to the development of correct attitudes—such as the rejection of excessive attachment to material possessions.

## 5. PERSONAL QUALITIES OF SAINT NICHOLAS AS AN EDUCATOR

### 5.1. SAINT NICHOLAS AS A ROLE MODEL FOR THE CONTEMPORARY EDUCATOR

Anna Zellma provides some very insightful and thought-provoking reflections on Saint Nicholas as a role model in school-based religious education.<sup>38</sup> As she rightly notes, while role models significantly contribute to the educational process, recent developments show their diminishing presence and, in many cases, even devaluation in contemporary pedagogy. Furthermore, in the conclusion of her article, Zellma states that Saint Nicholas is treated marginally in religious instruction, which is due, in part, to the lack of well-prepared catechetical materials. On that basis, she surmises that children and young people do not perceive Saint Nicholas

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<sup>37</sup> Five editions of the Congress have taken place to date: the first edition addressed contemporary challenges facing education; the second edition focused on communication within the family and at school; the third edition explored opportunities and threats in family-based education; the fourth edition examined the role of values in education; and the fifth edition dealt with education in the digital world.

<sup>38</sup> Anna Zellma, “Święty Mikołaj jako wzór osobowy w szkolnym nauczaniu religii? (przyczynek do dyskusji),” in *Św. Mikołaj Biskup Myry w wierze, pobożności, teologii i sztuce – dawniej i dziś*, ed. Katarzyna Parzych-Blakiewicz (Olsztyn: Warmińskie Wydawnictwo Diecezjalne, 2014), 269–280.

as an educational role model; she also offers many compelling suggestions as to how this problem could be remedied.<sup>39</sup>

## 5.2. THE DIALOGICAL EDUCATOR<sup>40</sup>

In the case of Saint Nicholas, it is also possible to speak of a symbolic dimension to his pedagogy. In the liturgy, a symbol signifies the living presence of a person within a sign. For instance, after consecration at Mass, the host is no longer perceived merely as bread visible to the eye, but as a Person—that is, as Jesus, present in the faith of believers. This dialogical character of education seems to be particularly relevant today, at a time when interpersonal communication has nearly ground to a halt. According to Martin Buber, dialogue may occur between two subjects (individual–group, group–individual, or individual–individual).<sup>41</sup> Importantly, the word “may” sets specific conditions for such dialogue, requiring the presence of both goodwill and a desire to serve. In this context, the educator accompanies the student in achieving full personal development.<sup>42</sup> The pedagogy of educational dialogue touches upon existential love as a personal value. In addition to imparting the values that should be embodied through the pupil’s life, the educator also offers the most precious gift—that of his or her own person.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>39</sup> According to the author, this conclusion is based on a cursory analysis of the available textbooks and catechetical materials, which is why she suggests further research in that respect. See Zellma, “Św. Mikołaj jako wzór,” 278–279.

<sup>40</sup> Katarzyna Parzych-Blakiewicz, “Dialog dzieł na przykładzie chrześcijańskiej symboliki Mikołajowej,” in *Św. Mikołaj Biskup Myry w wierze, pobożności, teologii i sztuce – dawniej i dziś*, ed. Katarzyna Parzych-Blakiewicz (Olsztyn: Warmińskie Wydawnictwo Diecezjalne, 2014), 304–311.

<sup>41</sup> See Martin Buber, *Ja i Ty. Wybór pism filozoficznych* (Warsaw: Instytut Wydawniczy PAX, 1992), 23ff.

<sup>42</sup> See Marek Szulakiewicz, *Dialog i metafizyka* (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek, 2006), 247ff.

<sup>43</sup> See Łukasz Kamykowski, *Dialog według Biblii. Wstęp do poszukiwań* (Kraków: Papieska Akademia Teologiczna, 2008), 28ff; Katarzyna Parzych, “Dialog jako wymiana darów w perspektywie dialogu międzyreligijnego według myśli Jana Pawła II,” in *Filozofia dialogu*, vol. 4, ed. Józef Baniak (Poznań: Wydawnictwo UAM, 2006), 170–200.

### 5.3. THE KERYGMATIC EDUCATOR

The term *kerygma* is used to denote the proclamation of the Good News concerning the crucified and risen Christ. A kerygmatic educator does not merely teach or justify this truth, but rather guides the pupil to experience and internalize the fact that God as teacher loves every person in his or her unique life circumstances.<sup>44</sup> What made (and continues to make) Saint Nicholas's kerygmatic pedagogy unique is the fact that during a period in the history of the Church when God was portrayed as a stern educator who only punishes human wrongdoings (sins), Nicholas held the conviction that God is merciful; he believed that God forgives unconditionally and shows a particular kind of love for the poor—a group which, from a theological perspective, also includes sinners. In this sense, Nicholas's attitude closely mirrors that of Jesus, who famously declared: "I came not to call the righteous, but sinners" (Matt. 9:13).<sup>45</sup>

### 5.4. OPENNESS TO OTHERS AND SELFLESS ALTRUISM

Experiences of harm or injustice leave emotional traces that induce individuals to adopt defensive attitudes, sometimes even leading to withdrawal. Without having a fact-based biography of Saint Nicholas to rely on, it is difficult to ascertain whether he encountered such unpleasant events in his lifetime. If he did, however, his conduct as an educator suggests that they bore fruit in the form of positive personal traits. Openness to others

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<sup>44</sup> See Anna Rondonańska, "Kerymatyczne założenia symboliki św. Mikołaja w obchodach świąt Bożego Narodzenia," in *Św. Mikołaj Biskup Myry w wierze, pobożności, teologii i sztuce – dawniej i dziś*, ed. Katarzyna Parzych-Blakiewicz (Olsztyn: Warmińskie Wydawnictwo Diecezjalne, 2014), 174–179.

<sup>45</sup> Sinners are those who are unable to overcome their own weaknesses or their lack of willpower. They constantly fall and continually fail in their resolutions to change. They are precisely the ones of whom Jesus speaks when He says that He has come for those who are unwell. He refers to them as being poor in spirit, that is, wholly dependent on God to free them from their weaknesses. They are people of faint spirit who repeatedly fall into the same sins. They are incapable of reforming themselves and breaking free from recurring transgressions. They are powerless in the face of their own sinfulness.

and selflessness in serving them are among the saint's most distinctive features. His willingness to help others without expecting anything in return became legendary and is one of the principal reasons for which he continues to be held in such high regard.

Another virtue commonly attributed to Saint Nicholas is generosity. While the legendary gesture of giving dowries to the three poor sisters is perhaps the most well-known example of his benevolence, it is by no means the only one. Many other narratives speak of his willingness to share his wealth with those in need of assistance.

Saint Nicholas is regarded as an educator who deeply loved children. All the legends and stories about him emphasize his affection and care for the youngest members of society. It is for them that he travels the world every year to deliver gifts and spread joy.

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