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**Developing intercultural competences of Polish religion teachers  
in the context of refugees from Ukraine: in theory and practice**

The aim of this article is to seek an answer to the following question: Do religion teachers have the opportunity to learn and develop skills in the areas necessary to support refugees from Ukraine? If so, how should this be done? To address the issue, the problem of intercultural relations was first presented in a synthetic manner, based on the perspective of the socio-political conditions that underpinned educational initiatives for the development of intercultural competence by teachers of religion. An attempt was then made to define basic concepts such as multiculturalism, interculturalism, intercultural competence and intercultural competence, as directly related to teachers of religion. The next stage of the research directly referenced practice by defining the necessary forms and specific actions in developing the intercultural competence of teachers of religion. A descriptive method, one of the qualitative methods, was applied to answer the questions posed. This method was used to assess the state of intercultural competence of religion teachers in a Polish school.

**Key words:**

education, Ukrainian refugees, intercultural competencies

## **Developing intercultural competences of Polish religion teachers in the context of refugees from Ukraine: in theory and practice**

### **Introduction**

The proper expression of human existence is culture. Not only does man come into the world and grow in it, but he also creates, expresses and finds his affirmation in it. Today, this principle is being subjected to new trends and influences because the world is becoming a global village thanks to the intensive development of advanced information and communication technology; while at the same time, it must face the serious challenges of emigration, migration and refugees. Therefore, a special task for human beings as 'social animals' is to address the issue of multicultural and intercultural communication with understanding, as theory and practice in this matter can play a considerable role in building good relations in the space of such a diverse humanity (Kapciak and Korporowicz and Tyszka 1996; Shaules 2014). Due to the desire for better living conditions, escape from totalitarian rule and freedom of movement, the issues of migration, emigration and refugees are on the rise in the modern world. So far in Poland, this problem has been relatively minor; however, the war in Ukraine changed the situation immensely almost in a flash. The scale of the exodus of citizens from war-affected Ukraine has made it essential not only to provide a place for refugees, but also to offer them a possibility to lead a relatively normal life. One of the areas that received a lot of public attention was Polish education. Nearly 200,000 pupils from Ukraine have been admitted to Polish schools (PAP/AT 2022). It is therefore a legitimate questing to ask whether Polish teachers, including religion teachers, are prepared to provide refugee students with the appropriate development and learning conditions.

### **Socio-political context**

24 February 2022 saw the Russian Federation's invasion of Ukraine, the date when the Russian-Ukrainian War began. This is an escalation of a conflict that has been in progress since 2014. Russia demanded to rule out the possibility of further enlargement of NATO, and to reduce the alliance's military potential in Central and Eastern Europe to its pre-1997 status. Ukrainians have united in resistance against the soldiers of the Russian Federation. Economic sanctions and symbolic measures have been implemented against Russia, e.g. exclusion of Russian national teams from major international sporting events (Długosz and Kryvachuk and Izdebska-Długosz 2022). As a result, Ukraine has received humanitarian and military aid. Just

before the start of military operations, thousands of Ukrainians crossed the country's western border and left for, among other countries, Poland (Długosz and Kryvachuk and Izdebska-Długosz 2022). Due to the imposition of martial law, men of Ukrainian nationality aged between 18 and 60 are barred from leaving the country. The vast majority of refugees from Ukraine are women and children (Długosz and Kryvachuk and Izdebska-Długosz 2022). According to the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees), 5,034,000 people had left Ukraine by 19 April 2022, of whom 2,825,000 have gone to Poland (“Ukraine Refugee Situation” 2022). In the following months, the rate of increase in the number of refugees decreased gradually. Data provided by the border guards indicate that from the first day of the war in Ukraine until the beginning of April 2022, departures of Ukrainian citizens to Poland increased. Since the beginning of Russia's invasion of Ukraine until December 2022, more than 8.3 million refugees from Ukraine have crossed the Polish-Ukrainian border. In the following weeks, inflows and outflows of individuals across the border with Ukraine were more balanced, but remained at elevated levels. At the beginning of May 2022, there was a temporary trend of more returnees from Poland to Ukraine than arrivals to the country (this trend later began to dominate). The main wave of refugee emigration therefore could be observed between the end of February and the beginning of April 2022. Some of the refugees crossing the Polish-Ukrainian border emigrated to other countries (mainly EU countries). In total, from 24 February 2022 to December 2022, more than 6.5 million people returned to Ukraine. An estimated 1.5 million women and children were in Poland in December 2022 (“Ilu uchodźców z Ukrainy jest w Polsce” 2022). Still, more refugees are crossing the Polish-Ukrainian border. The current situation can therefore be described as dynamic.

Immediately upon arrival in Poland, refugees are assisted primarily with accommodation, food, transport and basic information necessary during their stay in Poland. It is not only the Polish government, but also citizens who are providing assistance to Ukraine. The most frequently indicated forms of assistance are in-kind donations and cash assistance, either directly or through organisations (Główny Urząd Statystyczny 2022).

Research shows that it was the better-educated part of Ukrainian society that has arrived to Poland (Centrum Analiz i Badań UMP 2022). In the majority of cases, refugees have come primarily with their own children or with other people's children under their supervision. Most of them were accompanied by one or two children. The Polish government has therefore come up with an initiative for preschool and school education aimed at refugees (Ustawa z dnia 12 marca 2022 r. o pomocy obywatelom Ukrainy 2022; Ministerstwo Edukacji i Nauki 2022a; Kurzyńska-Chmiel 2022). Children are admitted to schools throughout the school year, and the

class in which the pupil will continue his or her education is determined on the basis of the sum of the completed years of schooling abroad. In the absence of relevant documents, a statement from the parents or guardians on the total years of education in the home country is required (Ustawa z dnia 12 marca 2022 r. o pomocy obywatelom Ukrainy 2022; Ministerstwo Edukacji i Nauki 2022a; Kurzyna-Chmiel 2022). Students from Ukraine without sufficient command of Polish can take additional Polish language classes, continue their education in the form of preparatory classes (preparatory unit) and benefit from additional remedial classes offered at school. Children and adolescents have access to psychological and pedagogical assistance (Ustawa z dnia 12 marca 2022 r. o pomocy obywatelom Ukrainy 2022; Ministerstwo Edukacji i Nauki 2022a; Ministerstwo Edukacji i Nauki 2022c; Ministerstwo Edukacji i Nauki 2022d; Kurzyna-Chmiel 2022; PAP/AT 2022; Ministerstwo Edukacji i Nauki 2022b).

December 2022 will see around 200,000 Ukrainian students in Polish schools. The situation has stabilised in relation to the past school year (until May 2022). Currently there are significantly more students taking classes with Polish peers; i.e. there has been a reduction in the number of students attending preparatory classes (Polski Instytut Ekonomiczny 2022). Among Ukrainian students studying in Poland, less than 8% attend preparatory classes in primary schools. In secondary schools, the number of Ukrainian students is still quite high, at close to 50%. There is also a clear concentration of students in the largest cities and their surrounding functional areas (Centrum Analiz i Badań UMP 2022). More than 17,800 refugee students from Ukraine are enrolled in establishments in Warsaw. This is the largest number in the country, accounting for more than 9% of all refugee students nationwide. Provincial capitals are also ranked next: Wrocław (7,900), Kraków (7,200) and Poznań (6,300). A large group of Ukrainian students residing in Poland (approximately 200,000) are remote learners. They use the Ukrainian education system and thus fulfil compulsory schooling from outside the borders of Ukraine. There is also a group of children and young people who do not function in the education systems of Central and Eastern Europe; they are outside of the remote learning system of Ukraine and the residential learning system in Poland (Polski Instytut Ekonomiczny 2022).

### **Research problem and method**

The primary objective of the research undertaken is to seek answers to the following questions: Do religion teachers have the opportunity to learn and develop skills in the areas necessary to support refugees from Ukraine? If so, how should this be done? The analyses undertaken in this study do not focus on all Ukrainians of different status residing in Poland, but only on children placed in Polish schools as a result of the war situation in Ukraine. The

authors are aware that in addition to Ukrainian children attending schools in Poland, there are students continuing their education in an online format and those who dropped out. The issues analysed concerning the development of intercultural competence among religion teachers raise a number of controversies. There are claims that religion teachers are not supported in developing intercultural competence in a way that meets the challenges of the presence of Ukrainian refugees in Poland. Such a critical approach does not take into account the multiple competences of religion teachers, including educational, communicative, and methodological ones. Entities responsible for the ongoing training of religion teachers in Poland (religious education departments, ongoing training centres for religion teachers) offer various activities related to the organisation of trainings that respond to the challenges of cultural pluralism in Polish schools. In our article, we tried to show both theoretical assumptions and attempts to support Polish religion teachers in developing intercultural competence. At the core of the issues addressed in the article lie the assumptions of intercultural education in Polish schools. The approach presented here shows attempts to shift from a theory of intercultural education and the pedagogy of religion to practice. So far, this issue has not received due attention in the scientific discourse of Polish researchers. The issues presented provide a basis for undertaking in-depth experimental research.

As the first stage of the research, an attempt was made to define basic concepts such as multiculturalism, interculturalism, intercultural competence and intercultural competence, relating them directly to teachers of religion. Next, the issue of intercultural relations was analysed from the perspective of the socio-political conditions that underpinned the intensive need for measures for teachers to acquire the acquisition of intercultural competence skills. The next stage of research is a direct reference to practice, forms and methods of working. The researchers reviewed the available literature and good practices to analyse issues related to the development of intercultural competence among religion teachers in Poland in light of new challenges related to the presence of Ukrainian students in Polish schools. The approach chosen was that of a review of literature and good practices due to its benefits, including the opportunity to present the current state of knowledge and practical activities, lower costs compared to experimental research, and the shorter time required to complete them. A review of literature and good practice offers reliable and evidence-based generalisations. To search for research analysis and analysis of good practices in Poland related to the development of intercultural competence of religion teachers in the situation of the presence of Ukrainian pupils in Polish schools, we have reviewed the websites of the Commission for Catholic Education of the Conference of Polish Catholic Bishops and all entities responsible for religious education in the

respective Polish dioceses. In the next stage of the research, we interviewed the directors of units that offer innovative solutions in the field of study regarding religion teachers. Moreover, three databases or search engines were used, namely Google Scholar, SCOPUS, and ERIC. Key words used in the search included religious lessons, intercultural competence, religious teachers, Ukrainian students, Polish schools, and refugees from Ukraine in Poland. The present analyses used only surveys that provided direct and reliable information.

A descriptive method, which is one of the qualitative methods, was applied to answer the questions posed. As a result of the use of this method, one can assess the intercultural competence of religion teachers in a Polish school. This method poses successive questions: who, what, when, where that enable analysis of the state of preparation of religion teachers for working with Ukrainian students/refugees. The descriptive method aims to obtain accurate data regarding the available offers for enhancing intercultural competences, the actors organising the various forms of their improvement, and the dynamics and timeliness of the proposed training in support of religion teachers.

**Key concepts: 'multiculturalism', 'interculturalism' and 'competence' as well as 'competence of religion teachers'**

In today's globalised world, issues of communicative competence affect everyone. Communication is sending and receiving information either verbally or nonverbally; but when the adjective 'intercultural' is added, then one can speak of communication between people raised in different cultures (Holliday and Hyde and Kullman 2021). Therefore, by definition, communication has its place wherever intercultural relations occur (Malinowski Rubio 2013). In view of the above, multiculturalism is a phenomenon associated with the presence in one area of groups with different languages, traditions, customs, religions and modes of social organisation. Interculturality, on the other hand, occurs when a person, by maintaining contact with other cultures, strengthens his or her identity, and develops his or her personality and ability to interact. Interculturality can be considered a kind of 'widening of the horizon' in a given society, not only in the recognition of existing differences, but also as an opening up to the otherness (e.g. novelty, difference) of people. Communicating and intertwining cultures remains a difficult and complicated task, and sometimes a perplexing necessity (Byram 2021; Lisica 2015; Byram and Zarate 1996). This is a particular task for Christians because, as Francis points out, "it is one thing to feel forced to live together, but something entirely different to value the richness and beauty of those seeds of common life that need to be sought out and cultivated" (Francis 2020). "While it is true that migrations often reveal failures and

shortcomings on the part of States and the international community, they also point to the aspiration of humanity to enjoy a unity marked by respect for differences, by attitudes of acceptance and hospitality” (Francis 2013).

Intercultural education has an indispensable role to play in this process, with the aim of creating equal living conditions for different groups within a given society. The intertwining of cultures is intended to lead to mutual enrichment and cooperation based on direct personal contacts, as well as transcending one's own culture and dialogue with representatives of other cultures (Zellma 2017). As Sarah Cox writes, this intertwining “allows further skills development for those working in language teaching” (Cox 2020, p. 31). This defines the main goal of intercultural education: to enable people to acquire the skills and readiness for prejudice-free encounters between representatives of different nationalities. This may be done formally (through educational programmes and educational institutions) and informally (through NGOs, social movements, libraries, theatres). Educational measures are designed to counter racism, discrimination and prejudice; promote promotion of cultural pluralism instead of cultural segregation and assimilation; and teach impartiality towards people from another country (Szkudlarek 2003). “Isolation and withdrawal into one’s own interests – as pope Francis rightly points out – are never the way to restore hope and bring about renewal. Rather, it is closeness; it is the culture of encounter. Isolation, no; closeness, yes. Culture clash, no; culture of encounter, yes” (Francis 2020). In this way, xenophobia (flight), domination (subordination) and adaptation (adjustment) are overcome in favour of integration (transnational empathy). As Aniela Róžańska observes, “The multicultural character of the modern world is determined, among other things, and perhaps above all, by the religious diversity of societies. Thus, the theory and practice of intercultural education should take into account religious issues, and religious education should take into account the multiculturalism of reality” (Róžańska 2017).

Another important concept relevant to the analyses undertaken is the term 'competence'. The specific nature of a teacher's work requires numerous competencies. This requirement applies to religious teachers as well (Cichosz 2006; Simiński 2021; Zellma 2013). Although the use of the term 'competence' may seem obvious at the first glance, as the literature cited below shows, it may be considered in various configurations, and distinguished by numerous subdivisions and types. According to the European Union Council document, key competencies are “defined as a combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes, [...] which all individuals need for personal fulfilment and development, employability, social inclusion, sustainable lifestyle, successful life in peaceful societies, health-conscious life management and active citizenship. [...] Skills such as critical thinking, problem solving, teamwork, communication and negotiation

skills, analytical skills, creativity, and intercultural skills are embedded throughout the key competences” (The Council of the European Union 2018).

The scope of the term 'competence' covers a wide area of content, and the difficulty in offering a single definition has been noted by numerous researchers (Simiński 2021; Soreca 2014; Zellma 2009, 2013; Bartmiński 2003; Misiaszek and Potocki 1995; Aumiller 1978). In the *New Pedagogical Dictionary*, Wincenty Okoń states that "in pedagogy, an ability for personal self-realisation, c[ompetence] is a basic condition for upbringing; an ability for specific task areas, c[ompetence] is considered the result of the learning process; the term communicative (linguistic) c[ompetence] denotes both linguistic proficiency and the ability for interpersonal communication" (Okoń 2001). The *Catholic Encyclopaedia's* definition of the term states that it is “the extent of a person's authority, action, knowledge or skill” (Bednarek 2002). An interpretation suggested by Maria Czerepaniak-Walczak, “the competence of a subject is its particular property, expressed in the demonstration, at the level set by social standards, of the ability to behave adequately, in the awareness of the need for and consequences of such behaviour, and in taking responsibility for it” (Czerepaniak-Walczak 1997) is undoubtedly useful in the analyses made. Teachers' competencies are therefore characterised by a closely related structure of knowledge, skills and attitudes, and their possession enables them to activate themselves and others (Konieczna-Kucharska 2015). Competencies of religion teachers are defined by the relevant state and state-church legal acts and documents of the Church (Ustawa z dnia 12 marca 2022 r. o pomocy obywatelom Ukrainy 2022; Ministerstwo Edukacji i Nauki 2019; Papieska Rada ds. Krzewienia Nowej Ewangelizacji 2020; Rada Konferencji Episkopatu Polski ds. Migracji, Turystyki i Pielgrzymek 2022) and are also the subject of analyses in catechetical literature (Zellma 2021a, 2021b, 2013, 2014; Cichosz 2019; Szpet 2010; Łabendowicz 2001).

The fact that teachers of religion undertake didactic, educational-preventive and evangelistic activities requires the efficient use of evangelistic-theological, social, communicative and didactic competencies (Łabendowicz 2021; Maj 2015; Zellma and Buchta and Cichosz 2022). Effectiveness of the work in this area is determined by both substantive and methodological skills, which is particularly important in a situation where society, including young people, is moving away from the Church (Zellma and Kielian and Czuprynski and van Dijk-Groeneboer 2022). Legitimising intercultural competence is undoubtedly necessary at all times, as every society has individuals rooted in other cultures. A specific nature of the teaching profession requires continuous acquisition and improvement intercultural competence, examples of which are media competencies and their importance in the context of the COVID-



19 pandemic and distance learning (Buchta and Cichosz and Zellma 2021; Buchta and Kaczmarek and Mandrysz 2020; Cichosz 2020; Drzewiecki 2013) or social (intercultural) competencies considered in the perspective of the war in Ukraine. Indeed, while it is believed that the development of the constituent elements of intercultural competence such as cooperation and otherness of those present in both national and local forums is a privilege of peacetime (Młynarczuk-Sokołowska 2014; Magala 2011), they prove to be extremely useful in the situation that Polish teachers found themselves facing when a large group of war refugees from Ukraine arrived.

Relating the above analyses to the topic of the research in question, intercultural competence is “the ability to communicate and interact with people belonging to a different culture/cultural circle, based on an understanding of their perception of the world” (Młynarczuk-Sokołowska 2014; Bem 2011), with each party having the same rights in the communication process. This means that all parties should be ready to meet others and be open to differences and mutual interaction (Frimberger 2016; Frimberger et al. 2018). Understanding and acceptance of another culture fosters peaceful coexistence and constructive resolution of conflicts that may arise (Nikitorowicz 2009). “The arrival of those who are different, coming from other ways of life and cultures, can be a gift, for ‘the stories of migrants are always stories of an encounter between individuals and between cultures. For the communities and societies to which they come, migrants bring an opportunity for enrichment and the integral human development of all’” (Francis 2020). In the process of developing intercultural competence, it is important to acquire so-called 'meta-orientation', which is the ability or readiness to undertake cultural interaction in a hitherto unfamiliar area, but with an awareness of pending new challenges and the need to revise previous ways of doing things (Cox 2020; Młynarczuk-Sokołowska 2014; Boski 2009). Following Francis' teaching, our response to the arrival of migrating people can be summarised by four words: welcome, protect, promote, and integrate (Francis 2017). “It is not a case of implementing welfare programmes from the top down but rather of undertaking a journey together through these four actions in order to build cities and countries that, while preserving their respective cultural and religious identity, are open to differences and know how to promote them in the spirit of human fraternity” (Francis 2020). Difficulties in welcoming, protecting, promoting, and integrating the unwanted can be seen by all, but the principal criterion, according to Francis, must not be preservation of one's own well-being but rather protection of human dignity (Rozwód and Adrianik 2023).

It should be emphasised that the intercultural competencies of religion teachers are skills that must be mastered. What is more, they result from individual predispositions, among which

can include such individual qualities as ease of learning languages, empathy, and openness. The events of recent months, when in December 2022 some 200,000 Ukrainian students had already started their education in Polish schools, dramatically highlighted the need to improve the intercultural competencies of teachers, including teachers of religion.

## **Practice**

Since the first days of the war in Ukraine, the Roman Catholic Church in Poland has been helping refugees with great commitment, especially on a humanitarian level. It is worth noting that only 1.67% of the Ukrainian population are members of the Roman Catholic Church. More than half of the country's citizens (approximately 61%) are Orthodox, 19.5% are atheists and 8.5% are Greek Catholic (Mandryk 2016). For the Catholic Church in Poland, the words of Christ: "I was a stranger and you welcomed me" (Mt 25:35) are still alive and understood as an imperative. A communication from the Council for Migration, Tourism and Pilgrimages, published in March 2022, highlighted the need to work towards community building, with both Polish society and integration among refugees (Rada Konferencji Episkopatu Polski ds. Migracji, Turystyki i Pielgrzymek 2022).

In the context of developing the intercultural competence of teachers of religion, the Council's indication that integration is always a two-way activity should be taken as an obligation. In the first place, it is an effort by refugees to learn Polish language and Polish culture, which should find support and assistance in efforts to learn the culture of those arriving. It was also highlighted that the vast majority of refugees are Orthodox believers. It is therefore advisable that humanitarian aid and all integration activities be undertaken in cooperation with the clergy and faithful of the Orthodox Church structures present in Poland. It is recommended that behaviour that would give a pretext for suspicion of proselytism is to be avoided (Rada Konferencji Episkopatu Polski ds. Migracji, Turystyki i Pielgrzymek 2022; Rada Prawna i Rada ds. Ekumenizmu KEP 2022). In the perspective of the Catholic Church's teaching, the integration process must be accompanied by the promotion of the humanity of the refugee, involving all actions aimed at profound respect for his or her dignity and rights. This means, in the first place, the need to organize Polish language lessons, both for children, the youth and adults. The systemic activities carried out in schools should be complemented by voluntary teaching. The Council's statement explicitly addresses religion teachers, defining their task in this area as "making pupils aware during religion lessons to the need for fraternal openness towards fellow Ukrainian pupils" (Rada Konferencji Episkopatu Polski ds. Migracji, Turystyki i Pielgrzymek 2022). The authors of the document are aware that promoting organised

volunteering in the Polish context means looking for people with relevant competences. This will involve “necessary training so that the enthusiasm and sensitivity for showing mercy is deepened by knowledge and professionalisation of voluntary action” (Rada Konferencji Episkopatu Polski ds. Migracji, Turystyki i Pielgrzymek 2022). Relating the analysed problem to the field of religious education, it should be noted that the predisposition of religious teachers to work in different environments and circumstances is extremely important (Simiński 2021).

The issue of teaching Roman Catholic religion to Ukrainian children was also addressed by the Polish Episcopate. The chairman of the Commission for Catholic Education, Bishop Wojciech Osial, draws the audience’s attention to the fact that children of refugees from Ukraine are predominantly Greek Catholic and Orthodox, and therefore recommends leaving the care of their religious development to their respective churches. He does, however, encourage the care of those among them who wish to attend Roman Catholic religion classes, with full respect and deference to their professed faith (Kasper 2022).

The reality of a few months of the 2021/2022 school year has shown that religious teachers have largely responded to the appeals addressed to them, and have been actively involved in systemic solutions for the education, care and upbringing of Ukrainian students. It should be emphasised that it is not a question of the 'legally declared' participation of Ukrainian students in Roman Catholic religion classes, but first and foremost of extending their care and upbringing in the school system, including support in difficult life situations and entering into dialogues on an educational level. Religion teachers help Ukrainian children during breaks and after-school activities. However, the effectiveness of the assistance provided depends on the possession of intercultural competence, which is precisely what the church entities responsible for the training of Polish teachers of religion intended, to nearly match the inflow of refugees.

One of the first initiatives in the area of intercultural competence was a Ukrainian language course for teachers of religion. Conducted from March 12th, 2022 for five consecutive Saturdays in an online format (two lessons each), the training was organised with the cooperation of the diocesan religious education offices in Katowice and Sosnowiec, and with the staff of the Faculty of Humanities of the University of Silesia in Katowice. The organisers’ intention was to equip religious teachers with the ability to communicate in a basic way with children and young people who are continuing their education in a Polish school as a result of the war. In the invitation addressed to religious teachers, it was stated, “It would be worthwhile for someone to be able to greet Ukrainian children and young people in their native language, for example, when they cross the thresholds of the school [...]. Even a few words spoken by the teacher in Ukrainian may break barriers down and create a more comfortable situation for the

child's stay in the new school” (Wydział Katechetyczny Kurii Metropolitalnej w Katowicach 2022; Cox 2020). During the course, participants received materials for individual work at home; and after the course, a glossary of basic words and phrases in Ukrainian, prepared by the trainers for practical school usage, was provided (Wydział Katechetyczny Kurii Metropolitalnej w Katowicach 2022). More than 500 religion teachers from the dioceses of Katowice, Sosnowiec, Częstochowa and Poznan participated in the free training. All training materials were also made available on the Wiedza i Praktyka web portal, which is very popular among religion teachers (Wiedza i Praktyka 2022; Warchała-Kopeć M. 2022). It is worth noting that Poland is one of the countries that has developed standards to ensure the study of the mother tongue by immigrant pupils (Eurydice 2009). The current legislation in Poland gives refugee children the ability to receive education (Ministerstwo Edukacji i Nauki 2022e). The Polish educational system takes into account the presence of a cultural assistant. As a staff member speaking the language and knowing the culture of the pupils' country of origin, he/she is expected to provide effective assistance to teachers, facilitate the integration of immigrant children within the school communities, and improve contact with their families. Although since September 1, 2017, the provision of Article 94a.4 has been repealed as a result of the amendment of the Education System Act (Sejm Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej 2017), individuals are trained for this type of work and employed where necessary (Fundacja na rzecz Różnorodności Społecznej 2023).

More than three decades of religious instruction in Polish kindergartens and schools have allowed religious lessons to settle well in the educational system. In spite of the criticisms that have been voiced over the years, it should be emphasised that pre-school and school religious education interprets the 'signs of the times', especially at the present moment in history, as a turning point of the epochs and marked by internal contradictions; and at the same time, as manifested in connection with the war in Ukraine, a desire for peace and justice, unity and solidarity. Taking the indicated premises into account, at the initiative of the religious education department of the Sosnowiec diocese, a group of religion teachers prepared religion lesson plans for all educational levels, as a response to the events taking place beyond Poland's eastern border. Educational meetings held for religious teachers focused on the commandment to love your neighbour and encouraged them to help people seeking refuge from war. The students had the opportunity to learn about the current meaning of the term 'mercy', and to discover the truth about the need to be a merciful human being in relation to their Ukrainian peers and their carers. The teachers thus showed the children and young people a wider interpretation of mercy in everyday life. The lesson plans have been made available on the website of the education desk,

with a request for all religion teachers of the Sosnowiec diocese to use them during classes. It is noteworthy that the implementation of the thematic handouts for religion lessons has helped both students and teachers to see the connections between faith and culture; humanity and religion; science and religion; and schools and other educational institutions in a new perspective. The task of religious teachers in this context was eminently educative and geared towards students' attainment of maturity (Borda 2022).

Concern for development of intercultural competences of religion teachers in the context of refugees from Ukraine was expressed in training courses organised for religion teachers in the diocese of Opole. Methodological meetings focused on legal regulations concerning the possibility for Orthodox and Greek Catholic children to participate in Roman Catholic religion lessons. Special attention has been given to ecumenical issues so that the care, education and pastoral work undertaken for the spiritual well-being of children do not bear the hallmarks of proselytising. The main objective of the training was to improve the competence of religion teachers on the differences regarding preparation for and reception of the sacraments in the Eastern and Western Churches. Evidence of respect for the right to religious upbringing and education in accordance with the rite professed was provided by the preceding consultations held by the Bishops of Opole, with representatives of the clergy of the Orthodox Church conducting pastoral activities in the Opole diocese (Kostorz 2022).

In dioceses that did not organise 'original' (in-house) formation activities dedicated to religion teachers, educators had the opportunity to develop intercultural competences by participating in training courses organised by regional teacher training centres and other entities involved in the organisation of the educational process. Trainings and workshops were held both onsite and via online platforms, for which the necessary skills were gained by the religion teachers during remote teaching popular during the COVID-19 pandemic (Buchta and Cichosz and Zellma 2021). An example of this type of cooperation is the Pelplin diocese, where the religious education desk has established contact with the Pomeranian Teacher Education Centre in Gdansk. Among many valuable proposals for developing teachers' intercultural competences, the following training courses are worth mentioning: 'Special Education Offer. Solidarity with Ukraine', addressing a wide range of issues related to the organisation of educational processes; 'Intercultural integration of pre-school and early school age children', presenting games and activities or 'Meetings of networks of teachers working with students with migration experience /2022/2023'. The latter is aimed at those starting to teach in linguistically and culturally diverse classrooms. During the meetings, participants share ideas on how to solve problems arising from everyday educational work in order to create an open and inclusive school for pupils with

a migration experience (Pomorskie Centrum Edukacji Nauczycieli w Gdańsku 2022a). The legitimacy of such actions is confirmed by the experience of the European Schools, where the issues of IC (Intercultural Competences) and ICC (Intercultural Communicative Competence) have been present for many decades (Cox, 2020; Orsini-Jones and Lee 2018).

In the national forum for religious education, the trainings organised by the Teacher Training Centre “Natan” are of great importance for the systemic development of the intercultural competence of religious teachers. The centre, which is accredited by the Lublin Superintendent of Education, pursues a vision of education that is summarised by the motto: 'actively, with heart, by the rules'. The aim of educators who in their work refer to Christian axiology is teaching and upbringing based on a synthesis of the best elements of tradition with contemporary methodology, emphasising the activity of students and pupils. The way to achieve this goal is through the systematic teaching of principles in school; and the building of links between teachers and pupils, and among the pupils themselves. Students at school should feel like active participants, so that they can make important discoveries on their own during their learning. This is also conditioned by the creativity of religion teachers (Centrum Doskonalenia Nauczycieli „Natan” 2022; cf. Zellma 2020). From this perspective, online workshops entitled 'Children and young people from Ukraine in catechesis' (Wydział Katechetyczny Diecezji Pelplińskiej 2022) were prepared. Due to their unquestionable content value and attractive format, they were very popular among religion teachers and received top marks from them.

## **Conclusions**

Undoubtedly, the presence of Ukrainian children in Polish schools present new challenges, which include the competence of religious teachers. Guidelines of the Polish Bishops' Conference (inter alia Council of the Polish Bishops' Conference for Migration, Tourism and Pilgrimages, Chairman of the Commission for Catholic Education of the Polish Bishops' Conference) were of a very general character. They called for adaptation to a specific environment (province, diocese, school). This challenge has been taken up by only some dioceses in Poland. Although Polish religion teachers need intercultural competence, they have had limited opportunities to participate in various forms of in-service training aimed at acquiring knowledge and developing the skills necessary to support Ukrainian refugees. The main emphasis to date has been on learning Ukrainian language. The topic of the cultural difference of refugees from Ukraine was treated marginally, yet knowledge of refugee culture and religion is crucial as a starting point in dialogue with others. It helps to see and understand

the reasons for different behaviour, and to avoid some of the thorny problems that arise from misunderstanding others and from prejudice. It also fosters learning to affirm the culture and religion of refugees. It helps to see and understand the reasons for different behaviours and to avoid some of the thorny problems that arise from not understanding each other or prejudice. Moreover, it fosters learning to affirm refugee culture and religion (Byram 2021; Cox 2020; Rutter 2006).

Among the educational offerings related to the development of intercultural competences of religious teachers, workshops on interpersonal communication with Ukrainian students and their parents or guardians were missing. Such a form of in-service training provides opportunities to develop the skills of active listening, empathy, refraining from judgement, overcoming stereotypes and prejudices, openness, tolerance, acceptance, respect for differences and dialogue, while maintaining one's own cultural and religious identity. Hence, it would be advisable to broaden in-service training for religion teachers and include this aspect in the appropriate curricula.

The research carried out showed that, through social media and distance learning platforms, religion teachers were able to benefit individually from the educational offerings, such as original materials made available online. Teachers expressed a great interest in these offerings (Borda 2022; Cichosz 2023; Kostorz 2022). In the future, it would be worthwhile to create a nationwide educational platform for religion teachers to promote good practices, including the area of intercultural education in religion lessons. This, however, is no substitute for face-to-face forms of in-service training that foster the exchange of learning experiences in dealing with Ukrainian students.

It should be considered extremely important to draw upon the potential of other religious teachers working in culturally diverse groups, as well as seeking original methodological solutions. This is fostered by the cooperation of religion teachers with other teachers who have undertaken creative didactic and educational activities; and whom, on this basis, have developed innovative programmes, educational projects and methods for the implementation of intercultural education.

Developing the intercultural competence of religion teachers in the context of Ukrainian refugees is becoming a new area of in-service training. It calls for special appreciation and embedding of long-term educational activities in dioceses, teacher training centres and school teaching staff. What is needed is a good diagnosis of the knowledge, skills and attitudes of teachers of religion in intercultural education, using appropriate research tools. Continuing on this theme, research should be undertaken among different groups of religious teachers, whom

may play a key role in diagnosing current competences, problems and needs. They may then provide the information necessary to develop proposals for the in-service training of teachers of religion in the development of intercultural competences in the area of didactics and education, in order to fulfil these need for Ukrainian students. The conclusions formulated above are postulatory and should be seen as an invitation for further research in this area.

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