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## **IN THE CIRCLE OF THE SOCIAL AND PEDAGOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF FOLK TRADITION AND CULTURE. THE CULT OF SAINT ROCH – A PATRON SAINT OF PLAGUE VICTIMS**

### **INTRODUCTION**

**I**n the church and folk tradition, Saint Roch is a patron saint protecting against contagious diseases and plague, among others. Therefore, one might think that his patronage is becoming irrelevant today but this is not the case. Actually, we may even talk about the renaissance of St. Roch's charisma expressed in serving the sick, the suffering, people staying at the margin of social life (Strzelec, 2010). Today we meet more and more such people because contemporary man exists in a difficult reality, often an opaque and hostile one, full of numerous difficult problems. In spite of the fact that he does not die of pestilence or cholera, for example, he is tormented with a lot of unprecedented dilemmas and difficult choices, not only medical ones, to such an extent that they can be figuratively called the 21st century plague. Therefore,

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in this context, it is worth looking closer at the treasure trove of wisdom and values which folk culture definitely is (within the title scope).

## THE NEW READING OF THE CHARISMA OF SAINT ROCH

We know very little about St. Roch, there are very few works about him, discussing his holiness and cult, and the information is short, almost repetitive. The name of Roch is not very popular or given to children nowadays. However, owing to the fact that there are a few centers of special cult to St. Roch in Poland (Dobrzeń Wielki, Konopnica, Osiek Pomorski, Gronów Pomorski, Miłkowie Maćki, Jonkowo, Klewki, Białystok, Mikstat (Strzelec, 2010)), we can talk about St. Roch's tradition, whose specificity is determined by oral transmission taking place and continuing in direct interpersonal relations, often unaware, mechanical ones. Thus, this tradition of regional character still exists, especially among older generations, but today it is gaining another meaning as a result of huge socio-cultural, as well as economic and political transformations (Strzelec, 2016).

Therefore, in order to explain the phenomenon of St. Roch's cult, in addition to the characteristics of the person, it is essentially worth making the notion of folk tradition, also crucial to the deliberations conducted in this paper, known better.

As is known, such a tradition includes elements of the cultural heritage of a country, which, in consequence of the processes of valuing and selecting, are passed from generation to generation and become a part of the cultural output of the whole society (Drozd-Piasecka, Paprocka, 1985), but the transmission concerns this part of the cultural heritage which its carriers consider important for the present or the future and in the case of which so-called will of inheritance occurs. Thus, it is about the set of content-related, ideological and formal elements, relatively permanent and invariable, transmitted by culture-building factors in a specific time sequence by approval or negation. And taking into consideration oral and written tradition, it is characteristic that oral tradition is older than written tradition (Kosowska, 1985). In the case of the cult of St. Roch, the first one seems bigger, which is proven just by the fact of a very small number of written works, but it also arises from the nature of the tradition. In general, as long as the tradition was of a lively and open character and maintained and thrived in the direct, personal, interpersonal transmission of selected local communities, there was not a special need for the awareness of passing it, whereas today, not only to protect it from being forgotten and to restore its past splendor but also in the situation of the occurrence of new forms, it should become the subject of in-depth analyses and studies, to which, among others, this article may contribute.

Therefore, to reclaim St. Roch's tradition, the knowledge of the person is obvious. In hagiographic lists, there is only one saint of this name, and the source of the name

of Roch can be found in a few languages. The name derives from French in which *roche* is a rock, therefore, it means a resilient person, as hard as nails (St. Roch, 2019b). It is also of German origin, from the word *broc* – calmness, or Scandinavian *brokr* – strong, brave. We cannot also exclude the origin of the name of Roch from the Burgundian word *broks* – a raven (which in the German religion was a saint bird) (Roch, 2019a). Therefore, a few important qualities mutually complementing the essence of St. Roch's image are related to this name.

In iconography, Saint Roch is presented as a young pilgrim or beggar in shabby clothes, and among his attributes an angel, a dog, and a pilgrim's bag are mentioned (Niewięgłowski, 1999). A legend says that he was born in Montpellier, France, and was a child received by his parents after many years' prayers to God. When he was young, he became an orphan, and then he gave away all his wealth and as a poor pilgrim went to Rome. During his pilgrimage, he arrived at Acquapendente where he attended the sick suffering from the plague, for which he received the gift of healing (Gorzandt, 1986). When he wanted to return home, he was arrested on the way and imprisoned on charges of spying. He died in prison, and after his death, as a sign of his innocence and holiness, an inscription appeared there (other sources say that it was a plate with the words of the last prayer of the saint *Peste laborantes, ad Rochi patrocinium confugientes, contagionem illam truculentissimam evasuros* – “Those stricken by plague who shall call Saint Roch for help as their middleman and advocate, shall recover” (Jagla, 2004; Niewięgłowski, 1999). At present, numerous historians question St. Roch's existence, claiming that his figure was created during the recurrence of plague due to the sudden demand for a new “Saint Doctor” carrying hope for recovery (Jagla, 2004).

The cult of St. Roch spread very fast all over Europe, its first traces go back to the end of the 14th century, and the development took place as early as at the end of the 15th century. The places of St. Roch's worship in Europe became, first of all, Montpellier, France, Bingen, Germany and Venice, Italy. St. Roch's cult reached Poland very early, probably in 1385, the first chapel commemorating him was built. It developed in Wielkopolska (Greater Poland) mainly in the 17th and 18th centuries when the areas were suffering from numerous epidemics (Strzelec, 2010).

Saint Roch is a patron saint of Montpellier, Parma, Venice, it is a patron of chemists and doctors, hospitals and prisoners, as well as pets, he exercises special protection over tramps and Polish vets. Today, his remembrance falls on 16 August (Pełka, 1980). He is also a patron saint protecting from contagious diseases, primarily from a plague. Moreover, in many countries he protected against rabies, in the Lower Rhine region pregnant women made offerings asking him for successful delivery, in France he was a patron protecting against foot disorders, and in Montpellier he was considered an intercessor in the case of infectious illnesses, flu in particular. In Aachen he was adored as a patron of horse diseases, and in the Lower Rhine region, he was supposed to protect pigs against pestilence. In Barcelona, Luxembourg, and France he was regarded as the patron saint of bakers and confectioners. He aided

sailors sailing down the Loire, carpenters in Bonn, gardeners in Alsace, stone-cutters and pavers in Paris, Bordeaux and the surroundings, as well as furriers and surgeons in various countries of Europe (Strzelec, 2010).

In the Polish tradition St. Roch is a patron saint of animals, a guardian of cattle and a friend of dogs. He also protects people from epidemic diseases and their herds from diseases and pestilence. On St. Roch's Day processions used to set off from churches dedicated to him, and people praying entrusted themselves and their herds to him. Moreover, in central and northern Poland "ritual fires" took place, the fires (holy herbs were thrown into them – mint, arugula, and pennyroyal) were made on a path going from the barn to the pasture and drove cattle through them accompanied by a loudly beating drum, which was supposed to protect them from plague, sorceries and ensure good breeding (Ogrodowska, 2004, 2005; Kempski, 2007).

There are few Polish folk proverbs related to St. Roch, e.g. *Na święty Roch w stodole groch* (On St. Roch's Day the barn is full of beans), *Na święty Roch, jaki dzień, taka noc* (The weather at night is the same as during the day on St. Roch's Day), *Od św. Rocha na polu socho* (Since St. Roch's Day it is dry on the field), *O świętym Rochu strzelaj bez prochu* (On St. Roch's Day shoot without powder) (Ogrodowska, 2004, 2005), in spite of this, they meaningfully point to an inseparably and ambivalently balanced relationship between man and nature, thus, to the necessity to subordinate to nature in the struggle of everyday life, also in respect of healing people and animals. A traditional man did everything to ensure welfare – the benevolence of nature and land which fed him and clothed him. Therefore, also folk medicine derived inspiration from it and based its curative practices on it.

It seems that nowadays the cult of Saint Roch may develop with great strength exactly because so far it has manifested itself in unlimited (!) service to people ill, suffering, staying at the margin of social life, and, as we know, today we come across such people extremely often, starting from the unborn, then almost constantly ill children, end even further through teenagers, adults and ending with elderly people. Therefore, St. Roch's patronage is, let us repeat that, still not only topical but also very important. Its power lies in the care and assistance to another man, based on deep willingness, kindness, understanding, respect, empathy, sense of safety and love, which in the postmodern world often makes up the deficit of basic needs even of a healthy individual (cf. Pinker, 2015).

## THE CHARACTERISTICS OF FOLK MEDICINE

Saint Roch was primarily a patron saint protecting against plague, he was one of "Physician Saints" whose curative power was given by God, owing to which with time his patronage included also other diseases. His growing fame was favored by numerous fellowships and churches in his honor created in the 14th and 15th century, whose tasks consisted not only in prayers but also in theatrical and humani-

tarian activities. What is interesting is that in a wooden sculpture portraying him, dated to the end of the 14th century, one detail was emphasized – it is a gesture of raising the gown in order to show a plague lesion on his thigh. This mark left after the disease – a legend says that when taking care of the plague victims he caught the disease himself but he became miraculously healed – became a symbol of anti-plague patronage (Jagla, 2004). In old communities, there was a belief that touching a relic or just a picture of a patron saint caused recovery from an illness, also in the case of Saint Roch it was believed that the touch of the “plague lesion” is supposed to bring recovery to those suffering from plague or cholera. It is one of the main characteristics of traditional folk medicine and folk religiousness, that is the belief in sorcery and superstitions, which arises from the fact that the causes of diseases used to be seen in the unfavorable impact of cosmic space, magic, nature, and demons. What is more, that was the path one should follow in treatment, thus, an ill person should be disenchanting, for example. However, it is a very narrow approach to folk medicine, that is irrational and useless today in conventional, professional medicine, contrary to rational folk medicine based on physiotherapy (herb treatment), apitherapy (treating with honey), relaxotherapy (a method of therapeutic massage) or the application of animal ointments. In a broader sense, folk medicine is perceived as a set of knowledge, skills and practices based on theory, beliefs and experience characteristic for various cultures – intelligible or not – applied to sustain health, as prevention, diagnosis or treatment of physical and mental illnesses. They are primarily characterized by the fact that it does not use chemicals but healing is based entirely on natural treatment techniques, and the basis for the curative activity is intuition or in-born capabilities of a healer (Lesińska-Sawicka, Wąskow, 2012).

In the oldest therapeutic practice, a great role was played by the belief that an illness is a real, independent entity, a specified evil, a monster, an evil, hostile, unpredictable power, a demon, a supernatural creature which acts in a premeditated way, comes from the outside, attacks a human being, penetrates his body and once it settles down there, it lives at his cost, destroys him, absorbs him, contaminates him, makes him suffer, takes away his power, “suffocates, shatters, burns, sucks, convulses, desiccates” (cf. Fleck, 1986). Never or almost never was an illness understood as a condition of the body caused by the disorders of its functions. Knowledge about diseases was passed orally. In the first place, it was shaped by beliefs, a specific interpretation of phenomena surrounding man, their causes and effects, and in particular the belief in supernatural, extraterrestrial powers which rule the world. Thus, supernatural causes determined all kinds of diseases and suffering. The most important cause of any diseases was “the act of God,” therefore, their perception as the punishment and atonement for sins, or an experience sent by God to become a better and more nobler person and thus deserve eternal salvation (Ogrodowska, 2012).

For centuries, in every corner of the world people had been searching for and acquired medicines helping in fighting illnesses and suffering. Folk medicine derived this knowledge from experience, observations and oral transmission, as well as

neighbor's advice. The state of knowledge about illnesses and their causes recorded in the adopted views, beliefs and customs determined the therapy used. Folk medicine and therapy were practical knowledge, necessary in everyday life, especially in the conditions of an old, pre-industrial country. Out of necessity, people had to apply medicines always used, whose formula was passed from generation to generation. In the first place, herbal medicinal substances were used, mainly herbs, appreciated also by contemporary professional medicine. Various organic medicines, animal as well as human medicines were used. Honey, eggs, milk, butter, wax, oils, minerals, as well as water from healing or holy springs. Those were substances available to everybody, being within reach, present in the nearest surroundings of the man, one just had to use them properly. Moreover, so-called *rękoczynny* (manual acts) were used, that is fractures, sprains were set, cupping was performed, leeches were attached. Both medicines and treatments were supported by magical practices (ordering, charming away, spells, undoing spells). Besides, in traditional medicine, a great role was played by religious practices, novenas, prayers, supplicatory processions, as well as religious accessories, e.g. crosses, medallions, relics, holy water, and various objects consecrated in the church (Ogrodowska, 2012).

The knowledge of traditional ways of preventing, diagnosing, and treating illnesses used to be a necessary element of education and practical knowledge, for years acquired at home, in a family, neighbors' group. It was knowledge necessary for human existence. In every home, in every chamber or larder there had to be bunches of herbs which served as medicines and spices. Apotropaic (protective) treatments and remedies were commonly known, preventing misfortunes brought by charms and illnesses, those were palm crosses nailed to the cottage door, various marks painted, conventional behaviors and gestures, e.g. rolling fingers in a fig sign. Great respect was enjoyed by country healers, old country women, herbalists, lambers, *zamawiacze* (charmers saying spells helping to overcome an illness), volkhvs, soothsayers, or even women considered to be witches, to whom people turned even in the case of the most serious misfortunes and diseases (Ogrodowska, 2012). They enjoyed the social trust and the overall health care was provided by them. The practices applied by them were accordant with beliefs and folk tradition, considered the culture of the rural population, and moreover, it was extremely important that they were always available, contrary to qualified medical personnel. Today, as a result of the development of conventional medicine and huge capabilities of using free medical services, mystical and magical therapies are basically not heard of, although there are still societies living in the country for generations, with deeply rooted culture related to folk medicine and they have not given up such healing practices so far. Moreover, very often folk medicine is a significant and unaware part of everyday life and in addition to the belief in superstitions, wizardry, and spells aiming at the recovery of health, patients often ask energy healers, dowsers or spiritual healers for help. A permanent cause of interest in such a form of treatment is often helplessness of scientific medicine in treating numerous diseases, such as cancers (Lesińska-Sawicka, Waśkow, 2012).

Today, folk medicine is an object of continued attention and research of historians of medicine, sociologists, ethnologists, and recently also pedagogics and its numerous subdisciplines, for example, ethnopedagogics, andragogics or gerontology. Old medicines and treatments are perceived as multi-faceted, timeless wisdom, or on the contrary, considering the contemporary state of medical knowledge, as the sign of backwardness, superstitions, vague prejudice, narrow-mindedness. It is still a valuable source of knowledge about ancestors and their times, beliefs, views and experiences, about acquired and still developed knowledge, about search, discoveries, continuous struggle with human life and suffering (Klasińska, 2017).

## PREVENTIVE HEALTH CARE IN A FOLK CULTURE

Deliberations about St. Roch as a defender of people against diseases incline to discuss another issue, namely traditional ways of disease protection. Health and fitness were always an unquestionable value, there were attempts to protect it in various ways (with various effect), and, where possible, to prevent the occurrence and spread of various diseases (Ogrodowska, 2012) and that was the case in spite of the fact that in the past greater importance was attached to treating illnesses when they were a fact than to preventive treatments. Prevention in contemporary understanding basically did not exist, as there were different views of the essence and causes of diseases. People believed that the majority of diseases were caused by witchcraft or an act of God. This is where various, therapeutic and prophylactic, magical and religious-magical practices came from. Moreover, there were different views on what is healthy and what is not, e.g. fatty and square food was regarded healthy, the same with the stay of patients in warm rooms, with windows closed and in non-ventilated rooms, there were also different hygienic habits, or rather their lack, because the hygienic condition was horrible.

Therefore, in traditional cultures, an illness was treated as the symptom of man's impurity, the consequence of the contact of man with another object, creature or phenomenon considered impure and regarded a taboo was seen in it. Illnesses which enter the body through, e.g. the nose or mouth were treated as a result of witchcraft or a spell. An illness meant not only the disturbance of the order and usual functioning of the body but also the whole world. Thus, treatment required purifying procedures – chasing away demons or transferring the illness to various objects or animals, or taking away, for example, to a forest or wasteland. The origin of diseases was explained differently, it was even thought that everybody carries an illness which emerges in favorable conditions or is God-sent. The concept of the origin of a disease corresponded to specific concepts of treatment methods (Kowalski, 1998).

All kinds of dangerous epidemic diseases, frequently occurring in old Europe, and pandemics of cholera, plague, smallpox, diphtheria or typhus motivated people to apply different treatments and protective measures. It was believed that the cause of



such diseases is stale food, rich dishes, weakness, overwork, poverty, drunkenness or bad sanitary conditions. Therefore, it was advised to eat fresh fruit, vegetables, and herbs, but in moderate quantities, sleep a lot, wear clean clothes and burn suspicious (infected) things. Moreover, sanitary procedures were necessary – waste removal, cleaning cesspools, drying swamps, banning assemblies in closed rooms, compulsory quarantine at border crossing points, limiting trade with plague affected countries (Ogrodowska, 2012).

A commonly known folk remedy against plague was garlic (*Alium sativum L.*), kept in the mouth, and pimpinella (*Pimpinella saxifraga*), whose root carried around the neck in a pouch was supposed to prevent epidemic diseases. Also, bryonia (*Bryonia alba L.*) and its root of an unusual anthropomorphic shape were carried to protect against plague. Rooms were censured with aromatic smoke from burning fresh juniper twigs, or big fires were made on yards or at crossroads – to purify with the wind of flowing air (Ogrodowska, 2012). Moreover, henhouses and pigsties were subject to specific disinfection with wild rosemary (*Ledum palustre L.*), or later with lime and carbolic acid. Apart from garlic also onion was often used to prevent plague, for example, braids of garlic were hung in windows and doors, its bulbs were put on windowsills, crushed garlic was spread on doorsteps of houses and stables (Ogrodowska, 2001). Garlic was used to alleviate toothache, putting it into the tooth or applying it to the elbow or the nail of the big toe of the leg on the side of which the tooth was. Infected spots should be circled with an onion bulb and then tied in a pouch and thrown away onto a road. A person who found and took such a bundle with them took also the thrown away ailment. To date, it is believed that applying an onion ring to the spot stung by a mosquito or a bee prevents swelling and acute itching. Moreover, covering the head with slices of onion was supposed to end a headache. By means of onion also an ear illness was chased out – by means of putting drops of onion juice into it. It was even believed that deafness could be cured in this way. Garlic carried around the neck was supposed to prevent jaundice, it was carried in a pouch around the neck on a red thread and after a few days when it turned yellow one could hope that the illness passed on to garlic (Kowalski, 1998).

In folk tradition, preventive property was also attributed to some accessories, such as a green branch, an egg, fruit, particularly apples and nuts, as well as fire and water. They appeared in various rituals together or separately and always symbolized a force and powers attributed to them, e.g. an evergreen branch associates with life, an egg includes the essence of life, is a symbol of victory of life over death. Apples and nuts symbolized fertility (thus, they were particularly important in the wedding ceremonial). Water was used as an object of magical procedures aiming at the provision of a sufficient amount of rainfall and as a purifying power. The fire had similar purifying and also healing power (Kamocki, 1986). Extraordinary magical, cleansing, life-giving, beneficial and preventive properties were displayed by bread and salt. All over Poland, unusual power was attributed to a blessed candle, it is primarily about the power to suppress storms and thunders, natural disasters and any evil. It was believed



that its light defends people and their herds against wolves, evil ghosts, that it averts evil spells, evil charms, fights off diseases, shortens the torments of dying people and leads them towards eternal light. Grain was worshipped as a symbol of life, fertility, prosperity, useful work, God's blessing. Since the earliest days, it occurred in numerous folk customs and rituals, primarily in farming ones. The grains of wheat, barleycorn, and rye were attributed benevolent and purifying properties. Thrown at the bride and the groom in the wedding ceremony they were to ensure fertility, a lot of children and prosperity. For the protection from illness and witchcraft, a handful of wheat was put into babies' cradles (Ogrodowska, 2001).

## CONCLUSION

To end the deliberations undertaken in this paper, it should be clearly added that in the belief system of traditional country religiousness the sense of unity with the world of nature was inseparably related to the experience of feeling the presence of God. The expression of such deep religious experiences was the cult, thus, the rituals and rites used not only to worship supernatural forces but also to maintain the order of the universe. Today we can observe dramatic transformations of religiousness, next to the attitude of religious fundamentalism indifferentism to the institution of the Catholic church has appeared, a selective, private and individualized religiousness defined as spirituality (Mielicka, 2014). Secondly, – not all old medical procedures are the sign of backwardness and superstitions, they are often perceived as a multi-faceted, timeless wisdom, which serves not only to solve health-related problems but in this way contributing to so-called primary questions about the sense of human existence (Klasińska, 2017). Today, these questions are particularly important, especially to teenagers and young adults, creating their own identity, image, and concept of themselves, often with the external image in the first place and leaving away the problems of religiousness, the identity of the role, or gender, and also the social, regional, national one. Traditions join people of many generations, and in today's state of so-called "new ethnicity" it gives a chance for the thorough definition of one's place in the world and the role played in it. For these reasons, the cult of St. Roch, characterized by unlimited help to sick and suffering people, distinguished by close and mutually cordial and affectionate human bonds is not only important and still particularly topical, in all respects worth cultivating and promoting not only in communities the Saint patronizes, but also during purposefully and accidentally organized formal, informal and extra-formal education of contemporary man – almost from the youngest to the oldest, on the one hand lost on back roads and on the other hand consciously and persistently looking for an answer about the sense of life.

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## IN THE CIRCLE OF THE SOCIAL AND PEDAGOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF FOLK TRADITION AND CULTURE. THE CULT OF SAINT ROCH – A PATRON SAINT OF PLAGUE VICTIMS

**Keywords:** tradition, values, folk medicine, St. Roch

**Abstract:** The aim of the paper is to present the cult of St. Roch in the context of the role of a patron protecting against diseases, traditionally assigned to him. First the person of St. Roch is characterized, then the qualities of folk medicine are presented, and finally, the traditional ways of preventing and treating some illnesses are shown. Nowadays, knowledge about that seems very important in upbringing and should be transmitted and cherished not only as the testimony of life and struggle with problems of previous generations, but first of all because of the values inherent to folk culture and traditional medicine, such as unlimited patient care, serving the suffering and staying at the margin of social life.

## W KRĘGU SPOŁECZNO-PEDAGOGICZNEGO ZNACZENIA TRADYCJI I KULTURY LUDOWEJ. KULT ŚWIĘTEGO ROCHA – PATRONA OD „MOROWEGO” POWIETRZA

**Słowa kluczowe:** tradycja, wartości, medycyna ludowa, św. Roch

**Streszczenie:** Celem artykułu jest przedstawienie kultu św. Rocha w kontekście tradycyjnie przypisanej mu roli – patrona chroniącego od chorób. Najpierw scharakteryzowana została

jego postać, następnie cechy medycyny ludowej i na koniec tradycyjne sposoby zapobiegania i leczenia niektórych chorób. Wiedza na ten temat wydaje się aktualna i bardzo istotna w wychowaniu. Powinna być przekazywana i pielęgnowana, nie tylko jako świadectwo życia i zmagania się z problemami wcześniejszych pokoleń, ale przede wszystkim z racji wartości tkwiących w kulturze ludowej i tradycyjnym lecznictwie, takich jak bezgraniczna troska i opieka nad chorym, służba cierpiącym i pozostającym na marginesie życia społecznego.