

## ФІЛОСОФІЯ РЕЛІГІЇ PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

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### CHRISTIAN CATECHUMENAL COMMUNITY: VOCATION AND MEANING

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#### Abstract

The peculiarities of the functioning of Christian communities are highlighted using the examples of the Neocatechumenal Way and Light-Life movements, which were created for the purpose of catechizing adults in the conditions of deepening secularization, the spread of individualism, consumerism, the formalization of Christianity and the spiritual crisis in society. The tasks of the movements are comprehensive catechization, systematic Christian education, which is carried out through three main elements: the Word of God, the Liturgy and the Community, passage of certain stages that last for years and are designed to help the formation of mature faith, the thorough personal transformation of a person, which is manifested in a deeper knowledge of one's own essence, one's life reality, changing relations with God and other people. It is justified that significant attention in the Neocatechumenal Way and Light-Life movements is paid to communities that are considered indispensable in the implementation of catechesis. Due to its vertical (connection with God) and horizontal (connection with other people) dimensions, community becomes a necessary condition for spiritual conversion and growth. On the example of these movements it was found that Christian communities are a challenge and an alternative to the values of individualism, materialism, and the tendency to reduce the attention and demands of a person to his spiritual and moral level. They remind of the need to maintain openness, patience, readiness for difficulties in relationships, which contributes to growth in faith and the formation of relationships with other people. Christian communities need thorough scientific research that will contribute to a better understanding of their phenomenon, relevance, and value for modern people. It is important that leaders and representatives of religious communities are open to them, in particular, to interviews, questionnaires for the purpose of their thorough study, and comparisons, as such studies can, among other things, refute unfounded preconceived notions that may arise about them.

**Key words:** catechization, Neocatechumenal Way, Light-Life Movement, secularization, Catholic Church, community, society.

**Problem statement.** The deepening of the processes of modernization, urbanization, secularization, anomie, the spread of individualistic guidelines, political, socio-economic uncertainty causes the growth of loneliness, alienation, mistrust, and social isolation between people in modern society. The desire for self-sufficiency prompts to increasingly perceive others as objects, a threat to one's own desires, space, to filling the inner world with superficial, virtual communications, material things, entertainment. The lack of high-quality human interaction has a detrimental effect on people psychologically – excessive individualism, superficial communication does not bring happiness, a sense of the fullness of life, which is possible only in real human relationships in communities. Community is important for every person and today the negative consequences of its absence

are obvious, so not only the family but also other communities are necessary because they reduce the negative consequences of modern autonomous existence. In them, a person feels significant and needed, learns to love, share his experiences with others, receives help in difficult life circumstances and helps himself, celebrates important events together, gets to know himself better.

For thousands of years, the most common communities have been religious. However, with secularization – the reduction of the influence of the church in society, the privatization of religion, more and more people do not have a clear affiliation to any religious community, guided by the well-known principle expressed by G. Davey «to believe but not to belong» and when they attend the service, they hardly know each other or do not know each other at all,

Religious communities in Ukraine have historically conducted spiritual, cultural, educational, and political activities, an example of which is church brotherhoods. Currently, there are various

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religious organizations operating in Ukraine, which pay considerable attention in their doctrine to communities, which are considered as a necessary means of spiritual conversion and development of the individual, designed to make Christianity more influential in society. The search for the organization of communities in accordance with Christian guidelines led to both the revival of historical models and practices and the invention of new ones, among which the Neocatechumenal Way and Light-Life stand out – movements that arose in the Catholic Church in the second half of the 20th century and operate in various countries of the world and in Ukraine in particular (in the RCC and UGCC). They are practically unstudied in domestic historiography, like many other religious organizations.

The article primarily uses the statute and materials of the catechisms conducted by the founders of the «Neocatechumenal Road» movement K. Arguello and C. Hernandez (5,6,9,15,16), the works of Polish researchers on the functioning of the Light-Life movement and the views of its founder Fr. Blachnicki (12,17,19), research on Christian communities by D. Bonhoeffer (4).

**The purpose** of the article is to analyze the peculiarities of the teachings and activities of the communities in the Neocatechumenal Way and Light-Life movements, to consider their role in the spiritual growth of a person and the values that guide and shape them.

**Outline of the main material.** The Neocatechumenal Way and Light-Life movements were created for the purpose of evangelization, recognized by the Catholic Church and are a kind of implementation of the instructions of the II Vatican Council on the need to restore pastoral care for adults – catechesis those who received the sacrament of baptism in childhood, since formal church membership without active faith is not sufficient for salvation. Both movements emphasize the importance of education in the faith – catechumenate, which in the early church Christians experienced during the period of preparation for baptism and the need for its renewal.

Although these movements have many different organizational foundations, they have in common an emphasis on three components on the way to Christian conversion: the Word of God, the Liturgy and the Community (Jastrębski, 2014: 207), (Oskwarek, 2009: 100). Communities formed as a result of catechisms go through various stages of formation that last for years and lead to the formation of a mature faith, a thorough transformation

of the personality, a deeper knowledge of oneself, one's life reality, and a change in relations with God and other people.

The Neocatechumenal Way and Light-Life movements critically assess a person as a product of modern civilization, in particular Fr. Blachnicki characterized it as incomplete, a consumer, aimed at achieving, managed, instead proposing the formation of an integrated person who owns himself, is self-realized through service, and is free (Herma, 2021: 174). Along with the transformation of the individual spiritual life of its members, the Light-Life movement considers the construction of a «new community» of «new people» to be its tasks, which would give evidence to the wider social environment through the correspondence between the actual way of life of its members and their ideas and principles, to transform the parishes of the community «newborn» people, both laymen and clergy, who would take full responsibility for the improvement and spread of the Christian way of life, as well as transformation of the whole society. The main activities of the movement are meetings in groups, summer spiritual camps, spiritual training, religious ceremonies. In addition to general meetings once a week, there is a second type of meetings in small groups with a similar level of religiosity of initiation, where communication is informal and includes not only joint prayer, but also sharing of one's own experiences, successes and problems (Załęcki, 1995: 184-187). Regular meetings of small groups also take place in the Neocatechumenal Way – twice a week at the Liturgy of the Word and the Eucharist, monthly Liturgies of penance, Convivences. An important element in the Neocatechumenate is the «Echo of the Word» when, in the presence of other members of the community during the Eucharist or the Liturgy of the Word, people interpret passages from the Bible in the light of their own lives. Growth in faith in the community occurs due to the experience of being together when people share their reflections, experiences, and help each other solve problems.

The need for community in the process of catechesis and strengthening of faith noted cardinal J. Ratzinger: «One cannot evangelize with words alone; The Gospel creates life, creates a community that goes together; Purely individual conversion does not have a solid foundation» (Cited by: Babiński, 2020: 40). This task is indicated by C. Hernandez: «Evangelization is the mission of the entire Church, not just bishops and priests. The church is united by people, people of God, who evangelize» (Cammino,

2000: 203). In small communities, unlike large parishes where relations between believers are anonymous, people have the opportunity to learn love, show their faith in practice by helping each other in various situations and thus be an example for others (Orientamenti, 1974: 89-91).

The significance of the religious community is indicated by J. Milbank as providing an effective way for a true Christian life, which modern Christians can only do in the way that was relevant for the first Christians as well – in a community that best corresponds to the characteristics that define the true spirit of Christianity – to be one body, cooperate and co-create (Горохолінська, 2019: 187). According to S. Žižek, the essence of Christianity is rituals and organizational and social aspects, not inner piety. Although spirituality or inner piety may be an important component of many religious traditions, it is not necessarily the essence of religiosity, the true core of Christianity as an organization, community and practice, since a vague spirituality does not limit a believer who can continue to lead sinful and exploitative lifestyle, remaining a spiritualist (Weber, 2021: 130-131).

The importance of communities is also confirmed by research, which shows that former religious preachers who left the church due to disappointment in faith felt the absence of a religious community in their lives. Many of them indicated that community and fellowship were among the things they lacked from their past vocations and recognized the need for such communities for non-believers in which there would be service, people nearby, who care for each other (Delaney, 2016: 58, 91).

Christian communities are not an expression of escape, solitude amidst the hustle and bustle of the world, but a place where the Church actualizes itself as a sacrament – a sign and instrument of the union of people with God: «The Church is only then present in the world as the Church of Christ, as a sacrament, when it is embodied in concrete, interpersonal, fraternal meaning of the community. In another way, we can say that the Church either exists in the realized fraternal community, or it is completely absent in the world» (Cited by: Oskwarek, 2009: 31). The Neocatechumenal Way and Light-Life movements emphasize life in the community through acceptance of responsibility for the community, acceptance of certain service, diaconia based on one's charisma (Marczewski, 2016: 113). According to the conviction of the founder of the Light-Life movement Fr. Blachnicki, a person is destined to

live in a community, which makes it possible to recognize charisms – gifts that everyone received for the development of the Church (Wilczyńska, 2023: 19-29). In his opinion, the catechumenate is a «translation» of theory into the practice of parish life. The process of community building, the implementation of the Church in the community consists of three stages: evangelization, initiation (catechumenate), diakonia because «a Christian community can exist only as a community of charisms and services. You cannot join the community otherwise than by joining, actualizing your charisms, that is, by diakonia. Otherwise, we will get a model of the Church divided into shepherds and sheep, into an active and responsible element and a passive controlled element, which is a denial of the concept of community, based on the awareness of all members of their active co-responsibility» (Cited by: Marczewski, 2016: 112-117).

These movements embody the concept of a Christian community that is not limited to a social horizontal dimension, but is primarily a community with God in Christ and Holy Spirit, as the image of the Church. The vertical aspect of the community indicates unity with God through Christ in Holy Spirit, which creates an objective basis for the unity of people in the community, which is a sign of a single Church, which is expressed and concentrated in the Eucharistic community (Biela, 2008). The meeting with Christ takes place not only in word, sacrament and prayer, but also in neighbors who, opening up to each other, in a position of service and self-giving, become a source of life. In the Christian community, a person with a selfish worldview is transformed into a new one – who gives himself to others, the basis of his lifestyle is «agape» – selfless, evangelical love that brings joy from communication with other people, mutual sharing. Such communities are considered as a basis and tool for building the life of the church (Oskwarek, 2009: 90).

The peculiarity of the Christian community is the action of God's grace, the Holy Spirit, without which selfishness, a kind of absorption of a person or a community by another person manifests itself in relationships between people when, as D. Bonhoeffer emphasize: «one soul acts directly on another soul. The weak was defeated by the strong, the resistance of the weak was broken under the influence of another person. Human love is directed towards another person for its own sake, seeks direct contact with another person; she loves her not as a free person, she binds herself, she wants to win by all means, and not to serve another person» (Bonhoeffer, 1954:

33-34). He notes that «in a spiritual community there is never a «direct» relationship between one person and another, while the human community expresses a deep, elementary human desire for direct contact with other human souls»(Ibid: 32). Spiritual love comes from Jesus Christ and His Word, serves only Him and does not have direct access to other persons, will respect the boundary between others and us, will find full communication with him in Christ, who alone unites us (Ibid: 35-36).

Many Christians long for the experience of community, expecting that religious meetings will be comfortable for them, bring new acquaintances, positive emotions, other people will correspond to their ideas, will be similar to them. However, an authentic Christian community has its own challenges and demands on a person, as K. Arguello emphasizes, it is something much bigger, it is beyond the control and the comfort zone, the real Christian community is a struggle, it requires a change, a renewal of thinking, which is impossible if people remain in line with the priorities and expectations of the world. The community helps everyone to learn the truth of their life, who we are, to see our dark sides more clearly, to what extent we are capable of loving, hating, complaining (Orientamenti, 1974: 89-91). In the Neocatechumenal Way it is especially emphasized that the community helps to discover in oneself the need for conversion and strengthening in faith: defects, differences, the inability to love others as they are, proof that unity is the fruit of the Holy Spirit. As neocatechumens grow, faith begins to show signs of *koinonia*: non-judgment, non-resistance to evil, forgiveness and love for the enemy. *Koinonia* manifests itself in helping the needy, the sick, the elderly, those who are on a mission (Cordova, 2021: 122). In the Christian community, notes Kiko Arguello, false ideas are destroyed when people think that the community will make them happy, when they want to find in it only love and mutual help, friends, «a club of good people who will help us make our lives even more bourgeois» and when this ideal is destroyed, people are disappointed and often leave the community or, relying on God, remain in it (Orientamenti, 1977: 24).

The same aspects were emphasized by the D. Bonhoeffer, noting that the Christian community is not a spiritual sanatorium where a person goes to escape from himself, to distract himself from loneliness for a short time but is a spiritual, not a mental reality and therefore it is not an ideal, but a divine reality, and thus it is absolutely different from all other

communities. When a person is looking for some special social experience that he has not found anywhere else, then the Christian community is in the greatest danger of all, because the ideas about what a common Christian life should be do not always correspond to reality, and the sooner this shock of disappointment comes to the individual and the community, the better for them, since he who loves his dream of community more than the Christian community itself becomes a destroyer of the latter, even if his personal intentions may be honest, serious and sacrificial (Bonhoeffer, 1954: 27, 76).

In the community, it is important to learn patience, to accept the suffering and sins of others, because «cross is an opportunity to love, lose oneself and meet another» (Cammino, 2000: 161). As noted by K. Arguello, suffering, problems in relationships exist so that a person does not belittle, does not reduce his life to small things, these are events that God allows for conversion, because life is something serious, it must go in tension towards something more important than everyday problems, material things (Orientamenti, 1977: 21). A consumer society in which a person seeks first of all material security, tries to live happily without problems, thus alienates himself from his mission and the salvation of the soul and destroys his life because family, career, success, even escape into religion cannot give happiness (Ibid: 111), therefore, difficulties and suffering become means through which God puts in a situation when alienation is no longer possible (Ibid: 37). It is emphasized that faith means burdening oneself with the sins of another, so people often find that they have very little faith. The initial period of catechumenate (precatechuenate) has an important mission, which consists in destroying pride under the influence of the Word of God, knowing one's weak, dark sides. As indicated by K. Arguello, the first thing a neocatechumen does is to put a person in front of his true reality, to cultivate humility, which leads to knowing the real truth about oneself, internal simplification, purification, when a person learns to know the action of God in life events (Ibid: 155), realizes his own little faith, pride in misunderstandings and disputes in the community, false ideas about the community, the desire to see only love and mutual help in the community (Cammino, 1999: 48-49).

The catechisms emphasize that faith means allowing yourself to be burdened by the sins of others, and the Word of God, the Eucharist and the community help neocatechumens to gradually get rid of false ideas about themselves and God and come to their



reality as sinners who need conversion and discover the love of Christ (Droga, 2008: 13-15). Such discovery of the truth about oneself, one's own weakness is difficult, therefore it is important to be humble towards oneself and others, which contributes to a clearer understanding of oneself, opens the door to a real community life. This is also noted by J. Greenman: if a person neglects the step of humility, the community remains elusive. Without humility, the gifts, talents, and contributions of each church member will remain underappreciated, and failure to see and appreciate the importance of each church member can only hinder or threaten the community (Greenman, 2018).

**Conclusions.** The Neocatechumenal Way and Light-Life movements are a response to serious problems that exist in modern society marked by a crisis of faith, excessive individualism, moral relativism and are in accordance with the resolutions of the II Vatican Council regarding the need for catechizing adults. Understanding Christianity not just as a system of religious instructions, but a way of life, the movements developed a system of catechisms, stages based on three key elements: the Word of God, the Liturgy and Community, which lead to a deepening of faith and a change in lifestyle. Considerable attention in the movements is given to communities, which are seen as particularly important tools

for the formation of a mature faith. In modern society, catechumenal communities embody and nurture love, attention, and mutual support between people – values that are necessary for a full life, but become less present in modern society when a person seeks to protect himself from dangers from the «other». Such communities remind us of the need to maintain openness to the «other», patience, readiness for difficulties and unpredictability in relationships, which helps to form deep relationships with other people and grow in faith. It is also worth emphasizing that an important task today is to increase religious literacy, since its deficiency creates barriers for a comprehensive, unbiased understanding of religion. Religion is often presented inaccurately or even perceived as extremist – 63% of religious media content portrays faith and religious institutions in a negative light (Faith in Action, 2024). Christian communities need thorough scientific research, which will contribute to a better understanding of their phenomenon, relevance, and value for modern man. It is important that leaders and representatives of religious communities are open to them, in particular, this concerns the conduct of interviews, questionnaires for the purpose of their thorough study, comparison, since such studies are capable of, among other things, to disprove unfounded preconceived notions that may arise about them.

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## **ХРИСТІЯНСЬКА КАТЕХУМЕНАЛЬНА СПІЛЬНОТА: ПОКЛИКАННЯ ТА ЗНАЧЕННЯ У СУЧАСНОМУ СУСПІЛЬСТВІ**

### **Анотація**

Висвітлюються особливості функціонування християнських спільнот на прикладі рухів Неокатехуменальна Дорога та Світло-Життя, створених з метою здійснення катехизації дорослих в умовах поглиблення секуляризації, поширення індивідуалізму, споживацтва, формалізації християнства та духовної кризи в суспільстві. Мета статті – проаналізувати особливості вчення та діяльності спільнот рухів «Неокатехуменальна дорога» та «Світло життя», розглянути їхню роль у духовному зростанні людини та цінності, якими вони керуються і формуються. Завданнями рухів є всебічна катехизація, систематичне християнське виховання, що здійснюється через три головні елементи: Слово Боже, Літургію та Спільноту та проходження певних етапів, які тривають упродовж років та покликані допомагати формуванню зрілої віри, ґрунтовній особистісній трансформації людини, що проявляється у глибшому пізнанні власної сутності, своєї життєвої реальності, зміні стосунків з Богом та іншими людьми. Обґрунтовано, що значна увага в рухах Неокатехуменальна Дорога та Світло-Життя приділяється спільнотам, які вважаються незамінними у здійсненні катехизації. Завдяки своєму вертикальному (зв'язок з Богом) та горизонтальному (зв'язок з іншими людьми) вимірах спільнота постає необхідною умовою духовного навернення та зростання. На прикладі цих рухів з'ясовано, що християнські спільноти є викликом та альтернативою домінуючим в суспільстві цінностям індивідуалізму, матеріалізму, тенденції до зменшення уваги та вимог людини до свого духовного та морального рівня. Вони нагадують про необхідність зберігати відкритість, терпіння, готовність до труднощів у взаємовідносинах, що сприяє зростанню у вірі та формуванню стосунків з іншими людьми. Християнські спільноти потребують ґрунтовних наукових досліджень, які сприятимуть кращому розумінню їхнього феномену, актуальності та цінності для сучасної людини. Важливо, щоб лідери та представники релігійних громад були відкриті до них, зокрема, це стосується проведення інтерв'ю, анкетування з метою їх ґрунтового вивчення, порівняння, оскільки такі дослідження здатні, серед іншого, спростувати необґрунтовані упереджені уявлення, які можуть виникнути про них.

**Ключові слова:** катехизація, Неокатехуменальна Дорога, Світло-Життя, секуляризація, католицька церква, спільнота, суспільство.

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