

## Challenges and chances of European Catholic theology beyond the pandemic

Revered audience,

I greet you warmly and thank you for the trust that I've been honoured with – the invitation to participate at the third edition of European Catholic Social Days. We have been paying attention to the exploration of social challenges the Church needs to face in a modern and deeply transforming Europe in the time of the Covid-19 pandemic that has affected all of us and undermined all of our securities. We wish to reflect over our chances to support the process of rebuilding of Europe from a Christian perspective and search for possible ways of healing, according to words of prophet Jeremiah (6:16): “Thus says the Lord: Stand by the earliest roads, ask the pathways of old, ‘Which is the way to good?’ and walk it.”

These Third European Catholic Social Days want to pay attention to three fundamental themes: 1) demographic shifts and family life, 2) technological and digital transformations and 3) ecological changes. My role is to offer anthropological and theological impulses on these topics, considering the complexity of the social-ecological crisis in Europe, in the Church. Thus, I have prepared five cues and a conclusion.

Looking at modern Europe and the Church, we see many impulses indicating that it is in crisis. However, this is not the first crisis in the history of the Church and it certainly will not be the last one.<sup>1</sup> History demonstrates that there have previously been expressions of profound faith and Gospel love but also signs of grave human weakness and sinfulness within our Church. The pandemic has accelerated many processes – both good and bad – and every simplifying answer would mean an expression of disrespect towards the complicated reality like the life of the Church and the way we would like to see it.<sup>2</sup> Phenomena of the crisis that we currently witnessing can thus be seen as impulses of God for *reformatio*, or reformation, understood by Yves Congar as a typical sign of the Church,<sup>3</sup> and the history of the Church proves this.

In the first impulse I would like to substantiate the importance of our will to think and take steps, of our will to not remain passive. In the time of grave communism and persecution of the Church, Jesuit father and nestor of Slovak Catholic theology, Emil Krapka, wrote a study entitled *On the situation of our Church as the transition of the Lord*. He found an inspiration in the event from the Gospel of Luke 4:16-30, where the preaching of Jesus in Nazareth is described, including the effort of people from the synagogue to hurl him down from the hill on which the city was built, and his passing through the midst of them and going away. Emil Krapka emphasizes that this Gospel event reveals the person of Jesus and his mission: some people expressed consent with his words; others drastically rejected them. But Christ peacefully and firmly passed through various answers of people to his message of salvation and kept on walking. According to Fr. Krapka, this mystery of the Lord's transition

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<sup>1</sup> LICHNER, MILOŠ.: Pohľad sv. Augustína na škandály v Cirkvi. In: *Nové horizonty*. Časopis pre teológiu, kultúru a spoločnosť, r. VII, č. 1, 2013, pp. 25-29.

<sup>2</sup> LICHNER, M.; URBANČOK, M.; BREČKOVÁ, S.; JELLUŠ, T.: The Change of system in 1989 and its impact on the Catholic Church in Slovakia. Challenges and chances of european Catholic Theology. In: *Acta Missiologica*. No. 2, vol. 14, 2020, pp. 73-85.

<sup>3</sup> Reform derived from latin *reformatio* that can be found in all medieval council bulls: CONGAR, Y.: *Vraie et fausse réforme dans l'Église*. Les éditions du Cerf, Paris, 1969, p. 26.

has been imprinted on the history of the Church like a seal: places, times, words, environments keep changing, but the transition of the Lord has been happening in all of them.<sup>4</sup> Christ keeps walking the history of his Church, experiencing both approval and rejection. We are invited to follow in his footsteps and bear the word of salvation amidst kind words or sharp disapproval, because this is the transition of the Lord in our Church. When Emil Krapka wrote this study, there were people who decided to wait for a better time. But he, along with other men and women religious and people involved in the underground Church, decided to walk with the Lord. Together they did admirable work in the Church.

Christ passes amidst us, and we should avoid the danger of remaining in a prefabricated past where no elements of life's dynamism can be found. The Church as a living organism is in motion, and its knowledge has been growing and corresponding with primal awareness, just like the genetic information of the adult body corresponds with the information of a primal undifferentiated cell of a newly conceived human being. That is why I would like to recall the words of Vincent of Lérins, ancient author of the 5<sup>th</sup> century, and his work *Commonitorium*, where he left us two rules about dogmas. The first, frequently interpreted rule, underlines the necessity to stick firmly to everything that has been believed from the very beginning, everywhere and by everyone.<sup>5</sup> The second rule, which didn't use to be interpreted so often, focuses on growth and motion. Vincent presents the image of a child growing and becoming a man.<sup>6</sup>

This also applies to us. Thinking about the condition of Europe and the Church can lead us to the temptation to dwell in an artificially created image of the past: to stagnate. We witness the attempts to stop, define our borders face-to-face with the other world and to shut down in a fictitious past or wait for so-called better times that are never going to come, creating artificial certainties. But in such a case we'll watch Christ pass and remain without him. According to *Gaudium et spes*, we are invited to scrutinize the signs of the times and interpret them, so that we can respond in a language intelligible to each generation.<sup>7</sup>

However, this walking with the Lord means – in the second impulse – also a change in the view of ourselves. Emil Krapka put a clear emphasis on one possessive pronoun – “our” Church.<sup>8</sup> Sociological research, unfortunately, confirms that the common believer sees the Church only as institution that exists outside his or her personal world. This believer does not feel like a living member of an ecclesiastic community. He or she does not feel included in the meaning of the possessive pronoun “our”. We are aware of the fact that due to hundreds of years of battle for investiture, i. e. the battle for the freedom of the Church and its protection from the interventions of oligarchs, a certain ecclesiology focused on hierarchy has developed, with the marginalizing of laymen. The battle of St. Augustine with the Donatists puts emphasis on two realities: the first is the baptismal equality of all believers (e. g. his sermon 58 dedicated to catechumens, in which he reminds that both emperor and slave give

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<sup>4</sup> KRAPKA, EMIL: Prechod Pánov. Teologické úvahy o situácii našej Cirkvi. In: Viera a život roč. 1, január 1991 číslo 1, pp. 17-19.

<sup>5</sup> LICHNER, MILOŠ: Commonitorium-Pripomenutie I, 5-6, Dobrá kniha: Trnava, 2021.

<sup>6</sup> LICHNER, MILOŠ: Commonitorium-Pripomenutie I, 5-6, Dobrá kniha: Trnava, 2021XXIII, 1-19. Tiež: HORKA, R.: Ekleziologické paradigmy Matúšovej reči podobenstiev u cirkevných otcov. Acta 1-2/2021, p. 91.

<sup>7</sup> GS 4.

<sup>8</sup> KRAPKA, EMIL: Prechod Pánov. Teologické úvahy o situácii našej Cirkvi. In: Viera a život roč. 1, január 1991 číslo 1, p. 13.

God the name Father).<sup>9</sup> The second reality concerns the catholicity of the Church, the fact that it is not limited to any region or nation. Augustine of Hippo kept repeating endlessly that the Church is either *Catholica*, which means designated for everyone, or none at all.<sup>10</sup> Isidore of Sevilla considered the Greek word *Ecclesia* to be pertinent because the Church calls and gathers all the people.<sup>11</sup> Paraphrasing Prosper of Aquitaine, we can say that it is always here for everyone who shows interest, considering no national, language, social, political, economic or regional limitations.<sup>12</sup> Knowing this, we affirm that the others who run towards us also represent a part of the body of Christ, of our Church. Hence, we may see the current refugee crisis as a blessing of God for a demographic winter in Europe. Those who are coming are people with life vigour. During the international congress on hope that was held in here in Bratislava in 2019, Professor Regina Polak pointed out the example of Austria. Refugees who had to leave everything behind are full of hope, while many people in Austria are full of despair.<sup>13</sup>

The third impulse unreels from the book by Henri Godin and Yvan Daniel published in 1945 under provocative title: *La France, pays de mission?* Today we see that the vision of Europe as a Christian continent is not true anymore. I think we can and must say that it has become a missionary continent, and the work of the Church must be similar to that in missionary countries.<sup>14</sup> We can say with Rocco Buttiglione that we don't have a well-formed Christian in front of us, whose passions are controlled by reason, who lives in the society that facilitates or at least does not impede the perception of right order of values and moral good. Pope Francis sees suffering people and their damaged lives, to which, however, we ought to announce a joyful message that God loves and invites them to unite with him and with the whole of mankind. Many of these people are not Christians, and one needs to consider their own cultures and values. Some of them may have been baptized, but their evangelization was shallow. They may feel the magic of faith, but their Christian formation was insufficient or even totally lacking. For all of them, the Church has to become a field hospital, often lacking the necessary instruments and facilities for providing care, where doctors are called to make difficult decisions and risk everything. There was time when such problems were encountered only in missionary countries.<sup>15</sup> In this regard, a concept of graduality, graded adherence to the Church, can be thought over theologically. Several hints have been given by St. Augustine in his work *De baptismo*.

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<sup>9</sup> AVGVSTINVS: s. 58, 2, *EcOr* 1, p. 120; s. 56, 5, *RB* 68, p. 29; s. 57, 2, *Homo Spiritualis. Festgabe für Luc Verheijen OSA zu seinem 70. Geburtstag*, p. 415; s. 59, 2, *SC* 116, p. 188.

<sup>10</sup> SCHINDLER, A: *Catholicus*, -a. In: Mayer, C ed. *Augustinus-Lexikon*, Bd.1. Basel: Schwabe, 1986, stp. 817.

<sup>11</sup> ISIDOR: orig. VIII,1,1, Lindsay, p. 309.

<sup>12</sup> PROSPER: resp. *Ad Gall.* 2,8, PL 51, 172.

<sup>13</sup> POLAK, REGINA: Hope for Europe: Catastrophes as Learning Spaces for a Spiritual Virtue? A Practical-theological Approach. IN: LICHNER, MILOŠ (ed.): Hope. See also: CYRULNIK, BORIS: *Quand un enfant se donne „la mort“*. *Attachement et sociétés*. Rapport remis a Madame Jeanette Bougrab secrétaire d'État chargée de la jeunesse et de la Vie associative. Odile Jacob: Paris, 2011.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. GODIN, Henri: *La France, pays de mission?*

<sup>15</sup> BUTTIGLIONE, R.: *Risposte amichevoli ai critici di Amoris Laetitia*. Milano: Edizioni ARES 2017, p. 142.

The primal announcing of faith was mentioned in 1975 by St. Paul VI in his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi*: “Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses.”<sup>16</sup> It is therefore “primarily by her conduct and by her life that the Church will evangelize the world, in other words, by her living witness of fidelity to the Lord Jesus – the witness of poverty and detachment, or freedom in the face of the powers of this world, in short, the witness of sanctity.”<sup>17</sup> The beginning of The First Letter of John also says that we should announce what we have heard and seen with our eyes, what we looked upon and touched with our hands, what concerns the Word of life.<sup>18</sup> We are invited to share the testimony that we have experienced, because as theologians we do not hand over a mere teaching. We hand over a reflected testimony of our lives.

And those whose opinion is different when it comes to culture or faith are not our enemies. They are people to whom we are invited through the baptismal order of Christ, through his order, to be his witnesses<sup>19</sup> in the field of the New Testament, which is – according to the Gospel of Matthew – the world,<sup>20</sup> where we are supposed to sow the testimonial Word of salvation. I just want to add that we are called to hand over *sanctum* (sanctity), not *sacrum* (sacredness).

I would say that the people to whom we are being sent are not our enemies. Creation of an impression of an enemy is a rather common political strategy for maintaining the cohesion of a certain group, but it has nothing to do with the Gospel, because Christianity has been built on the basis of an inclusive approach.<sup>21</sup> Pope Francis said in his sermon during his apostolic visit to Prešov, Slovakia, that “a witness who bears the cross in his heart and not just on his neck does not see anyone as his enemy. He sees all people as his brothers and sisters, for whom Jesus sacrificed his life.”

For this reason, we must unambiguously reject any attempt to instrumentalize religion, i. e. the misuse of Christian symbolism by any political, economic or social powers that don't believe that man has been created in the image and likeness of God but limit their perception of human beings to numbers.<sup>22</sup> Groups that turn religion into an instrument to achieve their own selfish goals often contribute to xenophobia and particularly antisemitism.

Last but not least is the fact that the topic of announcing the testimony of faith is closely related to the topic of ecology, i. e. the social and environmental dimensions of the crisis. While reflecting over the transmitting of the living faith to other generations, we should not forget to think of the environment or the place where the living faith of this generation can be truly lived.

The fourth impulse I would like to stress appeals to us who want to announce the testimony: the understanding of the term *clericalism*, often used by Pope Francis via

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<sup>16</sup> PAUL VI. 41.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. 1 John 1:1.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Acts 1:8.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Mt 13:38.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. DOJČÁR, M.: *Spirituálny dialóg*. Bratislava: TFTU, 2021, pp. 30–35.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. LICHNER, M.: „Povaha a riziká fundamentalizmu“. In: *Studia Theologica*, r. 15, no. 1, 2013, pp. 135-156.

Augustine's term *libido dominandi*, which has been neglected for centuries. Augustine did not know the term "misuse of power"; he rather spoke about lust in relation to power. He does not understand *libido* as a natural state, if our perception of naturalness is defined as man created by God on the way of unification. *Libido* contains latent egoism, implicit pride dwelling on the level of the body, pride as a result of Adam's sin in the Paradise. So, how are we supposed to understand *libido*? Man has been seeking the absolute in all of the creation from which he turned away. Therefore it is a desire of the spirit choosing earthly goods over eternal ones.<sup>23</sup> Such a man desires to own perceptible goods that cannot be owned by a single glance neither as a whole. Hence, the slavery of lust. The division of a man rooted in his own self. This deviation of will results in pride and *avaritia* (avarice) – Adam's heritage – in the untameable desire to gain possession of everything that surrounds us. This conceited desire for everything remains unfulfilled, because it can be sufficiently fulfilled only by God. But this is something that man can never acknowledge because of his pride. We should amend the prevailing opinion about *libido*, the term almost exclusively comprehended as exuberant sexuality. *Libido* in the sense of *concupiscentiae carnis* represents only one of its meanings. Augustine names several of them in his work *De civitate Dei*: *libido ulciscendi* (the desire for revenge), *libido habendi pecuniam* (the desire for money), *libido vincendi* (the desire for victory), *libido gloriandi* (the desire for glory) and finally *libido dominandi* (the desire for domination or power) that represents the basis for the theme of *De civitate Dei*. *Libido dominandi* is the exuberant desire to dominate over others,<sup>24</sup> one of the expressions of pride and *avaritiae* that we inherited from Adam. Augustine emphasizes that the horrible waterflow of helpless poverty, indifference, arrogance, hatred and violence causes an ear-splitting rumble around the world, and sexual temptation was and still is only a poor unpleasant fogging. With Adam's fall, the soul lost the ability to love in an undivided act and to praise God in all of his creation. Man is driven by a dark force, marked by a desire to control, own and use all the good things created by God, to be thanked for and shared with others to achieve his subjective goals. Many things criticized by the Holy Father Francis<sup>25</sup> can be understood in the light of the term *libido dominandi*.<sup>26</sup> It reflects in what we traditionally call *infirmitas* – spiritual infirmity – which remains inside us after receiving the sacrament of baptism. Church tradition recommends an ascetic battle, and Pope Francis encourages a radical living of the Gospel.

The fifth impulse of mine is related to appropriate reaction of us theologians. At first, we should beware of predetermined answers. We know that in the past, the position of the theologian was defined somewhere between learning and teaching the Church, given that he was aware of not adhering to any of these two groups. In general, a theologian was a professor nominated by a Church authority, controllable and dismissible. He was supposed to hand over strictly defined, unalterable teaching. He became professor through recognition of his co-professors, mostly when he transferred from giving lectures to writing. Authority

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<sup>23</sup> „Appetitus animi quo aeternis bonis qualibet temporalia bona praeponuntur.“

<sup>24</sup> AVGVSTINVS: en. ps. 106,7, CCL 40, p. 1574.

<sup>25</sup> KULISZ, J., LICHNER, M., FILIPEK, A., LUKIANOVÁ, H., SÝKOROVÁ, S.: Return of the Encyclical Fratelli Tutti to the Patristic roots of Christian Social Tradition. In: *Acta Misiologica*. Vol. 15. No. 1, april 2021, pp. 180-190.

<sup>26</sup> BONNER Gerald: God's Decree and Man's Destiny. Studies on the Thought of Augustine of Hippo (ed. By G. Boner), London 1987, IX 303-314 (Studia Patristica 6. Papers ... Conference on Patristic Studies... 1951, Texte und Untersuchungen 81, Berlin 1962, pp. 303-314.

made him a professor and the reputation of his work made him a theologian. His scientific scope became wider; he could work in the area of *quaestiones, disputatae, quodlibetales* and even *dubiae*. But he always spoke to a strictly defined audience within strictly defined definitions. The secular version of this model is still present at contemporary universities. However, the presence differs from the past, barely even resembling it. It is rooted in the change of the perception of theologian's position after the Second Vatican Council. The theologian started to focus more on pastoral questions; he stopped being the one who hands over knowledge downwards and gradually became the voice of public opinion, a theologian who had to win the attention of his listeners. This development was associated with secularization and detraditionalization of both society and the Church in Western Europe, often wisely mentioned by Lieven Boeve; the position of theologian became subject of transformation. If theology today does not provoke any interest, it is because it has lost its legibility and does not speak the same language. The first and foremost task of a theologian should be the effort to understand the reason of this. Reestablishment of the dialogue with modern times represents the crucial question for the future of theology and evangelization of the world. Hence, the words of Christ in Luke 5:37-38: "Likewise, no one pours new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise, the new wine will burst the skins, and it will be spilled, and the wineskins will be ruined. Rather, new wine must be poured into fresh wineskins." This new wine is the teaching of Jesus; old wineskins represent everything that opposes his Word. According to Origen, it is not about the Scripture that speaks about Christ, but about every interpretation according to letters and not according to the spirit, which prevents the light of Gospel newness to shine.<sup>27</sup>

Theological work should be a critical faith that starts with silent contemplation of Christ, who comes when the theologian renounces his claim to know everything and does so in advance, recalling that the Father in heaven hides from the wise what he reveals to the little. He begs Christ to reveal his Father, from whom he will learn to know the Son. In this pilgrimage, the theologian descends from his cathedra to become a disciple among disciples, to walk with people and share their lives. As theologians, we filled the Western world with our speeches and now this world has lost its knowledge of God and apparently it has been losing even the desire to rediscover this knowledge. In this situation, the theologian's work on critical faith consists of emptying the theologian's mind, abandoning his certainties, to regain the freedom to question his own knowledge of God, to be able to ask the world what has occupied the place previously inhabited by God.

## Conclusion

Therefore, we should try to substitute moralizing Christianity with therapeutical Christianity, according to the example given by tradition of the early Church. Augustine understood the Church as a *locus misericordiae et tolerantiae*, as the place of mercy and patient mutual tolerance. That is the Church that will look after the wounded. Instead of classic Roman saying: *si vis pacem, para bellum*, if you want peace, get ready for war, it will proclaim: *si vis pacem, para iustitiam*, if you want peace, get ready for justice. Only then the words of the psalm 85:11 will come true: "Love and truth will meet; justice and peace will kiss." Because God will never get tired of forgiving. Instead of Roman *divide et impera*, divide and reign, the

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<sup>27</sup> Cf. NEMEC, R.: „Three Types of Medieval Allegory as a Basis of Later Christian Spirituality.“ *Spirituality Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 2, 2021, p. 58.

Church must act in accordance with *servi et adunare*, serve and unite. Only then it will become a new leaven of European society, a new path leading out of a blind alley.  
Thank you for your attention.