

## THE ROMA AND THEIR CHRISTIAN LIFE IN A PANDEMIC SITUATION

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### ABSTRACT

**Aim.** The main goal is to identify not only the religion of the Roma ethnic group, but also their relationship to God, and their experience of faith in the Covid-19 pandemic situation. In the contribution, the authors point to the perception of the personality of the priest as a spiritual shepherd, but also as a figure who leads them to a moral and Christian life.



**Concept.** This scientific study thus points to the classic experience of spiritual life in various selected situations, and identifies the importance of a pandemic situation for a person's Christian life.

**Methods.** The study deals with several aspects of experiencing the spiritual life of the Roma community, and points out and identifies their thoughts about life during selected social activities. The authors point to important studies that show the connection between the pandemic situation and the issue of faith and religion in the Roma community.

**Results.** The study confirms that the pandemic situation had an adverse effect on experiencing spiritual life in the Roma community, but we can state that Roma carry on their spiritual life despite all the measures in their individual, family community, with the support of other community members. and a priest.

**Conclusion.** The scientific and professional contributions in this study point to the inner experience of spiritual life in the community through individual and family relationships, and the presence of a priest who is supposed to lead the Roma to a spiritual life in accordance with morality.

**Keywords:** Roma, Christian life, pandemic situation, priest, faith, religiosity

## INTRODUCTION

Working with Roma from disadvantaged backgrounds is very difficult, as many Roma think they are able to help each other and have no demand for professional support. This can be considered a very serious circumstance because not all the pitfalls of being can be handled on your own. Circumstances are emerging that necessitate the provision of targeted technical assistance (Selická, 2008).

Solidarity is presented in the Roma family, which can be observed as a symbiosis of older girls or older young people in the same home with their parents. Orphaned care is even appropriate, but the elderly population is not neglected, and these are cared for by their close relatives. They treat them kindly and with respect. It is inconceivable that these individuals should be placed in institutional facilities providing social services for nestors, or in other care consistent with socio-institutional facilities. Here we must notice a certain degree of Christian conviction associated with traditions. It is a directly defined form of social assistance that is not supplied externally, but is considered by the kinship itself (Sabol, 2006).

The Roma, like the majority, have identical customs and traditions. Let us mention the birth of a child, a marriage, and also the last farewell to a loved one. In all these exceptional situations, they adhere to customs and traditions. This is important to them in terms of security against possible dark forces that would cause them misfortune because of their blood relatives. When working with the Roma, it is necessary to respect these habits and make sure that the social worker understands what is necessary for their community to comply with and what requirements they must meet. In the case of segregated or extremely poor Roma groups, both field and community social workers need to become acquainted with these traditions in

order to understand all the circumstances they will encounter in their work and not be able to understand without preparation (Jakoubek, 2008). If one of them has a bad financial situation, the others try to provide him with assistance, and the same is true at baptism. The baptism of the newborn is accompanied by a band, spectacular celebrations that last several days. Customs and traditions are also strengthened in connection with the conclusion of a marriage in which the whole family is involved and all events are organised by the Roma. This is also the case with the last farewell, to which not only blood relatives but also the spiritual shepherd are invited. We can also see the Christian faith of the Roma here. Engagement – *mangaripen* – is also associated with Christianity in the Roma community (Čonka Popala, 2014).

## ROMA RELIGION

When working with the Roma community, the community social worker must also take into account its religion. Failure to respect their religion can lead to the failure of their social assistance. There is humanity connected with social work and a certain dose of emotional intelligence, versatile perspective and qualities of a good human being, such as courtesy, selflessness or objectivity. According to historians, the flight of Roma from India was marked primarily by a Muslim invasion in the 9th century. The first mention of our territory is from 1068. The initial religion of the Roma was a combination of different religions with the predominance of Hinduism (Hudecová, 2012).

The Roma focus on the belief in the existence of a comprehensive balance, which they call *kuntari*. They also care about the Creator and believe in him. They call him Del. They also have knowledge of Satan, whom they name Beng. Many of them claim that evil is portrayed in the world in the portrait of Bibaxt. They are convinced that in the midst of humanity there is a curse and they also believe in the healing effects of various ceremonies. None of these views should be ridiculed by a professionally able field social worker, so as not to raise the client's doubts about his intentions. In any case, he should respect the nature of his life, and therefore his religion and the worship of various forces (Hudecová, 2012).

There are stimuli for reincarnation in their lives. They gradually brought all the above-mentioned traits into Christianity, and these are the habits most professed (Samková, 2012).

A university-educated field, but also a community social worker, is a specialist who works with, say, the Roma community, is constantly interacting with the human being, and his authority should therefore be tied to certain personal attitudes, natural traits. For a deeper understanding of the religion of the Roma, it is necessary to examine those who still reside in India. The direction of a young Roma can be influenced by his ancestors. As

religious parents were, so will children. For the Roma in the lowest social position of the community, it is common for the creator to profess to address Bandjar Devi. Its shrines are also located deep in the mountains. The realisation of this religion is realised in such a way that if they pass near to this monument-shrine, they lay stones on it, which evokes a certain character of prayer. Adherents of the mentioned faith maintain a kind connection with nature (Mappe-Niediek, 2014).

After the birth of a new offspring, they come to show him to their goddess. They maintain a strong faith in the spirits. They also come to her at the time of marriage or the death of a loved one. In their opinion, the human being who ends up spontaneously becomes a dark spirit and may paralyse the fate of pregnant women or even small children. That is why they are especially afraid of the poor. The state of Gujarat, which is located in India, is still dominated by Muslim communities. A field social worker should not, in communication with his client, discuss undignified topics affecting his intimacy (Mann, 2000).

One of them is the problem of *badžars*, who have several features comparable to the Roma, such as:

- wandering way of life, which no longer occurs in Slovakia;
- Romani women prefer clothing in vibrant colours;
- thanks to them, magic and divination are widely practiced (Mušinka et al., 2014).

A trained field social worker should not judge his client by the nature of the clothing he prefers. He should not even deal with the subject of the client's religion and condemn it in some way. His ethical attitude should be followed by others and an example for the client and the whole community with which he regularly interacts. The Christianity of the Roma in the Slovak Republic is unique. Many of them profess the Christian faith. However, they still adhere to their original belief, which focuses primarily on superstition. For example, the Roma are convinced that a newborn baby who has not yet been baptised is in great danger (Strieženec, 2006). Many times, it is their religion that leads to complications in the situation in the existence of the Roma. The religion of the Roma is extended by superstitions and magic. They have their witch, whom they call Kali Sarah. This witch has a blackish form and comes from France. In the region where it occurs, a large pilgrimage is organised every year. The witch named Kali Sara was initially a *murinka* and had an interesting life. In her 12th year, she visited France together with Mary Magdalene (Rusnáková, 2007).

She is called Kali because of her appearance. She performed many miracles, and so she was worshipped in the company of people. She was also called the Black Madonna. Such portraits occur simultaneously in Poland or Luxembourg. At present, Kali Sára is perceived as a protector of the Roma community, while she is connected with their religion. The Roma turn to her when they are experiencing some problems and are unable to deal with them on their own.

Belief in the understanding of the Roma represents the performance of certain ceremonies or rituals related to their religion. This also applies to a visit to the church - the House of God, or pilgrimage sites (Radičová, 2001).

## THE RELATIONSHIP OF THE ROMA TO GOD AND TO FAITH

The concerns of the Roma, who fall into the hands of field and community social workers, often have the same denominator, and that is coexistence with another community. The social worker should be involved and co-operate in the client's progress in solving his problems - with managing his own mood - or eliminating adverse factors. These often hinder the social inclusion of a citizen who cannot integrate into the normal course of society and secure the means for his or her own family. Although the majority lives in a common area with the Roma, it does not have sufficient knowledge about their relationship with God and Christianity. The Roma are trying to assimilate with the majority population and its religion. They take fundamental values from him and promote them in their faith in the Creator of the world (Hudecová, 2012).

The religion of the Roma from disadvantaged backgrounds is duplicated by syncretism. Religion is still present for them. It cannot be said that the Roma do not profess any faith. Conventionally, they take over the religion from the majority and adapt it to their own requirements. There are disparate rituals, concretised by traditions, superstitions or the singing of Christian songs. Such religious manifestations of some Roma may result in relief from the daily difficulties they have to overcome and which they would not have been able to overcome without faith in the Creator. It is important to understand the Roma, to take an interest in them, to take in their feelings, to understand what they are like, to like them, to observe them and the positive aspects that escape others (Cohn, 2009).

The Christian religion predominates among the Roma. Witchcraft, superstitions and belief in supernatural forces are implanted into Christianity. They are used to trusting illusions, and they are afraid of enchantment, especially curses. However, they constantly turn to faith and God. They have great anxiety about spirits, so they have respect for their dead ancestors. Idealistic spirits are divided into honest and dishonest in their thinking. If one has a clear conscience, then one does not have to worry about any spirits. In the event of a dishonest conscience, fear is announced, and it is then that they turn more to the Creator and concentrate on prayers (Strieženec, 2006).

They eliminate any anxiety by focusing on their faith, the Creator. We also observe that the Roma have a relationship with holy places. They experience unrest and fear of visiting the cemetery. They do not visit it after dark. These specificities should also be taken into account by a field social worker who is a Roma ally. He should limit questions about tricky things (Hancock, 2005).

Roma go to church only sometimes, they pray more in a family atmosphere. In the houses they have crosses, holy effigies, prayer books. They decide to visit Mass especially during Christian holidays, or if it is necessary for them. In rare cases, they come to holiday liturgies, where they sit with the majority population (Csámpai, 2007). They consider prayer to be a conversation with the Creator. They pray when a loved one is unwell. They seek the assistance of extra-terrestrial forces for him. They use the Our and a Father and Hail Mary. They pray in Slovak, but also in the Romani language. In their mother tongue, they talk to the Most High outside the sanctuary, especially in distress if they ask him for anything.

When a community social worker communicates with a client, it is important that he respects their way of thinking and that the worker does not attack in any way. Also contribute to alleviating tension aberrations in the Roma community. Through one's own activity, strive to help the social socialisation of socially maladapted individuals, both at the subjective and local levels. A qualified field, as well as community social worker, should have an automatic ability to empathise – the ability to take on the experience of the individual, which will also be used to understand the thinking going on in the individual. However, he himself must be able to control his emotions and eliminate them (Jakoubek, 2008). The Roma attach great importance to the Virgin Mary, but not everyone has knowledge of the Holy Sarah. The Virgin Mary is present in their private lives in different forms. They are painted portraits or statues. Although the Roma themselves join Christians, they do not always live in an exemplary manner. For this reason, many have the view that they cannot be described as Christians. There is also the occurrence of inappropriate behaviour, which cannot be said to result from the Christian faith.

Inappropriate behaviour is often solved by field or community social workers, by cooperating with other experts in order to provide comprehensive assistance through civil self-help or coping with obvious problems. Sometimes they enforce legislative interventions and rules in order to facilitate the performance of social work itself, but at the same time they create spatial and material preconditions for community development (Podolinská & Hrustič, 2010).

The Covid-19 pandemic means a specific situation for the Roma community in Slovakia. Although the pandemic brought about many social, economic and political changes that affected the lives of all people (Roubalová et al., 2022; Tkáčová, Pavlíková, Tvrdoň et al., 2021; Tkáčová, Pavlíková, Jenisová et al., 2021), it also significantly affected all marginalised Roma communities in Slovakia.

Municipalities in the district of Spišská Nová Ves recorded occurrence of 3554 cases of pandemic disease COVID-19 in a large marginalised Roma community in settlements, communities and on this basis the conclusions of the Central Crisis Staff and Measures of the Regional Public Health Office quarantined parts. Authors (Ludvigh Cintulová & Budayová, 2020;

Maturkanič, Tomanová Čerget'ová, Králik et al., 2022) point to the specificity and especially the difference of this pandemic situation in Roma settlements and communities. Other experts remind that a general initial classification that categorises people into groups and assigns them positive and negative values (Kondrla, Tkáčová et al., 2020; Tkáčová, Pavlíková, Jenisová et al., 2021), that lead to the growing fears and anxieties, but also scepticism and phobias that accumulate within the marginalised groups such as Roma, and in the relations of this group with the majority (Kondrla, Tvdrón et al., 2020).

Comprehensive care (health, social, material) was provided in the quarantined part of the municipalities – settlements. The supply was provided through grocery stores that operated in a restricted mode. In the municipalities, the control of obligations for all persons who stayed in the municipalities was tightened. It was the duty of the population to undergo increased health surveillance, ie examination, monitoring of health status and sampling of biological material for examination for the presence of the pathogen COVID-19 (Ludvigh Cintulová et al., 2021). After testing the entire population in quarantined parts of the municipality and moving people with a positive test result and their contacts to the quarantine town, the quarantine was cancelled. Several units have been deployed to combat the spread of the disease in the community, such as the Regional Office of Public Health in Spišská Nová Ves, the District Department of the Police Force in Spišské Vlachy, the District Directorate of the Police Force in Spišská Nová Ves, the District Directorate of the Fire and Rescue Corps in Spišská Nová Ves. The District Directorate of the Fire and Rescue Corps in Košice, the Rescue Brigade of the Fire and the Rescue Corps in Humenné, Armed Forces of the Slovak Republic, enlightenment staff of the Healthy Regions contribution organisation, medical staff and volunteers, as well as legal entities and individuals who provided water, food and materials, and services. The Roma minority group is specific in its experience and focuses on the individual and the large family, and thus on other perceptions and perceptions of specificity in a broader context. We could observe these phenomena during the Covid-19 pandemic situation in almost all Roma settlements, which were characterised by a high number of problematic situations in the pandemic situation, rejection of measures ordered by the Government of the Slovak Republic whose role was not to spread the infectious disease to another wider environment (Budayová et al., 2020; Budayová & Ludvigh Cintulová, 2021; Ionescu et al., 2021; Ionescu et al., 2022; Kuzembayeva, et al., 2022; Ludvigh Cintulová, Budayová & Rottermund, 2022; Polačko, 2020; Trubavina et al., 2021).

## PERCEPTION OF THE PRIEST'S PERSONALITY

The perception of the individual – the spiritual shepherd – from the attitude of the Roma is such that they seek him mostly in a situation where it is necessary for him to perform some service. It is therefore the baptism of the

newborn, the participation in the sacrament of the Eucharist or the request for the last farewell to the poor (Jesenský, 2013).

People should not be divided into majority and minority. This view is held primarily by the field and community social workers themselves, who, through their work, contribute to connecting with diverse clients with restricted social status, who have a reduced disposition or opportunity to integrate socially and manage their problems autonomously. They are all the same and therefore have a certain common position on the Christian faith. As with the majority population, the Roma have certain prototypes of people who are intensely religious and, on the other hand, others do not attach much importance to the church and thus to the authority of the clergy (Hancock, 2005).

In Slovakia, the Commission for the Spirituality of the Roma was established in 1990 at the Conference of Bishops of Slovakia, which focuses on the coordination of the spirituality and educational activities of the Roma, especially in the eastern but also in the western territory of the Slovak Republic. According to several clergy who work with the Roma, it can be said that their relationship to the Creator and similarly to the faith is good. It is important that some of them choose the priesthood profession, not many of them are true. They maintain a deeper relationship with the Roma and are able to work with them better. The Roma themselves also accept them more intensively and rather decide to visit the celebrated festive liturgy (Jesenský, 2013).

In the dwellings of several Roma there are holy effigies, which are situated on the walls of their dwelling. There are also crosses, but we also find holy rosaries there. Their attitude to religion is that they do not have to go to God's temple, it is absolutely convenient for them to show their faith in such a way that they decorate their homes with Christian objects (Tetmanzi, 2004). Baptism and burial are important for the Roma in the first place. Only exceptionally is there a wedding in the Roma language *bijaf*, which they decide to conclude in the house of God. They have no direct relationship with the priest. This means that the spiritual shepherd does not play a key role in their existence. They respect him only in serious circumstances, such as the last farewell of a loved one or the baptism of a newborn. Mostly it's just a formal interest in wanting to resemble the majority. In the past, only a few Roma decided to visit a field or community social worker with the intention of managing their worries, now it is more frequent. It could certainly have been that the members of the Roma community are not sure of the speech and are not used to talking to strangers, so they may be tense and inaccessible. Therefore, a field or community social worker, but also a missionary individual, should fulfil the role of coordinator, negotiator between the Roma community, local government, the Office of Social Affairs and the Family, but also various local majority associations (Ludvigh Cintulová, Budayová, & Buzalová, 2022; Murgaš et al., 2022; Selická, 2006, 2008). Spiritual shepherds who are sent by the bishop to work



with the Roma are often worried that they will not be able to do so and that their service will be useless. At this point it is very important for the priest to realise that his mission is a ministry for the souls of these people who need spiritual help, even if they sometimes do not explicitly ask for it (Judák & Hlad, 2022; Maturkanič, Tomanová Čerget'ová, Majda et al., 2022). The argument is the indifference of the Roma towards the spiritual shepherd and his efforts. But there are also individuals who choose to visit the house of God precisely because the Romani spiritual pastor has discipline in it, and that is an attraction for them why they should be more interested in Christianity. This certainly applies even if the Roma act as a community or field social worker, then they trust him more. It is therefore important to focus on regular interactions, whether by the community or the missionary, which should be not only regular but also favourable, reflecting the seriousness of subjective interests and disagreements, non-directive with the participating Roma, recognising their equality and encouraging participation and action (Tettmanzi, 2004).

Spiritual shepherds work with the Roma at different ages. When working with children, they meet mostly during school hours. It is at a time when they have a religion lesson, which not all children attend. They also focus on caring for the health and safety of members of the Roma community, modelling a positive climate in mutual cooperation as well as in contact with the majority population, building healthy self-confidence, honest relationships, seeking and finding joy and hope in life, finding the true meaning of life or to distinguish the dangers of multiple addictions, following the example of Jesus Christ (Králik et al., 2022). The fact that children do not attend the already mentioned lessons may be a decision of their legal representatives who do not agree, as they themselves are unbelievers and it is useless for them that their children should be educated by spiritual authority (Ambrozy, 2022; Podolinská & Hrustič, 2010). Many Roma expect that the spiritual shepherd will not only provide them with a doctrine of religion, but will also be material or financial help, which they often demand. We must also say that they also often expect a field or community social worker to provide them with the aforementioned material or financial assistance. Sometimes faith in the Creator is conditioned only by fear of a grave life (Oravský, 2017).

## CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected the whole world, including Slovakia. After the first wave, which took place in Slovakia in the spring of 2020, the second wave of the virus came at the end of August, which, however, had a higher number of infected people and claimed more human casualties. For this reason, the Government of the Slovak Republic was forced to take various measures to prevent the spread of the virus in Slovakia. It is

clear that during the COVID-19 pandemic, the quality of life of the affected country's population is compromised. In the case of declaring a state of emergency in Slovakia, there was a significant impact on people's quality of life (Judák et al, 2022; Kobylarek et al., 2021). Movement was limited, people had to undergo comprehensive testing, followed by proof of a test certificate, which was a kind of ticket to functioning in everyday life.

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